

ESSAY ON FLAGSHIP 2030

Professor William M. King

Submitted March 25, 2007

Having read the two essays alluded to in your email of 19 February 2007, I want to take a slightly different tact with respect to what I believe should be a critical priority for conceptualizing "Flagship 2030." That priority is the issue of human resource development something I contend should be the central mission of any institution of higher learning especially a university.

For me, human resource development is about identifying and cultivating whatever talents students, staff, faculty and administrators bring with them as they gather in this place we call the University of Colorado at Boulder albeit location in this instance is less important than the ongoing processes we say defines what we do and how we do it. Essential to cultivation is the acquisition of discipline something I have been telling my students over the thirty-five years I have been teaching at UCB without which you cannot use whatever gifts you possess in your own best interest.

This arises from my view that education is about learning how to focus resources that help you to get whatever questions on which you are working clear antecedent to attempting to address them.

Human resource development also requires that we take a close look at the ways in which we resist change as a natural process in ourselves and the societies of which we are a part irrespective of the ways in which those resistances manifest themselves: biases, prejudices, fears, myths, rituals, discriminatory behavior and the like. Indeed, what seems clear to me is that a commitment to human resource development requires that we accept and learn to appreciate difference without transforming it into a species of deviance because in the final analysis the one thing we all have in common is our differences the engine of social change. In this regard one of the things that concerns me and has concerned me for the forty plus years I have been teaching in every venue from pre-school to post-doc is the piece-meal approach we bring to our study of the human condition.

Clearly, for me anyway, the human condition, the ultimate complex system, at least as I understand it, is the totality of the experience of being human and living human lives. This also explains my reference above to learning to appreciate difference without transforming it into deviance. And while it is the case that the precise nature and scope of what is meant by the human condition is a philosophical problem, it is also clear to me, given that both my graduate degrees were in interdisciplinary programs and that the bulk of my teaching at the collegiate and university levels has been in multidisciplinary and/either interdisciplinary programs, that the time is long past for us to reconsider how we have organized the academy to explore and assess the kaleidoscopic character of that condition.

There was a time when we employed the analytical, critical and speculative methods of the humanities writ large to explore and assess humanity and its existential conditions. There was also a time when we examined the actions, implications and consequences of human actions in the world utilizing what were called in the nineteenth century the social sciences. However, with the professionalization of knowledge that began to move rather briskly after the War Between The States, there emerged a plethora of strategic hamlets we came to call disciplines patterned very much after the craft organization of the American Federation of Labor as scholars sought to protect turf, expand, as the American university developed, the number of professorships, and effect identities based on practices embraced by differing theories of knowledge. The upshot of all this, in my view, was that we got farther (and further) away from an understanding of society and culture and the peoples that comprised them substituting ideologies like universalism and objectivity for the kind of epistemological consciousness that might raise the validity and reliability of our hypotheses and conclusions given that knowledge is a social product and truth is very much, as Obi wan Kenobi said to the young Skywalker, a function of the belief system one embraces.

Having said all this, to embrace the guidance of one of my mentors, the late John Henrik Clarke, emeritus professor of Black and Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College in New York, that "History is a clock people use to tell their political and cultural time of day. It is also a compass people use to find themselves on the map of human geography. The role of history is to tell a people what they have been and where they have been, what they are and where they are" I want to turn now to the remainder of that guidance wherein he told us that, "The most important role history plays is that it tells a people where they still must go and what they still must be," to speak about my vision respecting the shape of a twenty-first century curriculum for the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Let me begin first with the observation I have made many times before that for me, a curriculum is a political statement about a desired reality and also a species of intellectual property constructed out of the beliefs, values, understandings, et al of its creators. As I reflect on what I have written here so far, I am reminded of a short novel by Issac Asimov, "Profession," that appeared in the July 1957 number of Astounding Science Fiction in which he addresses the question, "What happens to those people who can't be taught regardless of the method you employ?" How are they to be prepared for useful lives in society when they are deemed "abnormal" because the "Education Tape Machine" that has supplanted schooling in the future does not properly prepare them to fill a predetermined billet in an ordered society where what you do is the principal criterion of determining what and who you are?

Clearly the shape of this new curriculum will have to grow out of a paradigm shift that emphasizes problem definition and a better understanding of the limitations of past approaches in this age of globalization and its attendant imperialisms--limitations that grow out of our not always being aware of what we have left out of our universes of definition and thus find so difficult to believe or prove the existence of, a point often made by critical race/gender theorists respecting the issue of inclusion. In short, we may have to go back to

a localized kind of basics where stress is placed on valuing and appreciating difference and diversity for what it can add to easing the way of our students in the world as they leave "home" to commence, as George Norlin opined, the rest of their lives. Further, as a practicing martial artist and instructor thereof, I fully recognize the dangers of not respecting one's opponent whatever the area in which the contest occurs.

Too, this curriculum will have to be one that promotes flexibility in those who transit it; flexibility in ways of thinking and acting, of being able as situations change to shed cultural encumbrances that are not only not adequate but also inappropriate for the new style of international relations that are aborning. It must be a curriculum that teaches those who transit it how to borrow and learn from others without prejudice as even a cursory review of world history from the voyages of discovery forward makes clear must happen. And most importantly this curriculum must teach us about ourselves. It must teach us to trust our own experience and not replace it with outside authority. We must, as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. told us that hot August afternoon in 1963 speaking about his dream, believe that the content of one's character is infinitely more important than the color of one's skin. For if we do not we will forever shortchange ourselves as a university, as a society, as a nation when it comes to answering the question of how shall we best prepare our human capital for a time and a place we can but imagine because it will be so different from what we know now.

These suggestions may mean that we will have to forego the notion of completing college in four years. It may also mean that we will have to do a better job of recycling folk who have graduated once and now realize the necessity of returning to school for additional or a completely different kind of preparation for the days ahead. I also believe that loans for education that became popular in the 1970s replacing grants as various strategic elites sought to damp down descent on the college campus have outlived their usefulness. To secure the kind of diversity implicit in my proposal here requires us to rethink how we finance education as an investment in human resource development that has long term benefit for the society at large. In some ways the university is faced with problems not unlike Detroit's collapsing auto industry: so much money has been invested in the preservation of an outmoded structure preserving, protecting and defending a sacred way of doing that what has been created is a kind of inertia that retards progress.

Prudence suggests that I quit here. At the very least I hope that what I have offered here will spark discussion. Please feel free to respond to what I have said.

William M King
Professor of Afroamerican Studies
The Department of Ethnic Studies