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William G. Bowen

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THE ANDREW W. MELLON FOUNDATION

140 EAST 62ND STREET

NEW YORK, N.Y. 10021

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

May 3

Dear Clair,

I hope that this
is helpful. Please
let me know if
we can do more.

As ever,

Bill

THE ANDREW W. MELLON FOUNDATION

140 EAST 62ND STREET

NEW YORK, N. Y. 10021

(212) 838-8400

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

May 3, 1990

Senator Claiborne Pell
Chairman
Subcommittee on Education,
Arts & Humanities
Dirksen Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Pell:

Thank you for your letter of April 20 (which for some unknown reason reached my desk only yesterday). In my view, the questions at issue concerning the support of graduate education in the humanities are of enormous importance, and I welcome the opportunity to respond to your request for comments. I hope that this letter, and its attachment, will constitute the kind of statement that you have in mind.

My own interest in this area is longstanding. I was one of those who warned (at the start of the 1980s) against encouraging more students to pursue PhDs than the academic market could accommodate at that time. More recently, Julie Ann Sosa and I have written a book which provides a detailed set of projections for the arts and sciences (Prospects for the Faculty in the Arts and Sciences, Princeton University Press, 1989). This study indicates that conditions in the 1990s are almost certain to be very different from conditions in the 1970s and 1980s, and leads us to conclude that now is the time to consider seriously ways of encouraging more able students to obtain PhDs in the humanities and social sciences as well as in mathematics and the physical sciences.

Rather than attempt to restate here the full argument of the book, I enclose a recent interview which summarizes its main points. Perhaps the interview can be made a part of your record with this letter.

As you will see, a combination of factors leads us to conclude that shortages of well-qualified faculty are very likely to develop in the late 1990s. We are hardly the only ones to have come to this conclusion, and your staff will be able to provide you with a number of other references.

On the demand side of the equation, a large number of anticipated vacancies will need to be filled, mainly as a consequence of the aging of faculty appointed in the 1960s. In addition, demographic factors will almost certainly increase the number of students to be taught in the latter part of the decade. On the supply side, the number of doctorates awarded to US residents in fields such as the humanities has declined precipitously (to about 60% of the number in 1972). For this combination of reasons, it is easy to see why so many studies project impending shortages.

To be sure, no one should invest projections of the kind developed in our study with spurious precision. We have been careful to alert readers to the distinction between projections and predictions, and to provide several alternative sets of projections. The most common reaction to our projections thus far has been to suggest that they are, if anything, overly conservative. Mrs. Cheney is the exception to this proposition, and we have considered carefully the arguments she gives for believing that the problem under discussion will simply go away. For reasons we have explained in detail elsewhere, we are unpersuaded that potential shortages of the magnitude we have described will be alleviated by any plausible combination of increases in the share of doctorates seeking academic employment, in the ratio of part-time to full-time faculty, in "net flows" back to academia from other vocations, or in rising student-faculty ratios (properly measured).

Moreover, any potential relief obtained in these ways must be set off against the considerations that have led most commentators to conclude that we are more likely to have understated the size of the potential shortages by underestimating demand. In particular, our "base-case" projections assume constant enrollment rates when the most recent evidence indicates that enrollment rates have continued to increase. Also, we assumed that the arts-and-sciences share of total enrollment will remain at the low level it had reached in 1984-86, when recent analysis suggests that some recovery is quite possible.

We are careful in our book to warn against overreacting to the projected shortages, since we share the view that it would be unwise to return to the "boom and bust" cycle in graduate education that has caused so much distress since World War II. But it would be even more unwise, in our judgment, to fail to make any response until conditions have worsened to such an extent that there will again be pressures to do too much.

It takes a long time for the typical student to earn a doctorate, particularly in the humanities, and that is why it is so important to take sensible action now. We agree with those who have urged the National Endowment for the Humanities to broaden its purview to include some provision of dissertation fellowships. (Fellowships provided at the dissertation stage, rather than during the first year or two of graduate study, would seem compatible with the general mission of the Endowment's research division.) As you know so well, associated with every problem is an opportunity, and we believe that such an initiative would be extraordinarily timely.

I might add that our own Foundation continues to study the effectiveness of graduate programs and expects to invest very heavily in graduate fellowship support, especially in the humanities, during the next decade. We would not be taking such actions if we were not persuaded that the problems are very serious and that more funds are vitally needed.

With best wishes -- and, once again, my thanks for your exceptional leadership in higher education over so many years.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "William G. Bowen", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

William G. Bowen

Attachment