

# 1979 Commencement Address

by Dr. A. Kenneth Pye, Chancellor and Professor of Law at Duke University.

Abbot Peter, Father Tobin, Congressman Whitener, Members of the Faculty and Board of Trustees, Distinguished Guests, Members of the Class of 1979:

I am greatly honored to receive this degree today, and I am certain that I express the sentiments of my fellow honorees in voicing deep appreciation to Belmont Abbey College. My remarks are addressed primarily to members of the graduating class, for this is their day in the sun.

To paraphrase an advertising slogan, "This is the first day of the rest of your life." You have completed another chapter in what I hope will be a long and successful life enriched by learning and the opportunity for service to your fellow citizens. Some of you will be undertaking your first permanent jobs; others look forward to graduate and professional studies. All share the advantages of a rich undergraduate background which is recognized today by the awarding of a degree. You are not yet in a position to fully appreciate all that you have learned, much less understand the effect that it will have on your life.

You have been the beneficiaries of a genuine liberal education, whether you chose a field of concentration in the humanities, the natural sciences or the social sciences. You may not be able to say of Belmont Abbey what St. Augustine allegedly said of his own education when he noted that as a result of it he could "read anything that was written, understand anything he heard said, and say anything he thought." But you have probably come closer to these goals than most. Most of you have developed a capacity to reflect and foresee consequences, to be more empathetic, with greater social consciousness and conscience, to see things in relation to each other, to have an integrated concept of yourself and consistent values, to reason and make judgments about disturbing problems without becoming disorganized or inefficient, to maintain independence of mind and judgment, to continue self-education with values and relationships that do not exist solely for self, to understand how others think and feel. You have had an education which enables you to face life within an intellectual framework that will permit you to deal with the problems you will meet—whether public or private, whether personal or professional. You have at least begun the search for a capacity to analyze a situation and distinguish between what is accidental and what is essential, to determine what are real issues, and to marshal evidence for and against each alternative solution to a problem. You have been able to begin to develop a set of values with experience in applying them which will permit you to choose rationally from among these alternatives. You should have the courage to face the challenges of the future without shirking from fundamental issues because of apathy, desire for personal advancement, or other reasons.

You are the product of an education that has been concerned not only with the development of the intellect and cultivation of reason, but also with a fundamental understanding of faith and the relative relation of faith and reason in the search for truth.

Part of the education you have received has its origins in the great scholastic centers of Europe of the Middle Ages—the traditions of Bologna, Paris, Oxford, of the great German universities of the nineteenth century, and the Harvards and Berkeleys of modern America. Part of your education owes its origin to a different source—the work, devotion and teaching of St. Benedict and the monks who have followed him for almost fifteen hundred years. It is this tradition which was responsible for the creation of Mary Help of Christians Abbey over a hundred years ago, which has evolved into the distinguished educational institution which confers its degree upon you today.

The merger of the rationalistic and intellectual tradition of the great universities of the Western world and the humanistic, religious and ethical traditions characteristic of the Benedictine order reflect a peculiar form of American institution—the private church-related college. It is an example of institution-building that is as typically American as baseball and apple pie. In his thoughtful volume, *The Americans: The National Experience*, Daniel Boorstin noted that in the American way of life, no community could be complete without its college or

university. Frequently a religious denomination gave the initial push and provided a plan but the whole community, regardless of its religious affiliation, then built and maintained the college. While locale and characteristics differed, the essentials were the same throughout the nation: denominational initiative, upstart enterprise, booster optimism. As Boorstin has reminded us, "An American style in higher education was a byproduct of an American style in community-building." The private college with its private board of trustees began a form of educational governance that seemed more natural to the American experience than either an autonomy inherited from medieval scholarly guilds of Napoleonic control by a central government which characterized higher education in Europe. Thus developed a distinctly American institution encouraged by public authority but controlled by private initiative with a significant religious influence. As Kingman Brewster has pointed out, the extraordinary phenomenon of institutional diversity, institutional autonomy and institutional self-determination was the beginning of, and continues to be the essence of, the vitality of American higher education. Today there are almost 1600 private independent colleges and universities in the United States, 38 of which are in North Carolina, and most of which have a religious affiliation. Two and one-half million students, approximately one-fourth of all college students, attend these institutions each year. Most are relatively small liberal arts colleges. They reflect an appreciation that much can be gained in a small college with intimate contact among students and with faculty that is incapable of realization in the huge universities which have become so common. They reflect a proven track record of graduates who have lived successful lives, prospered in the community, and provided leadership to their fellow citizens.

Yet this tradition of private education in church-related institutions is in jeopardy—not because students do not prefer to study in such colleges, not because their parents prefer that they study elsewhere, not because the quality of education which they receive there is inferior, and certainly not because there is less need of education which places emphasis upon ethics and morality. Indeed, only last month the Carnegie Commission on Policy Studies in Higher Education expressed concern about matters of unethical conduct in colleges and universities that reflects an alarming situation in terms of cheating, misuse of financial aid, theft and destruction of property, grade inflation, and other practices which are the antithesis of the educational environment required to produce citizens capable of personal rectitude and civic responsibility. The Commission was speaking on education in general and its findings have little to do with the small private religious-affiliated liberal arts colleges.

The threat to private higher education does not pose fundamental issues of value. It is almost solely a question of cost. No one in this audience needs to be reminded of the phenomenon of inflation. It has impact on each of us, but private colleges and universities have a special problem. They share with public institutions the fact that costs have increased at a much faster rate than inflation in terms of book costs, energy costs, the impact of major changes in the minimum wage laws, the increase in employer's tax for social security, and the burden of paying for a host of federal regulatory provisions which have required inordinate expenditures during the last decade.

Private colleges differ in large part from public institutions in that increased costs in the public sector are met primarily by increased legislative appropriations, while in the private sector they must be met primarily by increased tuition. In an era of inflation accentuated by costs imposed by government, the tuition gap between private and public institutions has broadened significantly. In our state, the tuition gap between the senior public institutions and the senior private institutions has increased by approximately \$1,000 in the course of the last decade. As this gap has increased, so has the number of students who can afford to attend private schools decreased. Ten years ago thirty per cent of the students studying in North Carolina attended private institutions. This year the figure will be less than 22 per cent. During the last five years the state has increased appropria-

tions per student in the state system from roughly \$1,978 per student to \$2,858 per student, not counting major capital outlays. Student tuition as percentage of cost in state universities has come down from 13 per cent to 10.7 per cent. Appropriations per student for out-of-state students have doubled during the five-year period while out-of-state student tuition as a percentage of cost has declined from 70 per cent to 56 per cent.

During this period the private schools have benefited from state plans that provide \$200 to each institution for each North Carolinian in attendance, upon condition that all of these funds be returned to North Carolinians in financial assistance, and by a state plan that provides \$400 per student to each North Carolinian who chooses to attend a private institution. Unquestionably, this plan has helped to alleviate the problem and has made it possible for some North Carolinians to attend private schools when they would otherwise have been unable to do so.

A financial aid program of this limited dimension is not, however, sufficient to arrest the trend. Even after allowance for such financial aid, the tuition gap continues to widen. It is for this reason that the private schools have urged as a matter of principle that the state be prepared to provide aid to undergraduate students up to one-half of the average per capita cost to the state for each undergraduate student enrolled in the state institutions. They fully recognize that the state does not have the funds to raise support to this level during the next biennium, particularly if the state is to spend an additional \$40 million on its predominantly black institutions, but the acceptance of the principle would provide a rational formula for permitting future students and their parents to do what they would like to do—that is, select a school such as Belmont Abbey for a college education. Support by the state for one-half of the per capita cost of a student in the state system means that each student receiving the grant is saving the state of North Carolina an equal amount by choosing to attend a private college. It is not a giveaway, it is a prudent financial decision for the state to utilize the resources of private colleges and the willingness of students and parents to sacrifice in order to provide the kind of education which they wish. It is estimated that this year the state of North Carolina is being saved approximately \$53 million by students who are receiving the state supplement in lieu of the \$2,800 per student subsidy which they would have received had they chosen to enroll in the state system.

Certainly, a North Carolina citizen should be entitled to as much support to educate his son or daughter in a private North Carolina school of his choice as the state is prepared to expend on an out-of-state student who is educated in North Carolina at taxpayers' expense. And one-half of the per capita amount now expended for North Carolina students in state institutions just about equals the cost which North Carolina pays for each out-of-state student who attends a public institution in the state.

You might suppose that a tradition as long as private education in America and a financial benefit to the state as great as that which is provided by partial subsidization of students who choose private colleges would gain universal acceptance as a sound public policy. Unfortunately, the opposite is true. Some educational leaders in the state oppose assisting North Carolina students who choose to attend private schools, arguing in terms of a threat of autonomy of private schools, a threat to their independence, a lack of accountability of private education. Obviously, there are potential problems in squaring accountability for the use of public funds with a private institution insisting upon independence, but we have worked out arrangements that reconcile independence and accountability before and there is no reason to believe we cannot do it in this arena. The more strident suggestions that public support for students attending private institutions such as Belmont Abbey is somehow out of the ordinary, unAmerican, and productive conflict, is simply erroneous.

Such an approach chooses to ignore the historical fact that state aid to private institutions was the original style of higher education in America and has

(Cont. On Page 7)