

# **AN INTRODUCTION TO THE AIRLIE HOUSE CONFERENCE REPORT**

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Today the issues on higher education's agenda range from lowering costs and providing a job-ready education to recapturing a sense of public purpose that could help stem the tide of efforts to defund college education on the grounds that it only provides career preparation, which students should pay for themselves.

This report takes you back 40 years to see what was on the agenda then. Conditions were different in 1976, but you may be surprised to see that today's agenda was already taking shape. The Airlie House Conference, convened by the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), brought together leading intellectuals like Margaret Mead, prominent academics like philosopher Charles Frankel, scientists like E. O. Wilson, and leaders of major institutions from Johns Hopkins University to the American Council on Education and the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education. Members of Congress, business executives, foundation leaders, journalists, and a smattering of students were there. The purpose of the Conference was to look at national and international imperatives to see what implications they had for higher education. As Virginia Smith, director of HEW's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, observed, colleges and universities have never changed themselves from within but have been changed by being receptive to constructive forces coming from outside.

As you might expect, equity was a major theme but integration as a topic was beginning to be replaced by references to "diversity." A defense of standards and academic excellence was mounted in response to calls for relevance and service. Most significant, participants had the sense that the identity, even the soul, of higher education hung in the balance in a time of uncertain transitions.

Federal funding was increasing, and with it new federal regulations, which further intensified questions of identity. Earlier, Harold Enarson, president of Ohio State University, had warned in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that institutions of higher education were being "whipped into a bureaucratic mold" to be production units in a knowledge industry "processing human beings for strictly utilitarian ends." And Earl Cheit, business school dean at Berkeley, had worried that this was a trend that would rob colleges and universities of the sense that they were originally movements.

If there is a lesson to be learned from this bit of history, it may be that the present concerns about higher education losing its historic sense of mission and not being seen as a public good are not to be taken lightly. Meeting the challenge of combating this decades-old trend will require a joint public-institutional effort to revisit the founding purposes of academic institutions and to deliberate on what these historic missions should mean now.