

EARLHAM

Office of the President

September 1, 2009

Dear Friends:

As we reflect on the financial mess of the past eighteen months, the foreclosures and bank failures, the stock market values that melted away in a matter of months, and now, especially, the cruel and likely persistent levels of unemployment that are ravaging communities around the globe, I think we have to acknowledge that this mess did not arise from ignorance and stupidity. It arose, instead, from intelligence and intellectual sophistication. Any sober reckoning will have to accord (and not for the first time) a primary role to the best and the brightest.

I am not meaning to mount a political argument here. I am not trying to lay the blame on some smart people as opposed to other smart people (though there may be a place elsewhere for such apportionment). I only want to note that those who did the most to precipitate this mess are people with very high apportionments of intelligence and education — much higher apportionments than those who will suffer the worst consequences. And thus I want to acknowledge that we who work in institutions of higher education need, again, to take stock.

For what purposes are we educating young men and women? For material gain alone, or for wider and deeper ends? For the benefits of those so educated alone, or for their benefit and also the benefit of others?

I believe Earlham is founded on this understanding: that to become educated is to acquire a special form of privilege, and that with that privilege comes responsibility. That with that privilege comes a willingness to find ways to serve others, to see that your good fortune contributes not just to your own well-being but to the well-being of others.

The College's mission statement speaks of "the pursuit of truth, wherever that pursuit leads," but it also speaks of "the application of what is known to improving our world." And the statement also says that we carry on education "with a concern for the world in which we live and for improving human society."

This version of our mission statement was written over two decades ago, and in this critical regard it still very much voices the commitment of the Earlham faculty today. As August began, I asked the faculty to make suggestions about what they hoped I would emphasize about the College when I had opportunities to talk with prospective students or prospective donors. "We prepare students for the world as it is AND for the world we'd like it to be," said one. A second urged me to emphasize that "the quest for knowledge and 'truth' here is inseparable from the quest to live wisely and well." A third said, "Earlham is a place where we learn to be better human beings."

If this seems unassailable to you, remember that very few colleges or universities educate in this way, and fewer still live up to their rhetoric. No wonder members of the faculty encourage me to emphasize this with prospective students. For many centuries, joining the pursuit of truth with the quest for living wisely and well was the unquestioned ideal of education in the liberal arts and sciences. In the 1920s (very roughly) some colleges took a different tack, emphasizing "knowledge for knowledge's sake." The moral purposes of education

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began to slip away. On this new understanding, a college education would equip students with knowledge and colleges would devote themselves with unwavering focus to that end. What students did after graduation with the knowledge they gained was not something in which the college took an interest.

At this fork in the road, Earlham remained committed to the understanding that an education in the liberal arts and sciences should involve both the vigorous pursuit of truth (wherever that may lead) and persistent attention to the purposes to which these truths may be put in service. Whenever I am away from Earlham and return to campus, I am struck again at how much we talk about purposes here, how much we think about how what we do affects others — and should affect others.

One of Earlham's main approaches to nurturing student reflection on how they should live is a document called *Earlham College Community Principles and Practices*, a statement of “the values that guide those of us who live and work at Earlham College and who form its campus community.” This document does not make detailed prescriptions about what people should say or do but rather helps them learn about how to speak and act responsibly in a community in which we accord unreserved respect to each individual. We strive to be a community of mutual support, responsibility and accountability.

Principles and Practices is framed around five core principles to which we ask commitment from each member of the community: respect for persons, integrity, peace and justice, simplicity and consensus governance. Some guidance is given under each of these headings for how we expect individuals to behave, but these are guidances, not rules. And in each section there follow some “Queries,” questions we expect members of the community to ask themselves regularly. “When I disagree, do I do so explicitly, so that others may reply, or do I defend my actions with deliberate silence and inaction?” “Do I speak the truth even when it feels difficult to do so?” “Do I try to keep my commitments in a healthy balance?” These are just a few of the queries. The use of queries is, of course, a distinctively Quaker practice, but there is nothing sectarian about the wording of these queries.

In this academic year we will be reviewing and renewing *Principles and Practices*, something we try to do every four years. You can read the whole document (and I hope you will) on our Web site at www.earlham.edu/policies/principles.html. If you have suggestions for how it might be improved, please send them to me at prexy@earlham.edu.

As you read *Principles and Practices*, I think you will find in it both guidance and queries that would have been helpful if they had been deep in the hearts and minds of our best and brightest in recent years.

As this academic year begins, my very best wishes to each of you from a special College in Indiana that is seeking a better way.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Doug Bennett". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Douglas C. Bennett