

REMARKS AT THE NASSAU CLUB
October 24, 1990

"Adults and Higher Education"

I would like to begin by recounting a comment made by a colleague, Dr. Badi Foster, former member of the faculty here at the University, who currently serves as President of the Aetna Institute of the Aetna Insurance Companies. In reply to my query as to the purpose of Dr. Foster's organization, he responded that the future competitiveness of his company was less a function of its products and services than the quality of its human capital, and that the Aetna Institute was the vehicle by which the Aetna Insurance Companies invested in its human capital. I would like you to reflect on that very powerful notion, for I will return to it later.

By the mid-1960's, American higher education had begun to notice that adults were coming to the academy in large numbers and in ways which could not be explained by the various GI Bills. Mature adults first began attending college in significant numbers following World War II in response to government incentives for veterans to pursue higher education, and we in the academic community expected that this bubble of "nontraditional students" would pass through the system and we would return to business-as-usual with our more customary 18 year olds.

By the middle '60's it was apparent that the adult population in higher education was not to be a transitory phenomenon, and that the growing number of mature students had broadened beyond returning veterans. In the late '60's, the Carnegie Commission considered the implication for American higher education and this radically different kind of student. They concluded that adult students are significantly different from traditional age students in ways that transcend the mere fact of age. They further concluded that colleges and universities could not effectively address the needs of these two very different groups of students within the same policy context, and recommended that higher education create a separate policy context for mature adults.

Three states responded by creating free-standing institutions specifically targetted to serve mature adults. In 1971, Minnesota created Minnesota Metropolitan State College and New York created Empire State College, and in 1972, New Jersey chartered Thomas Edison State College. While there are differences among these three institutions, what we have in common is that we were created to be client-specific, and in that fact lies the genesis of our unique institutional character. For, whereas other colleges and universities are faculty-centered, we are student-centered; and where other institutions are place-centered, we are process-centered; and whereas other institutions place an emphasis on teaching and research, our focus is on learning and the ability to document the acquisition of knowledge.

I would like to quote from the Thomas Edison State College Statement of Mission and Purposes and its six guiding principles:

"The College was founded for the purpose of providing diverse and alternative methods of achieving a collegiate education of the highest quality for mature adults. To this end, the College seeks:

- I. To provide curricula and degree opportunities of appropriate level and composition consistent with the aspirations of our students, the public welfare, and the highest qualitative standards of American higher education.
- II. To create a system of college-level learning opportunities for adults by organizing collegiate and sponsored noncollegiate instruction into coherent degree strategies.
- III. To make available educationally valid learning opportunities which serve as alternatives to college classroom study and which are appropriate to the varied needs and learning styles of adults.
- IV. To develop and implement processes for the valid and reliable assessment of experiential and extracollegiate college-level learning, and to provide appropriate academic recognition for knowledge so identified consistent with high standards of quality and rigor.

- V. To serve higher education and the public interest as a center of innovation, information, policy formulation, and advocacy on behalf of adult learners.
- VI. To conduct its affairs in a manner which acknowledges the maturity, autonomy, and dignity of its students; assures a portal of access to higher education for adult learners; and celebrates the values, diversity, and high qualitative standards of American higher education."

Two philosophies, implicit in the mission statement, are important in understanding Thomas Edison's approach to serving the adult learner. The College believes that: (1) Many adults possess or can acquire college-level knowledge through formal or informal education or training, through community activities, and through self-directed learning; and (2) College credit should be awarded for the demonstration of college-level and college-relevant knowledge, regardless of the source or method of learning.

Accordingly, the College encourages learning and access to learning opportunity in all forms, acts to translate the outcomes of learning into well-understood educational objectives, and supports adults in achieving their aspirations for college degrees through a personalized system of academic planning. Thomas Edison's approach to education seeks to empower its students to fully take advantage of the institution's resources in achieving their educational goals.

Thomas Edison students satisfy requirements toward one or more of the College's six associate and five baccalaureate degree programs through any of a variety of methods. Students may transfer in credits earned at other accredited institutions; take any of 350 available examinations for college credit; receive credit for completing evaluated training programs offered by their employer, labor union, or the military; earn credit for certain professional licenses and certificates; and, in some cases, be granted credit for having taught college courses. The College offers students a structured independent study program--Guided Study--through which adults can earn college credit without attending classes by studying at a distance supported by various learning technologies. Through the College's Portfolio Assessment program, students may present, for evaluation by qualified faculty assessors, documentation which demonstrates knowledge equivalent to one or many college courses.

Thomas Edison's national prominence and leadership in its field is evidenced by the replication of methods pioneered by the College at numerous other institutions; by the success of Thomas Edison's annual National Institute for the Assessment of Experiential Learning; and by recognition received in the form of numerous national and regional awards and frequent references in adult higher education literature. The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, one of the seven regional accrediting agencies, turned to Thomas Edison for assistance in developing its Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Standards for Accreditation.

Our Statewide Testing and Assessment Center provides experiential learning assessment services for students of 37 member institutions.

The high regard in which our college and our graduates are held by our sister institutions is reflected in the fact that approximately one-half of our graduates go on to graduate and professional schools, and nearly 90% are admitted to the program of their first choice. Today, Thomas Edison State College enrolls approximately 8,000 students in a student body whose average age is approximately 40 years old. Our national reputation has attracted students from each of the 50 states and over 20 foreign countries. The reasons our students study with us are as diverse and different as the student body itself. Many come en route to graduate and professional school study, others participate for career or professional advancement. Many are retired senior citizens; others we refer to as "retired homemakers", women who have retired from the homemaking role and are now prepared to commit their resources to their development after they finished with the children.

At our last commencement a couple of weeks ago, our youngest graduate was 25 and our oldest was 80. What they have in common is that they are all independent, self-disciplined, self-motivated, goal-oriented individuals who, through this institution, were able to achieve a long-deferred life objective that was not possible earlier in their lives or that could be accommodated within another institution's context.

Many Edison students are enrolled through employer sponsorship. The College's Center for Corporate and Public Partnerships delivers Edison's services to the training programs of more than sixty corporations, public agencies, and labor unions, ranging from AT&T, Omaha Public Power, and Blue Cross/Blue Shield to the New Jersey Departments of State and Taxation and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

We admit students every day. We graduate students when they finish, and we have a commencement ceremony once a year in October. We are named after Thomas Edison not so much because he was a famous New Jerseyan, but because he demonstrated the power and ability of adults to embrace learning and achievement as a life-long principle independent from the structure of traditional collegiate education.

I mentioned that Dr. Foster referenced the need of the private sector to invest in its "human capital" and emphasized the concept of life-long learning. This insight is not unique to the AETna. As I stand before you this afternoon, there are more students, faculty, and dollars invested in postsecondary education at corporations, labor unions, government entities, and the military than in all the colleges and universities in America combined.

In the last year before divestiture, AT&T spent three times more money on the education of its employees than MIT spent on the education of its students, and, even in the traditional academy, approximately one-half of the students in American higher education today are over the age of 25, attending college part-time.

I would like to conclude where I started. The AETna Insurance Companies understand that its future competitiveness, health, and welfare is a function of the quality of its human capital. Probably more than other institutions, Thomas Edison State College has understood that the future of our society, of our state, and our nation is also a function of the quality of its human capital.

The case has been made over and over by economists, by corporations, by journalists and futurists, that the economic vitality of a state and the quality of life of a region are directly tied to its support for and the strength of its system of higher education in that region.

Thomas Edison State College more than an institution, represents a system which embodies individuals and institutions in the development of our human capital. We have joined with our colleague institutions, public and private, junior and senior, in creating in this state a model of institutional achievement which the rest of the nation has applauded and emulated.

For the last couple of years, the fiscal crisis in which our state has found itself has begun to erode the gains higher education has made. Regardless of the resources made available to us, we shall not erode the quality and commitment to excellence that has been the source of our growth and reputation. If we are given less to work with, then we will serve fewer people. But those that we serve will be well-served. When the public, through its government, disinvests in higher education, it is not the institutions that are the object of the real loss, for we are the vehicles by which the people of New Jersey invest in our state's human capital.

Dr. Foster was right. For the first time in the history of this country our future is not dependent on those things which we have depended on in the past. The paradigm has shifted. The current climate of disinvestment in higher education is a disinvestment of our own future. I want you to be proud of higher education in New Jersey, both public and private; our community colleges and our research universities.

I especially want you to understand, admire, support, and applaud Thomas Edison State College. But more than that, I want you to appreciate the tremendous asset that we have built in this state for protecting the future of our human capital. It requires our support, for if we do not, we do so at our own peril.

Thank you, and I stand ready for your questions.