

Our president is challenging us to answer the question: What does it mean to be a liberal arts college in the contemporary world?

BY DR. EDWARD QUEEN II '80

I care about Birmingham-Southern College. In fact, I honestly and unabashedly can say that I am grateful to the school for making possible any of the successes I have had in life. In many ways, however, that statement is not quite true. Traditionally my affection and gratitude have been reserved for professors and fellow students. Without Earl Gossett and Natalie Davis, Irvin Penfield and Susan Hagen, Paul Franke and Barbara Lester, and many others, including Lloyd Slone, Roy Wells, and David Fraley, my life would have been markedly diminished and radically different. For the institution of Birmingham-Southern College, my affection has been more muted, reserved mostly for those whose foresight created the scholarship programs that allowed so many of us to attend the institution and obtain such opportunities. My feelings toward the college have been mixed at best. Every action undertaken by the administration always has been viewed critically, as potentially threatening the school's strengths and its passions.

The hiring of a new president, while striking me as an event marking the end of an era, initially did little to change that view. As the new president, David Pollick, made his rounds to visit with alumni in various cities, I received an invitation to attend such a meeting in



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Atlanta. While pleased to see 'Southern reaching out more aggressively to alumni, my suspicions were not readily allayed. In fact, when I initially was introduced to Dr. Pollick, they increased. To be honest, he struck me as too polished, possibly slick, even alien.

Then he began to speak about his vision for Birmingham-Southern College. My attitude began to shift. If he truly meant what he said, then he was the perfect person for the job as president of my college. He understood both what a Birmingham-Southern could, and should, be and what it meant to be a liberal arts college. As he expounded on his vision of Birmingham-Southern College as an ethos and a place, I became increasingly impressed. When he spoke of the name Birmingham as something from which the

college should not run, but which meant a history of distinctive experiences and understandings that provided something special to offer the world, I was a convert.

With me, however, he was preaching to the choir. His vision meshed with everything I had believed about the college from the moment I set foot on campus. When President Pollick began to articulate his vision for a Center for Global Human Dignity, I knew that he was a man capable of grasping essences (not surprising in a philosopher) and of thinking creatively about the

liberal arts college in the contemporary world. He saw that the essence of a liberal arts college was to inquire into what it means to be human, to ask how to live a human life, and to ensure that all can truly live such a human life. Only by struggling with such questions and by educating students about the importance of such questions does a liberal arts college have a reason for existing. If President Pollick believed in the vision which he so powerfully articulated, then 'Southern indeed was in good hands.

That, however, was the rub. How sincere was this man about what he meant and how hard would he work to realize the vision he articulated so well? Over the past year, I have learned the depth of his sincerity and commitment. While serving as the volunteer alumni chair for the Center for Global Human Dignity—a new position on the Alumni Association Board—I have had the chance to work closely with President Pollick, as well as with many of the senior administrators and faculty at 'Southern, particularly Provost Kathleen Murray, and to observe their responses as the college dealt with incredibly serious matters. They invited me to participate as the only non-faculty/staff member of the campus Task Force for the Center for Global Human Dignity—an opportunity I welcomed. Everything I have seen and heard has proven to me that the substance of the commitment is at least as strong as the vision. Dr. Pollick's response to the church burnings was morally commendable and most impressive. Rather than hiding behind any number of reasons about why the college bore no responsibility, he challenged the school and all its stakeholders to meet the intellectual, moral, social, and financial challenges that the arsons presented. As one who always has valued what people do over what they say, I was markedly impressed.

Conversations with faculty and students served to validate my positive response. I am pleased that the school is in such good hands. From my position on the Alumni Board, I look forward to sharing with you—in future articles in this magazine and through e-mail communications—the details about the center as they emerge, and inviting all alumni to join in celebrating the fact that this center calls out and gives a name to that which has been making our college great for 150 years.

Birmingham-Southern College faces serious challenges and must address them. It must become a national institution. It has to tell its story, embracing its past and moving aggressively into the future in a way that positions the school to address emerging realities. The college has to answer what it means to be a liberal

arts college in the contemporary world. I am pleased to be part of the discussions that are leading to the formal structure, goals, and priorities for the new Center for Global Human Dignity. President David Pollick has challenged all of us to work with him in articulating that answer.

It is up to all of us who care for Birmingham-Southern to respond to that challenge, to struggle together for that answer, and to turn that answer into a meaningful institutional reality.

Editor's Note: *Dr. Edward Queen II, director of Ethics and Servant Leadership at Emory University, is volunteer alumni chair for the Center for Global Human Dignity on the Birmingham-Southern Alumni Association Board.*

Center for Global Human Dignity

Birmingham-Southern College has a long history of service to the broader community, embracing its Methodist heritage and extending that ethos through programs such as the Hess Center for Leadership and Service, service-learning experiences integrated into the curriculum, and an expanding Study Abroad program. Its Methodist founders asked the first graduates of Southern University to “be Christian heroes in this great moral warfare of life,” to “develop the latent capacities, to transform the helpless infant into a good and wise man, fitted to serve God and his generation on earth.” On the occasion of its Sesquicentennial, the college reasserts the value of advancing human dignity as fundamental to the mission of liberal arts education.

To this end, Birmingham-Southern College is establishing the Center for Global Human Dignity with the mission of investigating what it means to be human and what is required to advance human dignity in the world. Central to this investigation is the exploration of what impedes opportunities for people worldwide to live in an environment that sustains an inherent sense of personal worth and social responsibility. Our heritage compels us to intentionally examine the social principles that direct our daily impact on the world.

The center will actively seek to create an environment, both at the college and in the broader society, in which the knowledge, skills, and strategies for addressing these questions can be developed.

Private support for this Center for Global Human Dignity is vital to creating such an environment that brings hope for peace and human dignity across our state, nation, and world.