THE IMPACT OF THE 1980s ON DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

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When Carol Bogue approached me almost a year ago inviting me to address your general conference theme, "Coming of Age in the 1980s," I suggested that I would like to speak to that theme by looking at trends and changes in the broader society that would have an impact on developmental education in this decade. I then hoped that within a year, it would become clear to me what those influences were likely to be. As it happened, I didn't have long to wait for the feathers to hit the fan.

It was just about this time last year that the National Commission on Excellence on Education managed a direct hit on the nerve center of discontent with schooling in America with its quotable language about "a nation at risk" and "the rising tide of mediocrity." It now seems clear that the major forces that will shape developmental education in the short-term future will arise out of the educational reform movement that has been gathering reports and momentum all year.

At last count, there were more than 30 books, studies, and commission reports, and in addition the 50 states had appointed a

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total of 175 task forces charged with improving the quality of education. That averages out to more than three task forces per state and about two national reports per month. For better or for worse, that amount of directed energy is going to have an impact on virtually all forms of education, but especially on the types of programs that are the focus of your professional interest. The educational reform movement is basically concerned about increasing the academic competence of students in reading, writing, mathematics, computer literacy, and anything else judged to be an essential learning skill. So let us turn our attention in this session of your diverse and interesting convention program to the points of overlap between the recent national emphasis on educational improvement and your concerns about helping individuals to improve their learning skills.

At one extreme, we could entertain the thought that if the school reform movement were really successful, there would be no need for developmental education at the college level. All children coming through the school system would be adequately prepared and appropriately motivated for college-level study. This wildly optimistic possibility, however, takes no note of the fact that half of all college students today are over the age of twenty-two. Moreover it was not until the 1950s that a majority of the population remained in school long enough to complete high school. Thus, if one wants to indulge in the popular nostalgia for the "good old days" when students learned their lessons in schools, we must also acknowledge that many people, including most minorities, had little opportunity to learn in the schools

of the 1950s. So there are generation gaps that must continue to be addressed by educators, even if students should begin to emerge from high school with the learning skills that are essential for college or other learning options.

At the other extreme of this hypothetical continuum about the impact of school reform on developmental education, there is the thought that if the present school reform campaign is successful, every educator at every level, grade school through college, is going to be concentrating on doing a better job of seeing that all students are well-equipped with the basic learning skills. In that event, the cluster of concerns that lie at heart of this professional association will lie at the heart of all professional education.

In any event, I think it likely that the school reform movement will strengthen the role and the clout of developmental educators. Your experience and your knowledge about how to work with underprepared learners should be a national resource for the educational reforms of the 1980s. Most of the commissions would have benefited from the insights of professionals with experience in the fields they were trying to address, but at least the discussions and debates that are taking place throughtout the country now are open and lively, and I am delighted to have this opportunity to think with you about the directions of the 1980's reforms and their probable impact on the philosophy and practice of education directed toward the development of lifelong learning skills.

Incidentally, I am going to use the phrase learning skills or lifelong learning skills to refer to those cognitive skills and attitudes that permit people to continue to learn new things whether they are 8 year olds learning to spell, 18 year olds struggling with college chemistry, 40 year olds faced with the challenge of computer literacy, or 50 year olds interested in the study of American literature. The euphamisms that we have invented over the past several decades for talking about people who are ill-prepared for learning whatever they need or want to learn seem to change with the seasons, and they certainly impede our conversations about common concerns. Whether you operate a learning assistance center, a developmental reading program, a remedial math lab, or some other learning assistance program, I would like to consider the future of our common concerns in the context of the current reform movement.

I am not going to spend a lot of time on the symptoms of malaise in American public education. Almost everyone agrees that the general health of education in America is not what it should be. Different publics, however, repond to different indicators. Perhaps the most convincing symptom to the general public is the decline of test scores. That symptom has been reported in both the popular and professional press for more than 15 years now. In 1975, the College Board and Educational Testing Service began exhaustive studies about the probable causes of the decline. The answers implicated a wide variety of culprits, ranging from the demographics of the birth rate to social unrest to efforts to educate a wider spectrum of the population. But much of the

problem was laid at the doorstep of the schools -- not enough homework, too many nonacademic courses, lowered expectations, not enough emphasis on writing, etc. (College Board, 1977).

For businessmen, the symptom of school failure lies in the loss of productivity of the American labor force. While no one suggests that schools alone are responsible for everything from the loss of the competitive edge of America to the negative balance of trade, there is a feeling that American workers are not doing their jobs, and that at least part of this is due to the fact that students and teachers are not doing their jobs in the schools.

For teachers at any level, the evidence of educational malaise is to be found in the deplorable skills of their incoming students. Teachers complain that colleges don't get good students from the high schools, who don't get good students from the elementary schools, who don't get good teachers from colleges and graduate schools.

To continue the medical analogy about the health of the schools, no one who has examined the patient has suggested that the symptoms are not real or that the cure is as simple as two aspirins and bed rest. But anyone seeking a second opinion on the severity of the illness is likely to get it -- and a third, fourth, and fifth opinion as well. There really isn't much agreement on whether American education has a cold, the flu, or pneumonia.

Even those who have spent many months in the field examining the patient aren't sure how serious the situation is. John

Goodlad warns that, "It is possible that our entire public education system is nearing collapse" (1983, p. 1), while Ernie Boyer finds that the schools are beginning to improve, with the top 10 to 15 per cent providing perhaps the finest education in the world. (1983, p. 38) Overall, however, Boyer concludes that schools are, "like the communities that surround them--surviving but not thriving" (p. 38). Perhaps the point of greatest agreement is that is depends very much on which school you are talking about. Some are very good indeed; some are terrible, and most are mediocre.

John Goodlad is especially insistent that no single set of judgments or recommendations can reasonably apply to all schools (p. xvii). But most of the reports conclude with sweeping and amazingly specific recommendations for treatment. A few are supremely selfconfident that their treatment will result in quick and complete recovery. The authors of A Nation at Risk, for example, assert that if their recommendations are implemented over the next several years, they will "promise lasting reform" (1983, p. 23). Historians may doubt the prognosis of "lasting reform," but there is reasonable agreement on the general direction the reform should take in the 1980s.

I am not going to discuss the recommendations in detail. One of the more absorbing tasks in education these days is making charts of the various recommendations and then making summaries of summaries. There are so many reports out now and so many commentaries and analyses that practically every wise and foolish thing that can be said about the schools has been said. For

that reason I am going to avoid commenting on recommendations that have already gained high visibility, and I am also not going to dwell on the admittedly difficult issues of how we are going to pay for all this or the proper role for the Federal government. Instead, I am going to concentrate on the possible negative side effects of relatively popular recommendations on which there is enough agreement that there is a chance for implementation.

My purpose in taking this approach is not to slow down action, but to speed up thinking. My concern is that for every complex problem, there is proposed a simple solution -- and these reports are full of them. Generally speaking, the reports put together by blue-ribbon commissions are more simplistic than those prepared by individual investigators. Perhaps this is understandable, since while individual commissioners are highly talented people, the commissions are consensus seeking and do not attempt to address either differences among committee members or differences among schools.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education took a calculated risk when they decided, I hope deliberately, to make their report simple enough to grab public attention. That it did, but simple solutions to complex problems are unlikely to improve education. The more sophisticated analyses that came out later are having a hard time convincing the general public, excitable politicians, and a sensationalist press that school reform is going to be a long slow process and that over-reacting may be as bad as failure to act. They are just opposite swings of the pendulum.

Many of the reports attribute the erosion of quality in education to the permissiveness of the 1960s and 70s and reason that the solution is to swing the pendulum in the opposite direction, toward more control, more requirements, and tougher standards. These prescriptions call for simple corrections of perceived excesses of the past. Not enough homework? --assign more. Not enough testing? --require more. Too many electives? --insist on more requirements. These undimensional corrections might be labeled the swinging pendulum solution. A pendulum is in constant motion, but it never goes anywhere. It simply swings from one extreme to the other. Indeed, the momentum gained from a swing to the left provides the energy for the swing to the right.

Those of you who work with underprepared students know that doing more of what has not worked for these students in the past is not the route to success. As one observer of the current mania for legislating standards observed, "If the kid can't high jump 4', it does no good to raise the bar to 4'8". What then should we do? Specify clear objectives? Yes. Make a careful analyses of individual learning problems? Of course. Establish realistic expectations and high standards of performance? Certainly. Conduct frequent evaluation and provide immediate feedback? Surely. These are strategies based on an analysis of the problem; they are not simple pendulum swings applied with relentless uniformity to the entire student population. If we are not more thoughful about the goal of quality and how to attain it, we will spend the 1980's correcting for the

permissiveness of the 1960s and 1970s, and we will spend the 1990s correcting for the overregulation of the 1980s. We might, I suppose, recommend more modest corrections, but that would simply slow down the pendulum, eventually stopping all movement.

We know more about the characteristics of effective schools than swinging pendulum solutions suggest, and it is a disservice to imply that our options are limited to strategies that seemed to work in different times with different student populations. We know, for exmple, that effective schools are distinguished by some of the same characteristics that distinguish effective developmental programs: clear priorities about what must be learned, high expectations for students, uninterrupted time on task, positive discipline, and support from the top.

Unfortunately for those interested in gaining credibility as people of action, these qualities cannot be legislated as can the currently popular quantifiable reforms such as more time in school, more pay for teachers, more requirements, and more tests. Effective reform must be achieved by slower, more complex actions built up through community pressure, faculty commitment, and support from the President and the Board.

In addition to more thoughtful analyses and greater patience we need some fresh perspectives and perhaps some new metaphors. The spiral staircase is a more apt metaphor for school reform than the swinging pendulum. Whereas the swinging pendulum involves retracing old ground, the spiral staircase rises to new levels. We may circle back to look at old problems from new perspectives, but our motion is constantly upward to a higher

plane of action. Schools of the 1980s are operating in a different plane from those of the 1960s, and we need to find some new perspectives if we are to avoid educational faddism and swinging pendulum solutions.

One such perspective is offered in the best selling book, In Search of Excellence (Peters & Waterman, 1982), in which the authors describe the most successful corporations in America. Ironically, the conclusions about the environments which stimulate excellence in corporate America are frequently the opposite of what is recommended for excellence in our schools, but I found that the factors contributing to corporate excellence have much in common with what we think we have learned over the past decade or so about effective learning environments for underprepared learners.

When Peters and Waterman set out to look for corporate excellence, they found it at both IBM and MacDonald's --in the production of the lowly hamburger as well as in the glamour of high tech. Their criteria for excellence seemed not to reside in the prestige of the thing produced, but rather in the attitude and enthusiasm of the workers. They concluded that one of the main clues to corporate excellence lay in "unusual effort on the part of apparently ordinary employees" (p. xvii). There is a lot to think about in that deceptively simple conclusion, and developmental educators are constantly concerned about how to motivate ordinary people. Are there recommendations in the 1980s educational reforms that will stimulate "apparently ordinary" people to unusual effort?

In the first place, there is surprisingly little attention given to "ordinary people" in the school reform reports. There is the clear implication that the rising tide of mediocrity is made up of embarrassing numbers of ordinary people, and if we want to return excellence to education, we better go out and find more excellent people. Teachers colleges are advised to select better candidates; colleges are encouraged to raise admissions standards, and the Federal government is urged to offer scholarships to attract top high school graduates into teaching. There is not a lot said in the education reports about how to stimulate unusual effort on the part of the ordinary people that we seem to be faced with in the schools and in most colleges.

"Excellent companies," say Peters and Waterman, "require and demand extraordinary performance from the average man" (p. xxii). Since the tips for getting such extraordinary performance are scattered throughout their book, let me select a few of them and measure them against the recommendations of the 1980s educational reforms.

One important suggestion from the corporate world for stimulating unusual effort on the part of ordinary people is to make people members of winning teams while also recognizing each individual as a star in his or her own right. Peters and Waterman found that excellent companies, "turn the <u>average</u> Joe and the <u>average</u> Jane into winners" (p. 239 emphasis added). That is a bit more difficult, it seems, than recognizing winners. The tough problem is not in identifying winners; it is in <u>making</u> winners out of ordinary people. That, after all, is the

overwhelming purpose of education. Yet historically, in most of the periods emphasizing excellence, education has reverted to selecting winners rather than creating them.

In any era, colleges that are able to select winners among both students and faculty, are most likely to be perceived as quality institutions. Although "value added" is a sound educational concept and the ultimate educational challenge, it has not often been pursued with any vigor in education. Community colleges are frequently considered lower quality educational institutions than research universities, not on the basis of comparing the "value added" to their graduating classes, but by comparing the selectivity exercised in admitting their entering classes.

Peters and Waterman insist that there is no reason why organizations cannot design systems to support and create winners. Most excellent companies, they say, build systems "to reinforce degrees of winning rather than degrees of losing" (p. 57).

At IBM, for example, sales quotas are set so that 70-80 percent of its sales people meet their quotas. At a less successful company, only 40 percent of the sales force meets its quota during a typical year. "With this approach," say the researchers, "at least 60 percent of the salespeople think of themselves as losers. They resent it and that leads to dysfunctional, unpredictable, frenetic behavior. Label a man a loser and he'll start acting like one" (p. 57). Of all of the data that I have collected on open-admissions students in

community colleges, none were more distressing than those showing students' perceptions of themselves as losers in the educational race (Cross, 1971).

There is much in the present educational reform movement that should frighten us if, in fact, winning is important for ordinary people. The investigators on corporate excellence observed that less-than-excellent organizations take a negative view of their workers. "They verbally berate participants for poor perfomance ... They want innovation but kill the spirit of the champion ... They design systems that seem calculated to tear down their workers' self-image" (p. 57).

That sounds a lot like what we are doing in the educational reform movement of the 1980's. We are telling teachers that they are a sorry lot, scoring lower on the SAT than their fellow students in college. We are proclaiming that the deplorable state of the schools is an embarrassment to us internationally and a risk to our nation. We are telling students that they are losers and threatening them with loss of further educational opportunity if they don't shape up. It is very hard to feel like a winner anywhere in the educational system today. But, the critics will object, how can you improve the educational system if you don't face the facts? Fair question.

The "facts" seem to be that there are some excellent schools out there, that there are some exceptional teachers, that we do know something about making teaching and learning more effective, that high expectations are important to perfomance, and that financial support is absolutely essential. We also know that

test scores have been falling, that expectations for students are not high enough to demand their best performance, and that until students experience success as a result of their own efforts, it will be hard for them to feel like winners. Even very young children know when they are learning and when they are not. It does no good to tell students of any age that they are doing fine if they are not. Thus, learning tasks must be realistic, and every student must have an opportunity to succeed at a learning task that is important. It is not an easy task, and throughout history it is has been made ever more difficult by the growing diversity of our student populations.

In some two decades of trying to find answers to the question of how to provide education for all the people, I have reached the conclusion, that it is our commitment to the lock-step time-defined structures of education that stand in the way of lasting progress (Cross, 1976). It is simply unrealistic to think that all students can learn the same material, to the same standards of performance, in the same amount of time, taught by the same method. We continue to talk about individual differences. We know they exist; we have reliable measures of them. We even cherish them, but we fail to provide for them in our educational systems. Most experiments in individualization are soon abandoned because they require too much work on the part of teachers who are faced with individualizing instruction <u>in addition to</u> their obligation to handle all of their traditional tasks.

Strangely enough our solution has never been to change the

system to accommodate individual talents. Rather it has been to try in some way to reduce the diversity --through selection, through narrowing curricular choices, and through proclaiming that we expect too much of our schools and that they must be allowed to get back to basis.

Those are the familiar planks in the platforms of the school reform movement of the 1980s. Many people are searching for ways to rid the school of problem learners, to reduce the obligations of the schools, and to restrict the curricular options.

There are serious proposals to deny the losers in the educational race a high school diploma or entrance to a community college. There is not much doubt that the easiest way for an educational institution to raise its own quality is to get rid of problem learners. Don't accept them and don't certify them. Test scores will rise, faculty morale will improve, and the institution will be perceived as a quality place for serious learning.

The problem is that the society that supports this superficially excellent educational institution now has on its hands the educational rejects. Whose responsibility is it to convert them from a drag on society to productive members of that society? The chances are high that an illiterate mother or father in this generation will produce three or four more problem learners in the next generation. Clearly, we cannot afford to "improve" educational institutions at the expense of society. But it is distressing to see how many well-meaning but short-sighted legislators and educators are taking advantage of

the current mandates for excellence by supporting proposals that can have the effect of eliminating from local high schools and colleges the very students who need their services most. Some years ago, one wag devised this motto for Admiral Rickovers' elitist recommendations: "Save the best; shoot the rest".

Selection is the easy route to quality -- but it is a swinging pendulum solution that fails to address the underlying problems with curriculum, instruction, and teacher training. For better or for worse, our schools have to be concerned with maximizing the performance of "ordinary people."

One of the perennial problems with universal education is the diversity in achievement that it brings into the average classroom. Many of the reports call for a core curriculum, frequently on the grounds that it will abolish the evils of tracking. The common core curriculum, however, without provisions for individualization, will simply replace parallel tracks with vertical ones. Instead of lower achieving students being shunted into vocational or general education curricula, they will occupy the lowest ranks of the academic core curriculum. There is ample research evidence to show that students who start school in the bottom third of the class will remain there throughout their dreary journey through the American school system (Cross, 1971).

Although I am convinced along with Ben Bloom, Jerome Bruner, and others that almost any child can learn the basic school curriculum, given enough time and appropriate help, I am not convinced that the core curriculum imposed on existing time-bound

structures will abolish the evils of tracking. Why do we think that a D student in the academic curriculum has more life choices than an A student in the vocational curriculum?

As to the recommendations that schools should get back to defining their educational mission, there is always the assumption that the mission is to provide for the cognitive development of students. No one can quarrel with that. What some people are wondering is what organizations in our society should assume responsibility for moral development, common courtesy, civility, and yes, even driver training. The choice seems to be between adding these so-called frills to the schools or ignoring them in the hope that churches, families, and community agencies will reorganize and reassert themselves to deal with them. The inevitable result, I should think, is the swinging pendulum. Schools restrict their responsibilities to intellectual and cognitive tasks until society feels that citizenship and morality need attention, and then there is no place to turn except to the schools.

I believe that we must begin to question whether the ancient structures of education can cope with the diversity that is inherent in universal education. We need structures that are built, not only on the acceptance of individual differences, but on explicit recognition of their value to our society. To use Alvin Toffler's phrase, it is time to de-massify education.

A significant aspect of Alvin Toffler's Third Wave (1980), you will remember, is the customization of products and services. Whereas the industrial revolution of the Second Wave emphasized

mass production, the arrival of the Third Wave makes possible customized production. In the manufacture of clothing, for example, Second Wave production methods required the worker to place one layer of cloth on top of another, lay the pattern on top, and then with an electric cutting knife cut out the pattern and produce multiple identical cutouts of the cloth. These were then subjected to common processing and came out identical in size, shape, and color to be purchased by the masses at reasonable prices "off the rack".

The Third Wave laser machine operates on a radically different principle. Laser machines can be programmed to fill an order for one garment economically, and soon it may be possible "to read one's measurements into a telephone, or point a video camera at oneself, thus feeding data directly into a computer, which in turn will instruct the machine to produce a single garment, cut exactly to one's personal, individualized dimensions". (Toffler 1980, p. 184).

De-massification is also occurring in the mass media. The mass messages that were a product of Second Wave communications are giving way now to highly specialized media audiences. There are, for example, magazines which cater to populations as diverse as antique collectors, joggers, car buffs, and people in the million dollar housing market. Radio stations specialize, not just in music, but in hard rock, soft rock, punkrock, country rock or folk rock. In the Boston area, a new cable TV station announced its intention last week to specialize in "neighborhood news," and newspapers are doing the same thing. A tabloid

newspaper is customized to provide news and advertisements targeted to each separate suburb of the metropolitan Boston area. The Cambridge Tab has some items in common with the Newton Tab, but apparently the publisher thinks it makes good economic sense to publish customized versions for each community.

Although instructional programs appear generally oblivious to the potential power of the computer to custom-design education, we are already beginning to customize testing. Second Wave testing called for identical machine-scorable answer sheets, batched by the thousands, and scored by the overlay of common patterns of right answers. Third Wave testing calls for branching, customization, and diagnosis of individual learning problems. Student personnel work too has become more customized and more individualized. There are more special interest clubs and groups custom-designed to serve special needs populations, such as reentry women, parents without partners, Black student organizations, and the like. At the same time, computerized guidance systems are providing individualized career-guidance services that would be impossible without interactive computer programs. Despite such changes before our very eyes, most of the school reform recommendations of the 1980s propose Second Wave solutions in a Third Wave world. They suggest re-massifying rather than de-massifying education.

Of all of the teachers who work in schools and colleges, I find that those who have or create the opportunity to work with individual students are the least likely to be persuaded that sweeping curricular reforms will return excellence to the schools.

There is, however, one curricular reform that we must begin to deal with immediately. It appears that educators do not know how to handle the information explosion. Mike O'Keefe (1984) presented a compelling picture last week at professional meetings in Chicago of the impact of the information explosion on high school physics. The standard text book used in most high schools today is 610 pages long and contains sections on 42 separate subspecialties of physics including optics, mechanics, nuclear physics, thermodynamics, and all the rest, plus some sections on social responsibilities of scientists and contributions of women and ethnic minorities to science. Whenever a new subspecialty appears or new social concerns arise they are added to the textbooks. The result is a very superficial exposure to innumerable definitions and specialized vocabulary which are usually forgotten within a week. There is no time left for learning what young people growing up in the information society are going to have to know -- how to locate information when they need it, how to analyze, synthesize, interpret, and apply information. In short, today's students are going to have to learn how to learn. We need to develop the higher-level cognitive skills of putting words together to express idea, of selecting from mountains of information that which is relevant, of analyzing arguments, and of synthesizing information from different sources. Until we can find room in the overcrowded curriculum for teaching people to live in our information-saturated society, education will be outdated almost as fast as it is learned. Between 6000 and 7000 scientific

articles are produced each day, and information doubles every 5 1/2 years. By the time the average physician completes his or her training, half of all the knowledge and skills acquired in medical school are obsolete.

How do we educate people to live in a world in which entire industries are created and wiped out in a single decade? The most important lessons that we can teach our children are the skills and the attitudes that will be required of lifelong learners. No education, no matter how brilliantly designed and delivered, will last a lifetime. The greatest handicap any adult can have in the 21st Century is a dislike of formal learning.

It is already clear that there is a growing gap between adults who have learned to enjoy learning and who use it to make their lives richer in every sense of that word, and those who dislike learning and are stuck in dead end and even disappearing jobs. A college graduate today is seven times as likely to be engaged in some form of adult learning as a high school drop-out, and the gap between the educational "haves" and "have-nots" is widening as the learning opportunities for adults increase. One thing that we know for sure from all of the research on adult learning is that it is the already well-educated who rush to take advantage of the new opportunities that are appearing; the poorly educated stay away in droves (Cross, 1981).

In conclusion, the most serious challenge to developmental educators is to prepare students for their futures as lifelong learners. The requirements will be fourfold: 1) to demonstrate to students that they are capable of learning and that it is a

useful, satisfying skill that will serve them well throughout their lives, 2) to provide the cognitive skills that serve as the basic tools for lifelong learning, 3) to instill positive attitudes toward learning, and 4) to gradually put students in charge of their own learning so that they can make choices from among the multiple learning options that will face them as adults in the learning society.

On these requirements, the 1980s reforms are strong on only one of the four. They do want each student to master the basic learning skills. There is not, however, much attention given to creating atmospheres that stimulate enthusiasm for learning. We are approaching our task with grim determination, and there is little patience or interest in the slow learners who will almost certainly constitute one of our greatest social problems in the learning society that lies ahead.

Ted Sizer speaks most directly to the fourth requirement when he says, "A self-propelled learner is the goal of a school, and teachers should insist that students habitually learn on their own" (p. 216). That is a goal we have not seen mentioned in most of the reports. In fact, the general direction is quite the opposite. We are gradually creating more dependence on authorities to specify the learning tasks, control the options available, determine standards, and evaluate outcomes. If we are creating a generation of young learners who become increasingly dependent on others to define standards of acceptable learning, are we also thinking of the demands that will be created on the learning society, with millions of adults unprepared to assume

responsibility for their own self-directed learning? We should, I suggest, start now to develop lifelong learners who are willing and eager to assume responsibility for their own continuous learning.

In order to do that, we must assure that students of all levels of ability develop the basic learning skills and the positive attitudes that will enable them to live productively and with a sense of personal satisfaction in the learning society. Since these are the fundamental goals of developmental education, it seems clear to me that developmental educators will have to rise to the challenge, and in so doing, will fulfill the theme of this 1984 conference, "Coming of Age in the 1980s."

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