

This past spring, in the atmosphere of heightened patriotic rhetoric that followed the September attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, I taught a first-year course in early American literature. My students were reading about the contradictions in America, all of the hopeful talk about religious freedom, personal liberty, as well as the years of slavery, the dispossession of the Native people, and the long struggle to extend the vote to women. I found myself pushing James Baldwin's observation that American experience has always fallen short of the ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence, but that nonetheless it is truly remarkable that our founders set us the task of treating everyone as equal. And thus, in Baldwin's view, the best thing about us was that we kept on trying to make the reality fit the language, trying to discover what it really means to say that people are equal, what we have to do to make it possible for people to be equal. All of which set me to wondering what I, who have so little patience with sentimental nationalism, would consider the best thing about the United States. And surely, as a teacher, I would have to pay attention to education, which human beings at least since Plato have equated with freedom, with movement, with light, with the ability to see what really is instead of the dark shadows cast up on the wall of the cave, or the television screen.

Like the idea that all men are created equal, the idea that all human beings should be educated to the best of their potential is a dangerous one. Yet it has been one of the most characteristic American ideas, expressed and put into law and betrayed and fought for (and against), one of those that have spread to other places and of which we have the most right to be proud. For long periods of time whole communities were thought to have little potential or use for higher education, and many powerful Americans considered it enough if the Irish or Chinese immigrant acquired the most basic literacy. Even today many people argue that vocational schools are what students of limited means really need, and consider demanding academic programs a luxury that the state can only afford to offer in its Aflagship@ institutions. The Amission of the regional campus in this view is mediocrity; research is for research campuses; honors programs and merit scholarships are unnecessary, and all kinds of excellence are elitist.

Indiana University South Bend, as a regional, commuter campus of a state university, is one of the places where the American idea that everyone deserves a good education is happening, is even in some sense on the line, every day. Most of our students work their way through college, many putting in thirty to forty hours at a

job; many have child care or serious family illness added to the mix. Many go through the semester when it just doesn't seem possible any more, the semester when the transmission goes out of the car the same week that somebody on the day shift quits and the boss demands an extra twenty hours of work, which turns out to be the same week that they or their children develop an ear infection and professors schedule midterms in physics, biology, and experimental psychology. In such circumstances, many people do give up, but others keep coming back, learning to multi-task, to work out math problems in the pediatrician's waiting room, to read snatches of the psych text between customers or to get by for weeks in a sleep-deprived state. Many even find time to do more, to do original research and go to research conferences, to write poems and stories for the literary magazine, to work on the *Undergraduate Research Journal*, to tutor other students and wash cars for the Freedom Summer trip or participate in a candlelight vigil for the victims of hate crimes. These students play a major role in keeping faculty here whose research credentials might promise them more prestigious jobs, make it possible for them to teach serious courses and push them to keep up-to-date.

To say that we all have an equal right to learn is not to say, of course, that everyone is equally good at math or German, or that we all learn the same way. But it is to say that we all deserve an education that will challenge us, that will stretch our minds and make us ready for the next stage of our lives, and that whatever our limitations, they ought to be imposed by our talents and our character, but not by our income or ethnicity or gender. This is an ideal that can be threatened many dramatic ways, by the dictator who shuts down the universities to stifle dissent, the private school that sets a quota or Jewish or Asian students, the theocracy that won't let girls go to school, the public school system that puts all the computer labs in the suburbs. But it is threatened, too, any time that people assume that there is a correlation between a student's ambition, imagination, and intelligence and the family income. The promise of an equal education is not the promise that everyone can attain to the same dreary basic literacy, math, and technical skills. The promise of equal education is that our public universities will provide a first-rate education to anyone who can benefit from it.

The *Undergraduate Research Journal* is testimony that we do provide a successful and challenging program for our best students. The essays you are about to read show that IUSB students are doing work that would be a credit to any institution. They will remind you, if you

are a faculty member, of how many of our students have gone on to successful careers in research, law, medicine and, of course, college teaching. If you are a contributor to this issue, you can certainly take pride in your accomplishments; if you're just beginning your college education, you will see models of the kind of work to which you can aspire. Taken collectively, these essays testify to the intellectual talent in our community, and the role of the public university in liberating it to pursue a richer life and a deeper happiness.

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