

# Ernest Boyer: An Appreciation

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Ernest Boyer, who died in December 1995, was the most influential spokesperson on higher education in the United States. His ideas about the undergraduate curriculum, the role of research in academe, and the reform of higher education had a significant impact on the direction of American higher education. He was influential not only because he headed the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the nation's oldest education-oriented "think tank," but because he had a unique ability to translate controversial ideas about education into understandable language. He also had a tremendous commitment to his ideas and to education—and put time into communicating these ideas far and wide. He was willing to go to small colleges or into school classrooms to discuss education. Indeed, he was as at home in the classroom as he was in giving testimony before Congress. Education, to Ernest Boyer, was a calling that he saw in almost religious terms. Strongly influenced by the pacifist and socially active Church of the Brethren and the Quakers, Boyer was an evangelist for education.

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Relatively few have the ability to take complex ideas or abstract data and immediately get to the heart of the matter. Ernest Boyer had that gift, and that is one of the reasons why he was so often able to communicate so effectively. He could make ideas come alive, and could explain their importance not only to specialists, but to wider audiences as well. He was widely respected by his peers in education, and at the same time was able to interact effectively with policymakers and the public. His books are characterized by a clarity of expression.

Ernest Boyer's work in education was also infused by a commitment to values. He was convinced that education—from specialized graduate mentoring in the nation's top universities to preschool education—was an extraordinarily powerful force for good, not only in society but in the lives of individuals. Ernest Boyer was committed to education, not to training. His focus was on learning as a liberating experience for people. Education also contributes to a

more effective workforce, but Ernest Boyer was most interested in how education could contribute to bettering the minds, and the lives, of people.

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In the past few years, Ernest Boyer took the Carnegie Foundation in an entirely new direction. He began to focus on international education, recognizing that the United States is increasingly linked with other nations and that understanding education abroad can help shed light on domestic issues. A long-term exchange with the State Education Commission in China resulted in several seminars on both sides of the Pacific, and a continuing relationship between the Carnegie Foundation and key education leaders in China. The Foundation's sponsorship of the first international survey of the academic profession was a logical step following its several surveys of American academics. That study yielded original insights into how professors think worldwide, and has implications for the improvement of higher education in the United States and abroad.

My own involvement with Ernest Boyer and the Carnegie Foundation was limited to these recent international initiatives. I always found him to be intellectually stimulating, insightful, and full of enthusiasm for the project at hand. I was always amazed by his energy, his willingness to travel to the ends of the earth to further the cause of education, and his ability to balance a myriad of different projects, people, and ideas all at the same time. Ernest Boyer's energy and commitment to education were infectious.

There is no doubt that Ernest Boyer's impact on higher education will be lasting. His recent *Scholarship Reconsidered*, to be followed soon by a new report on the assessment of academic work, is tremendously influential. His ideas have helped to shape the debate on the future of academic work, the role of teaching, service and research in higher education, and the future direction of American higher education. *Scholarship Reconsidered* is typical of Ernest Boyer's work—it is clearly written, cogently argued, and highly relevant to contemporary concerns.

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