

**Arnold Mitchem**  
**LBJ Lecture Nov. 8, 2005**

UNEDITED

LBJ Distinguished Lecture  
Remarks for President Denise Trauth  
Student Center Teaching Theater  
Tuesday, November 8, 2005  
2 p.m.

Good afternoon, and welcome to our fall 2005 Lyndon B. Johnson Distinguished Lecture and to our celebration of the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Higher Education Act.

We have many important guests with us today, but I want to introduce some of them to you: Lyndon Nugent, President Johnson's grandson and a Texas State alumnus; Sue McMillin, president and C.E.O. of T.G., a co-sponsor of today's activities, along with The College Board and the university; Dr. James Montoya, vice president for higher education assessment services at The College Board; The Honorable Robert Krueger, former Congressman, senator and ambassador, and a former L.B.J. Lecturer; And Patrick Rose, our state representative.

Our speaker today is well aware of the provisions of the Higher Education Act of 1965.

He is the first and only president, so far, of the Council for Opportunity in Education.

The Council is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the expansion of programs designed to get low-income Americans into college and graduate them.

Most of these programs are the product of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and are collectively known as the TRIO programs.

These programs not only help students overcome financial barriers to college, but also to tackle cultural, class and social barriers as well.

They have been enormously successful, thanks to the dedication of people like Arnold Mitchem.

Dr. Mitchem graduated from the University of Southern Colorado, studied European history as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at the University of Wisconsin and earned his Ph.D. at Marquette University.

He began his career as director of the educational opportunity program at Marquette and has dedicated his career to being a voice for low-income Americans.

Lyndon Johnson would be immensely proud that he is here today to give a lecture named in his honor.

Dr. Mitchem shares the Johnson dream of a Great Society, where the doors of education are open at all levels to every citizen.

Dr. Mitchem will talk to us today about "The Higher Education Act: The Nation's Promise to Low-Income Americans."

Please help me welcome Dr. Arnold Mitchem.

**The Higher Education Act: the Nation's Promise to Low-Income Americans**  
**Remarks on the Anniversary of the Enactment of**  
**The Higher Education Act of 1965**  
**San Marcos, Texas**  
**November 8, 2005**  
**Arnold L. Mitchem**  
**President, Council for Opportunity in Education**

First of all, let me acknowledge how honored I am to be here –to be a part of such an important occasion.

I can think of no better place to be this afternoon than on this campus to commemorate the signing of a landmark piece of legislation that has enabled millions of first-generation students to go to college, particularly those students who came from low-income families.

When historians discuss the major accomplishments of the Johnson Presidency, not many list the Higher Education Act of 1965 among his most prominent achievements. Other historic pieces of legislation – the Civil Rights Act, the Economic Opportunity Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act – are more frequently mentioned in citing the highlights of President Johnson's career. So on this occasion it is very appropriate to examine why President Johnson, unlike those who wrote about him, viewed the Higher Education Act – together with ESEA – as a keystone of the 89<sup>th</sup> Congress. It is also worth exploring whether we have been faithful to that legacy.

Unfortunately, in my view, we have not been faithful to the Act's purpose or Johnson's intentions. It is clear that the philosophy and sentiments that under-girded the Higher Education Act in 1965 seem to be absent from today's political discourse. The burst of democratization that followed the passage of the Higher Education Act in the late '60s has been slowed by a combination of forces, including the elitist underpinnings of American higher education and an increasing unwillingness by Congress to view higher education as a public good.

Too often discussions of postsecondary opportunity today tend to gloss over or ignore the extent to which elitism provides both motive and definition for higher education. Very seldom, for example, is it mentioned that American colleges did not welcome the GI Bill after the Second World War, but rather, saw it as a threat to excellence.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, few recall today that the organized representatives of American higher education in the early 1970s initially rejected Senator Pell's notion of a transportable "grant" for needy students. Instead they favored funds to colleges – to be distributed to students who met each college's criteria of excellence<sup>2</sup>. It took strong leadership to push back against these elitist tendencies. Pell, Nixon, and others were aided, as was President Johnson, by a Congress in which many Members had, themselves, been beneficiaries of the GI bill.

Recently *New York Times* columnist David Brooks<sup>3</sup>, not known as a liberal commentator, commented persuasively on the effects of our country's turning its back on President Johnson's vision. He noted that especially after Katrina, everybody laments

poverty and inequality, but few are doing much about it. He railed against American colleges and universities for being “one of the greatest inequality machines this country has known.” And to make his point, he quoted a litany of discouraging statistics from Thomas Mortenson, Senior Scholar at the Pell Institute for Opportunity in Higher Education, the research arm of COE.

Mortenson tells us that the gap between the rich and poor is widening. Students in the poorest quarter of the population have about a nine percent chance of getting a college degree, whereas students in the top quarter have almost a 75% chance.

What went wrong? I can come up with at least three answers.

First, since 1980, federal policy decisions have turned away from those least able to attend college based on family resources. This lack of attention to need-based financial aid took place at the same time that policy discussions focused increasingly on mechanisms – primarily loans – that were designed to assist students from middle and upper income families in financing their college educations. The results are obvious. While in 1979 the Pell grant covered 80% of the average cost of attending a public four year institution, today, it covers less than 36% of that cost.<sup>4</sup> During that same period, we have added more than \$44 billion in funding for federal loan programs, but only about \$5.5 billion in increased support for Pell.<sup>5</sup>

Second, we have completely lost sight of what President Johnson saw so well – the public benefits of investing in higher educational opportunity. Johnson viewed postsecondary educational opportunity as an instrument to create opportunity, which, in turn, would enhance social cohesion. Policymakers, today, too often appear at ease in rejecting the value of social cohesion.

Thirdly, we have accepted – some would say welcomed – economic stratification in postsecondary education.

There are several reasons, in my view, undergirding this attitude. First, beginning in the 1970’s, the egalitarian convictions of those who espoused postsecondary opportunity led to the use of some very muddy language in policy discussions. We rejected the use of the term “higher education” in favor of the more inclusive “postsecondary education.” Today, we are at the culmination of that road – where Congress speaks about a “single definition” in the Higher Education Act. It matters little whether an institution grants a degree or does not, whether it is for profit or is not. Once you accept that anything after high school is postsecondary education, it is not too great a step to the point of “separate but not quite equal.” My point is this: we are uncomfortably close to accepting a situation where children of the privileged go to one set of institutions – and other people’s children go somewhere else.

Another factor contributing to economic stratification in higher education is the failure to hold colleges and universities accountable for outcomes. American elites might ask how well minority students do compared to white students at a particular college – or at all colleges – in a particular state or the nation – but, at the same time, these groups are good at avoiding issues of class. We do not ask, for example, “How do a college’s Pell grant recipients perform in relationship to other enrolled students?” While policymakers do not excuse high schools when students “drop out,” in contrast, they conveniently ignore low graduation rates at many colleges. We have known for years that low-income students and students whose parents didn’t graduate from college – even when they enter college – are only half as likely to graduate as their peers. Today, 56% of high-income

students earn a bachelor's degree within six years compared to only 26% of low-income students.<sup>6</sup>

While we can lament these facts, we cannot dispute the reality that the Higher Education Act has made America a better place. It has made a powerful contribution to the dramatic change in the ethnic and racial landscape of our colleges and universities. And in fact, the overall numbers show that the Higher Education Act has not failed. In 1960, not quite 8% of all Americans over 25 had earned a bachelor's degree. Today, nearly one-third of all Americans over 25 have earned a bachelor's degree. We see similar progress by race and ethnicity. The percentage of Black Americans over age 25 with a bachelor's degree grew from 4% in 1960 to more than 18% today. Comparable figures for Hispanics were not kept in 1960, but between 1980 and today, the percentage of Hispanic Americans with a bachelor's degree has grown from less than 8% to 12%.<sup>7</sup> But it is simply not enough.

Now – before I offer you some of my own thoughts about how we might rekindle the promise that LBJ articulated when he signed the Higher Education Act, I want to ask this question: why was it LBJ, and not other Presidents, or Member of Congress, who confronted our nation with the challenge that we provide equal opportunity in higher education?

I think we can get a glimpse of the answer by turning to Robert Caro's Pulitzer Prize winning work, *Lyndon Johnson, Master of the Senate*. Here he speaks movingly of LBJ's compassion in a different moral universe than we live in today. He portrays a Southern politician who understood menial work because he had done it, and who understood the potential of children from poor and minority communities, because he had taught poor children at what he describes as the "Mexican school" – in a town not far from here – called Cotulla.

Caro tells us that in the first twenty years of Johnson's life, he had little contact with Blacks or Latinos. However, LBJ spent his 21<sup>st</sup> year as a teacher of poor children. Caro goes on to tell us that at the Cotulla school, before Johnson arrived, "no teacher had every really cared if these children learned or not, but this teacher cared." Not only did Johnson convince the school board to provide equipment so that his pupils could play games during recess, but he also arranged for games with other schools – "baseball games and track meets like the white kids had." Johnson remembered: "I was determined to spark something inside them, to fill their souls with ambition and interest and belief in the future." One of his students recalled how LBJ constantly returned to a story, "the little baby in the cradle." "He would tell us that one day we might say the baby would be a teacher. Maybe the next day we'd say the baby would be a doctor. And one day we might say the baby – any baby – might grow up to be President of the United States."<sup>8</sup>

Now this story and others point up how clearly both the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the HEA reflect LBJ's vision, ideology, and experience. Both Acts are undergirded by his optimism and his empathy for all segments of American society. And his temperament and values were played out and reinforced by his teaching experience in Cotulla.

As we all know, the policies embedded in the Higher Education Act addressed both the financial and non-financial barriers to equalizing college opportunity. Initially the financial barriers were tackled by the creation of the Educational Opportunity Grant (EOG). The non-financial barriers were addressed by the creation of Talent Search, now

one of the five TRIO programs. Both financial aid and TRIO programs have worked in tandem in trying to improve the life chances of low-income students. Since much more attention is typically given to discussing the role of grant, loan and work programs, than TRIO programs, I would like to use this opportunity to briefly elaborate on TRIO.

TRIO is a continuum of five efforts that work with young people and adults from low-income families and from families where neither parent has gone to college. Today, nearly one-third of all high school seniors from low-income families who enter college each year are assisted by these TRIO programs.<sup>9</sup> The second TRIO program, Upward Bound, got its start in the Economic Opportunity Act, and a third program was added in 1968 to assure that once low-income students and first-generation students entered college, they would receive the support they needed to succeed and graduate. Since 1965, TRIO has supported more than twelve million students and produced nearly three million college graduates.<sup>10</sup>

After discussing current differences in educational attainment based on class, David Brooks, the columnist whom I referred to earlier, wrote: “Educated parents not only pass down economic resources to their children, they also pass down expectations, habits, knowledge . . . Pretty soon, he concluded, you end up with a meritocratic class that reinforces itself generation after generation.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, TRIO balances that trend: TRIO, it could be argued, was put in place in the 60’s to provide ‘other peoples’ children” with what Brooks would call the expectations, habits, knowledge of success enjoyed by middle class children.

So how do we respond to Brooks’ worries about what is happening in America? How do we recapture Johnson’s vision? Clearly, the need for education beyond high school grows increasingly important. In the Post World War II era, our country was the international leader in higher educational access. Today it is not even in the top ten among nations in college participation.<sup>12</sup> And this need not be the case. In fact, there is some evidence that the American public would like for it to be otherwise.

A recent survey conducted by the Widmeyer Research and Polling Group for my organization – COE – confirmed that Americans continue to support President Johnson’s vision in surprising numbers. For instance:

- Almost all Americans – in fact 97% – say that a college education is important to a person’s future, and over three-quarters say it is very important to an individual’s future.

Further,

- Nearly 9 in 10 Americans are concerned about the lack of affordability of college for low-income students and 93% agree that it is in the public’s interest for people of all backgrounds to go to college

And finally,

- 96% of Americans support programs that help qualified first-generation and low-income students go to college.

So from the numbers it can be argued that Johnson’s vision is still alive with the public, but dead in Washington’s policy community. There is little evidence of any will or effort in Washington today to do a number of things, including:

- Reintroducing a forceful and broad discussion of the public benefits of investment in educational opportunity;

- Fully funding the Pell grant program; and
- Providing for a major expansion in college opportunity programs such as TRIO and GEAR UP so that low-income students and first-generation students are assisted in developing the expectations, experiences, habits and knowledge that will lead to their success in college. And, of course, no one seems to recognize or care that a secondary benefit of expanding TRIO in particular is that it enables individuals who know, first-hand, the humanity and potential of the poor and minorities, to assume positions of leadership and authority – like the three TRIO graduates who are currently serving as Members of Congress.<sup>13</sup>

Let me conclude by saying, again, that the current prospects are poor for implementing any of these policy options. I'm afraid we have to look much further down the road for LBJ's promise to be met. What is important, at this point, is to celebrate and recognize a promise that was made here 40 years ago. We must believe – based on what has already been accomplished by the HEA – that there will again be a moment in American life when both reason and circumstance will force our national leadership to make Johnson's promise real.

Yes... it might take another 40 years, but his words still speak to us. In closing, let me leave you with what LBJ said here on November 8, 1965 —

“When we leave here . . . I want you to go back and speak to your children and to your grandchildren. Tell them that we made a promise to them. Tell them that the truth is here for them to seek. And tell them that we have opened the road and we have pulled the gates down and the way is open and that we expect them to travel it.”

Thank you.

*Lecture transcribed by Benjamin Hicklin, graduate research assistant 2007-08*

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<sup>1</sup> Gladiex, *Federal Student Aid Policy: A History and an Assessment*

<sup>2</sup> The College Board, *Memory, Reason, and Imagination: A Quarter Century of Pell Grants*

<sup>3</sup> (September 25, 2005)

<sup>4</sup> The College Board, *Trends in Student Aid*

<sup>5</sup> ACE, *Pell Grant Status Report*

<sup>6</sup> Tinto, Pell Institute, *Student Retention and Graduation: Facing the Truth, Living with the Consequence*

<sup>7</sup> US Department of Education, *Digest of Educational Statistics*

<sup>8</sup> Robert Caro, *Lyndon Johnson, Master of the Senate*, pp.719-722

<sup>9</sup> Pell Institute

<sup>10</sup> US Department of Education

<sup>11</sup> David Brooks, *New York Times* (September 25, 2005)

<sup>12</sup> .OECD, *Education at a Glance*

<sup>13</sup> Henry Bonilla (R-23<sup>rd</sup> TX), Gwen S. Moore (D-4<sup>th</sup> WI), Albert Wynn (D-4<sup>th</sup> MD)