

opinions

The Daily Collegian
Tuesday, Aug. 28, 1984

editorial opinion

Meeting the challenges of change

1951. Penn State's first Encampment for University administrators, faculty and students. Encampment began the tradition of meeting in an informal setting to discuss the problems facing Penn State.

At the time, Penn State freshmen were being reprimanded for ignoring the customs rules of carrying Bibles, wearing black bow ties and name cards while walking on campus.

University President Milton S. Eisenhower was faced with the problem of declining enrollment. The student population dropped 8 percent to 11,463 for fall semester.

Eisenhower also announced the Student Union fee would remain at \$7.50 for the semester. And a crowd of 15,000 spectators was expected to attend the football season opener with Boston University at Beaver Field.

The issues have changed over the years, but the tradition of providing a forum for students and administrators to discuss key topics has continued.

The University has made tremendous progress in keeping up with the times. But Encampment 1984, "Challenges of Change," showed the entire University community that Penn State has many new problems that must be solved.

This year's Encampment, like those in the past, provided an informal setting that gave students a chance to get acquainted with busy administrators without the stuffy setting of an Old Main office. Likewise, administrators and faculty had the opportunity to meet students and hear their opinions.

Moreover, members of the State College community were able to bring their ideas and knowledge to the forums, as well as hear the concerns of students and administrators in the problems facing town and gown. Faculty members from the University's various colleges brought fresh, new ideas to some old problems.

Working along these lines of inviting a diverse group of administrators, faculty and students, the Encampment committees

in the future should invite more students and faculty from throughout the Commonwealth system. Their ideas often shed light on difficult problems and are helpful because the problems faced by University Park often concern those students and staff at the branch campuses as well.

Each forum presented at Encampment was enhanced by the group of resource persons who offered their specialized knowledge of the problem at hand. With their information and the audience's ideas, the entire group was able to discuss the problem and review the progress being made by the University.

However, University Trustee Marian U. Coppersmith was right when she said Penn State cannot rest on its laurels. The ideas and plans discussed last week need to make it beyond the informal discussion of Encampment.

Some problems — such as the quality of teaching assistants in the classroom — have been debated and discussed at great lengths beyond Encampment. The University has made some progress in this area, as well as academic advising and minority retention.

These advances, however, were realized because people were willing to work throughout the year and find a solution.

But other problems, such as sexual harassment and alcohol abuse at Penn State, have been ignored too long and need to be confronted more often — not just for two days in August.

While no one claimed to hold all the answers to these problems, the willingness to work to solve the problems was evident to everyone who participated. And this spirit of cooperation needs to be remembered in the coming months and years at Penn State.

If the spirit of Encampment is put away on the shelf until next August, the status quo at University Park will continue. But if this spirit is taken off the shelf and implemented in the offices throughout Penn State, our University will grow and truly meet the challenges of change.

Columnist applications are still available in 126 Carnegie and will be accepted through Sept. 1.

One of our best hopes for creating rich and satisfying lives

Editor's note: Below is the commencement address delivered by R. Dean Mills, director of the School of Journalism, to the University's summer graduates. Because of space limitations, sections of the speech have been edited.

You will notice that I did not say "warn you against mass communications." If I have not come to praise the mass media, neither have I come to bury them. I do not believe the mass media are intrinsically evil, not even that mass media, television.

More than that, I believe that in mass communications lies one of our best hopes for creating free and rich and satisfying lives. From the time of the first mass medium, the printed book, the mass media have been closing the physical gap which isolates one human being from other human beings.

Printed journalism, for example, has been a key component of American democracy since before the beginning, when a bunch of scrappy amateur journalists like Madison, Franklin and Adams used the printing press to argue for revolution.

Electronic communications media have drawn humans ever closer together for more than a century and a half — so much so that most of us take them for granted. A few are old enough to remain in awe.

The point is that the mass media can be powerful forces for the better in our lives. We know, most of us, the essential role they play in the exchange of information and the stimulation of debate in a free society — though we may want to forget it when the information displeases us and the debate annoys us. We understand, intuitively, the aesthetic power of the mass media when we watch an elegant play in a professional football match or experience the visual oomph of an Eisenstein film.

The mass media can give us better lives. They help us to examine, critically, the world in which we find ourselves, and to wish, always, for a better world. They connect us to the rest of humanity. And they offer us aesthetic pleasure.

My message is this: Modern mass media are not by nature evil. But they are powerful. And so we must make sure, as with anything powerful, that we use them and not they us. And one secret of keeping the upper hand, of making sure

that humans use wisely the technology of modern mass communications, lies right in individuals, and on all of us, as part of the human community. My message, in other words, is that if the mass media are too important to be left to the professionals.

That is why, though I speak as a former professional journalist, and as a professor who now helps educate future professionals in the mass media, I speak to all of you. We must answer, together, questions like the following:

- In an age in which every human being on earth will be able to communicate with every other human being, will we have anything to say to one another?
- Does a nation rich in communications technology have the right to beam its culture, by direct broadcast satellite, into countries poor in communications technology?

To ask the same question from a different set of assumptions: Should individuals in communications-poor cultures, rather than their governments, have the right to decide which signals to allow into their homes?

- How do we assure that the fragile, but perhaps correct, voice of the individual is heard in an age in which satellites and mass circulation newspapers address millions?
- The mass media give us ever more information about our world. Does the information help us lead more rational lives? Or does it, as French philosopher Jacques Ellul argues, overwhelm us, so that we can make no rational decisions at all?
- American judges and juries, reflecting perhaps a frustration over their sense of the power of the mass media, have been punishing newspapers and broadcasters with million-dollar libel judgments. Will journalists be priced out of their role as watchdogs against public and private wrongdoings?

I have no immediate answers to these questions. I don't expect you to. Think of them as take-home exams that you — and the rest of us — need to answer over the next several decades.

You go out into a world that has more and more powerful mass media than at any time in history. Next year it will have more yet, the year after, more yet, and so on. At the same time we, all of us, think little about how the media influence our lives. And to

disregard toward the character of all students, it seems to me that the running of this ad constituted blatant hypocrisy on the part of the party responsible for running the ad.

No, the danger is not the technology itself. Or, even if it is — as some theorists, like Ellul, argue — the technology is here. Somehow we have to deal with it.

And this brings me to the final irony of this occasion. I am talking today about communications technologies which are changing our lives.

Let me say that again: I am TALKING about technologies. We have the technology to have videotaped this speech. Or we could have printed out a copy for each of you, complete with snappy graphics. We could have taken the diskette from my Apple computer and had the whole thing typeset immediately, using new print technology. Or, perhaps better yet, if you all had computers — as you all will, and soon — we could have just zapped the speech into your electronic mailbox, along with a message indicating you had or had not been graduated.

Why, then, do we bother with this antique ritual? Why do we wear this medieval drag as we go through it? Why, in other words, are we going through ceremony which, except for a few electronic enhancements, would be at home in the 1300s, before Europe had even discovered movable type?

We do it because there is a part of us that realizes the importance, the magic, of ceremonies. We are in part embarrassed by the ceremony of these many costumes, so out of character in this overly-rationalist age. And yet in part our spirit likes them, cherishes this remnant of ritual in an age that is so barren of ceremony.

So this final irony is itself a form of mass communication. These gowns we wear communicate to us, if only unconsciously, the importance of the university — an intellectual haven which has always promised, if not the answers to our questions, at least a place in which to discuss them. I suggest that a university, a great university, can help us find the answers to the important questions we have about mass communications.

The American philosopher John Dewey once said: "Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful." He was not talking about "I Love Lucy" or "The Young and the Restless" or "General Hospital."

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forum

Now you sit here, perceiving light at the end of the tunnel. Champagne sizzles, waiting for pop. At least I hope it's waiting. The mood, in a word, is celebratory. You have much to celebrate. And what does Penn State give you as a reward? Do you get what you deserve, as speech, say, by Eddie Murphy? Do you get Harrison Ford? Rick Springfield? Ronald Reagan? Geri-alaine Ferraro?

No such luck.

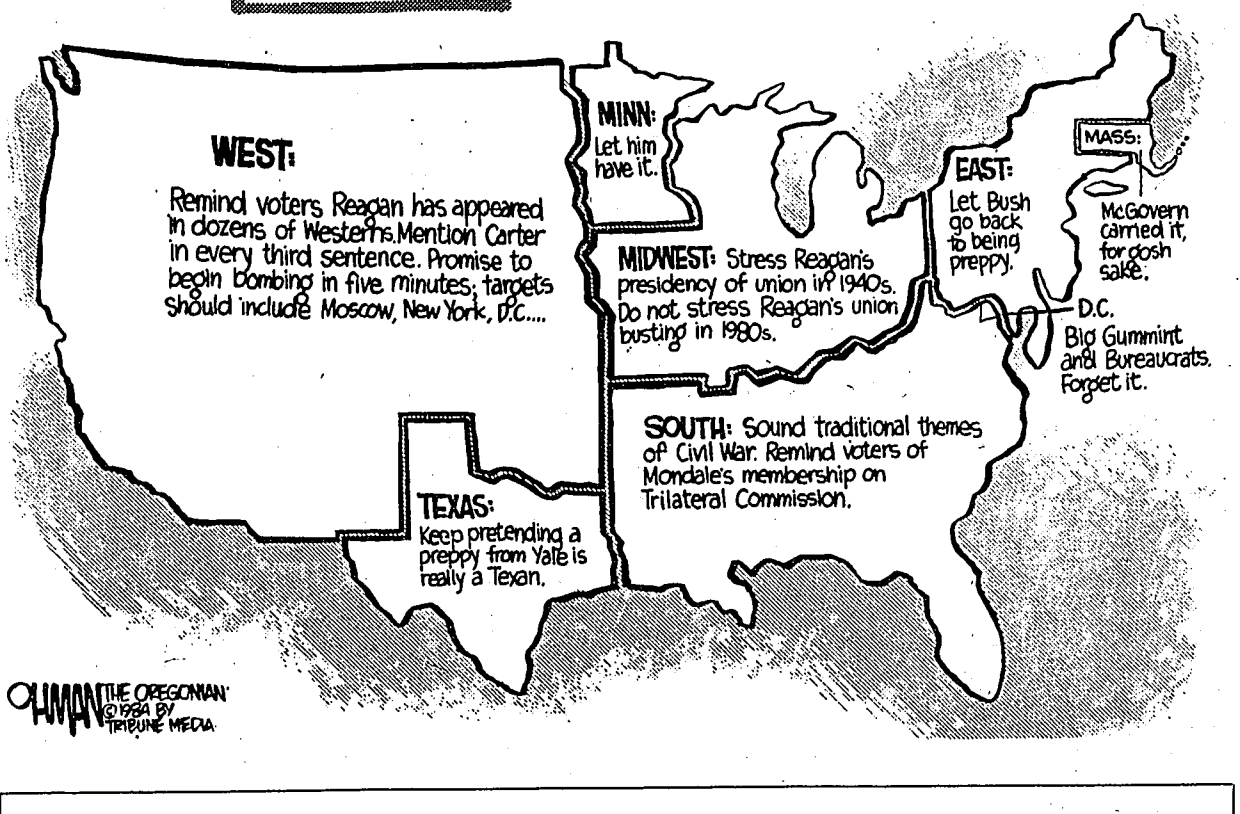
So we're all just going to have to get through this as best we can.

I said the occasion is rich in ironies. Here's another:

My subject today is mass communications — a barely twentieth century phenomenon that is probably more important to our daily lives than any other institution, with the possible exception of politics and education. I am myself a former practitioner in the field, as a newspaper reporter. And I come from a branch of the liberal arts, communications, which educates young people for careers in mass communications.

The irony is this: My background is in the field. I make a living teaching about the

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Alicia Swasy Editor
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reader opinion

No students

During the semester break an ad ran in the Centre Daily Times encouraging people to shop downtown. Prominently displayed was the title "NO STUDENTS" in bold letters.

To me this represented a blatant disregard toward the character of all students. It seems to me that the running of this ad constituted blatant hypocrisy on the part of the party responsible for running the ad.

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He was talking about the kind of mysterious process by which humans, talking to one another, discover what it is to be human. They generate, in communication, the meaning which gives life its meaning. John Dewey pointed out that it is no accident that communication and community have the same root. For it is by communication that we form and maintain community. And it is only in community that we become human.

In the Western world, as ever more dominant technologies have transformed and retransformed life on the outside, universities have tried to maintain the tradition of that kind of communication. Universities have tried, sometimes successfully, some-

times not, to remain COMMUNITIES, communities in which the human dialogue could be continued whatever the pressure from the outside. This is why we like to call ourselves communities of scholars. It is the community to which you have belonged for the past few years, and to which we hope you will come back, either figuratively or literally.

And the university community, it seems to me, can provide hope that mass communications will be used wisely. The university can help in three ways:

First, it can provide the kind of strong, liberally-based professional education that assures that competent, ethical, and responsible young people continue to enter jobs in mass communications.

Second, the university can insist that all students — not just those who plan to become mass communications professionals — have an understanding of the role of mass communication in modern societies. Every student should have an introduction to the vast amount of knowledge accumulated through research on communications. Any course could begin with the following lesson: On every television set, on every radio, on every computer, there is an *off* switch.

Third, the university can provide a forum in which members of the public and professionals of the mass media can discuss ideas for ensuring the information and debate essential to a free society.

All three points, really, go to the heart of what good universities have always done, whatever the subject matter they were teaching. They have provided their students with a critical spirit and the intellectual tools to exercise it. I hope we have given you something of that spirit, and some of those tools, during your stay in the Penn State community of scholars. I hope you will continue to use both after you leave.

Of course, you shouldn't think of this as the end of your relationship with Penn State. Think of it, instead, as an intermission. Or perhaps an interruption in your mail service. Up to now you've been getting letters from the bursar's office demanding that you pay your tuition fees, your dorm bills, your library fines. From now on, you'll be getting very politely worded letters from us pleading for donations to the university.

I make light of what is in fact a serious point. We do need your help. Cash is fine, of course. But even more important, we need your help in supporting the CAUSE of public higher education, and of course the specific cause of Penn State. It is a great university. You have enriched it by your presence, by your participation in the Penn State community. We hope you feel that you have been enriched by Penn State. We hope you will continue to be active members of the community, whose other members are spread around the world. And we hope you will come back to see us now and then. Best of luck. Congratulations.

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