

# A Spirit of Change

The spirit of change sweeping through our social, cultural, political and economic institutions needs to include higher education as well.

U.S. higher education may be the strongest in the world, but to help produce the future leaders we need and to secure our economic future, it must adapt to new realities.

The biggest challenge is posed by swift changes in the college-aged population. The number of students from communities who traditionally attend college is dropping, while the fastest-growing

making their campuses more affordable for those in need.

At the same time, colleges and universities must adapt, often in ways counter to the instinct to pursue higher institutional rankings and to boast about ever-rising SAT scores, falling admission rates and the like. Almost every useful step involves suppressing institutional self-interest for a broader public good. For instance, merit aid can enhance the status of a college or university at least in the short run, but—since aid dollars are finite and merit awards often go to students who would attend college anyway—the overall result is usually less affordability for low-income students. The many such students who have been under-prepared bring lower test scores. Meanwhile, the special support they need while on campus costs institutions money.

In tough financial times it will be even harder for schools to look beyond their narrow institutional interests. But both the mission of every nonprofit college and university and the broad support that taxpayers provide for higher education, public and private, compel us to pursue the social good.

For our part, Williams has made great strides in recent years. Almost one-third of the members of the Class of 2012 identify themselves as U.S. students of color. Almost one-third have at least one parent without a bachelor's degree. And over the last 10 years the number of students who qualify for grant aid that covers at least three-quarters of the cost of attendance has grown from one in 20 to one in five. At the same time, we've expanded support services for these students so that their experience at the College can better mirror that of students from backgrounds more traditional for Williams.

It's clear, though, that we can do more to find such students, convince them that they can afford Williams and make sure that we have in place the programs they need to take full advantage of what the College offers. If we allow current financial challenges to keep us from these goals, we will be doing a great disservice to our wonderful college.

U.S. higher education has long been an engine for social mobility. But to remain so it will have to adapt, and fairly quickly, to the new social and economic realities, and Williams needs to be at the forefront of this effort. ■

—Morty Schapiro



Kevin Kennerfick

segment is composed of students from families and communities with no experience of college—how to choose one, how to apply, how to pay and how to thrive once there. Many are from low-income families; many are children of immigrants.

America mostly did well in absorbing previous waves of new populations. But back then a high-school education was enough to lift them into the middle class; now they need college. To an alarming degree, though, our higher education system doesn't seek out these students, isn't affordable for them and fails to offer the academic and personal support they need to succeed once on campus.

Both government and individual institutions have roles to play in turning things around.

By word and example, President Obama can persuade members of these communities that they can attain higher education. Congress can make the federal financial aid system easier to understand and generally more supportive of low-income students. State governments, even as budgets tighten, can put a priority on

LETTERS

The account by Caroline Cretti '06 of her Olympic Trials marathon experience ("Quite the Crowd," January 2009) was a delight on two counts: She writes beautifully; and she captures—with all the power of a simple story, well told—the extraordinary nature of the bond among graduates of Williams.

Thanks to her and also to Ernie Imhoff '59, whose two contributions to the January issue ("Victory at Sea" and a letter to the editor) provided fascinating glimpses into the history of my college and my hometown.

—Dennis O'Shea '77, Baltimore, Md.

Six years ago, my firm designed a memorial to Liberty Ships and the South Portland, Maine, shipyard that built 266 of them during WWII. Our extensive research included visits to both remaining ships, the *SS John W. Brown* (while in dry dock in Toledo, Ohio) and the *SS Jeremiah O'Brien* in San Francisco, but I had not heard of the *SS Williams Victory* until seeing the magazine. I hope it is no more than a coincidence that I graduated from Williams in 1969, the year the ship was scrapped.

—Richard Renner '69, Portland, Maine

Reading the January issue I was struck by the 1963 photo of Robert McNamara at Williams to address the graduating class ("Covering a Century"). Sadly, McNamara, one of the "whiz kids" of the Kennedy administration, well educated, genius IQ, a former

brilliant executive, was soon to become one of the key charlatans of the Vietnam War. Whatever McNamara told the graduates that year, better advice might have been: Beware of intelligence without wisdom, brilliance without honesty, hubris without introspection. And when you're emperor, always listen to what that slave behind you keeps whispering in your ear.

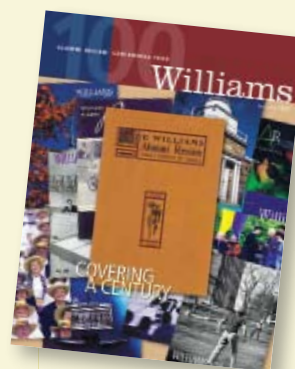
—Richard Eggers '60, Niwot, Colo.

That's me on the stem of the six-man bike in the picture just to the left of the very first *Alumni Review* cover ("Covering a Century"). Hank Flynt '44 owns the bike and is the steersman. The rest of the members of The Berkshire County Wheelmen were Ted Emerson '43 (#2), George Lawrence '43 (#3), Tom Leary '43 (#4) and Bill Rossell '45 (power seat).

We had to keep all our pedaling in concert. There was no coaster brake, and we had to slow down by carefully riding the pedal on the return upstroke. We took the bike to Northampton for a Smith College orientation outing at Look Park in August 1942 by putting it in the baggage car of the Boston & Maine passenger train headed east. We unloaded in Greenfield, pedaled south on U.S. Route 5 and were stopped by a nifty state cop who couldn't believe what he saw. When we threw a

chain, he got us help from the mechanic at the police barracks so we could continue on.

We arrived at a little hilltop overlooking hundreds of Smith girls, and on our way



The *Alumni Review* welcomes letters related to topics in the magazine.

Send letters to:

*Alumni Review*, P.O. Box 676

Williamstown, MA 01267-0676

fax: 413.597.4158

e-mail: [alumni.review@williams.edu](mailto:alumni.review@williams.edu).

Letters may be edited for clarity and space.

down a substitute #4 man, Lon Hill '43, lifted his feet off the pedals and stuck his legs out, kicking off his chain and eliminating our braking power. We hurtled down the slope, sped wobbling over the bridge and came to a horrendous cropper ass over tea kettle! What an entrance!

We did better riding in parades and on the track at football games. One of our honorary members was Anne Baxter (Phinney Baxter's '14 wife), who was a great sport and a very good crew member.

—Malcolm MacGruer '43,  
Madison, Conn.

## Houses Burn, People Die

by Peter Britton '56

Years ago when I heard "West Virginia" I would think coal, hillbillies and bluegrass music, mystery, mountains and moonshine, Daniel Boone, Homer Hickam and basketball's Jerry West.

Not anymore. Now I think mountaintop removal, the horrifying destruction of 300-million-year-old hills to get black gold in the cheapest, fastest way. You must fly low over the area to grasp what is happening: total devastation of some 500 mountains.

Seven years ago I'd driven through West Virginia to check out Cabin Creek, the home of the hoops legend. My map indicated a road south to the town of Dorothy and hence to Nashville. I'd heard of mountaintop removal and would keep an eye out for it.

Then came Kayford Mountain. The road I followed back then, now gone, turned to dirt, began climbing and became treacherous. Through the foliage came sounds of construction, I thought, and glimpses of rocks and hillsides stripped bare. Mountaintop removal.

Scattered mentions kept that memory alive. In 2005 I called a Mountaineer lawyer. He put me on to the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, which sent me to a remarkable woman whose home place in Bob White was under siege. Maria's family lives at the foot of a hollow across a stream and a railroad track. One-hundred-car coal trains pass a half dozen times a day. Up the hollow, ammonium nitrate/fuel oil blasts send dust and flyrock onto her property. A mountaintop in view slowly disappears. Occasional floods of blackwater wash out her stream, poison her water, deplete her land.

She told me of her Cherokee ancestor fleeing the Trail of Tears in the 1830s to hide in a West Virginia hollow. Of her grandfather who mined coal underground and built the house she lives in. Of her father, who died in an ATV accident back up the hollow because of a trail aborted by mountaintop coal operators. And she told me of the constant fear and dread that hovers over all these little coal towns south of Charleston. Fear of losing one's limbs or lungs or life in the mines. Fear of disease from air or water. And dread of uncontrollable blackwater floods like the ones in Buffalo Creek and Aberfan that together killed 269 people, mostly children.

Maria caused me to recall my part in all of this. In 1992 I was researching a story on "clean coal." I went to the United Nations to scope out the world situation. An interview with Earth Summit Secretary-General Maurice Strong, a Canadian energy man, left me with one quote ringing in my ears. "The Cold War is over; the coal wars are just beginning." A longtime journalist, I had to write.

Strong's statement becomes clear in West Virginia and its growing practice of mountaintop removal (also thriving in neighboring states). The horrible concept is well described on the websites [www.ohvec.org](http://www.ohvec.org), [www.wvhighlands.org](http://www.wvhighlands.org) and [www.crmw.org](http://www.crmw.org).

The result of this devastation is chaos and death. But this is big business, and it runs the state. The only hope for the future is the law. And there's the rub.

Maria has become a coal community organizer and recently a spokeswoman for the lawsuit to stop the operation behind her hollow. Coal-originated floods washed out her bridge; those responsible called it an "act of God." But the plaintiffs won a temporary restraining order against the Callisto Surface Mine. And Maria, who became the scapegoat for the 39 laid-off workers, was labeled by their bosses an "anti-coal activist." She's not. She's for justice and the environment and truth.

Since the federal judge's ruling, overt threats—"sometimes houses just catch on fire and people die in them"—and other hostile acts have caused her to hire guards for her house and kids. Now she's building a fence around her property.

She wears a bulletproof vest while doing housework. She has a trained guard dog. The FBI is investigating the threats. And Maria continues to fight.

The Coal Wars have, indeed, begun. ■

---

*Peter Britton '56 has been a freelance writer since 1960. He is currently at work on a "coalback/bluegrass" musical called HollowGirl concerning mountaintop removal. The music can be sampled by doing a Web search of "Peter Britton" or "Co2al Train to Amos," or by visiting CDbaby.com.*