

# Global Action and Social Change<sup>1</sup>

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I love Tharon Smith's quote for this conference from Robert Maynard Hutchins:

We hear a great deal nowadays about international understanding, world community, and world organization. These things are supposed to be good; but nothing very concrete is put forward as to the method by which they can be attained.

Hutchins wrote this in 1952, as part of the introduction to an *Encyclopedia Britannica* set of great books.<sup>2</sup> Here's something else he wrote:

A man [let us quickly add, "or a woman"] must use his mind; he must feel that he is doing something that will develop his highest powers and contribute to the development of his fellow men, or he will cease to be a man.

I'm proud of you today for developing the highest powers of your minds and contributing to the development of your fellow men and women.

You are exemplifying one of the distinctive purposes of a university: to take on the most difficult problems facing our region and our world.

[Asks some of the student presenters in the audience to describe the topics of their papers. The answers range from spirituality and public life, to access by Latino students to higher education, to the international pharmaceutical industry and intellectual property.]

When people talk about big issues like yours, today as in Hutchins' time, it's often just talk. When global action and social change are raised, too often people just roll their eyes and give up before they begin. You've heard their escapes into reflexive thinking and despair, with refrains such as "we need a change of mentality" or "we need a revolution" or "the poor you will always have with you."

It is precisely when we hear such slogans that we should call universities into action. Precisely where reflexive reactions are prevalent, we need evidence-driven analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> Introductory remarks for a day-long, student-led symposium of 57 student research papers on the theme of Global Action and Social Change, sponsored by Claremont Graduate University's Minority Mentor Program, Claremont, March 2, 2007. <http://www.cgu.edu/pages/4448.asp>

<sup>2</sup> Robert Maynard Hutchins, *Great Books of the Western World, Vol. 1: The Great Conversation: The Substance of a Liberal Education*, Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952.

Precisely where despair is close at hand, we need to be inspired by stories of success, at least relative success, and to experiment with new ideas.

Who in our society is going to provide the hard analysis, the breakthrough thinking, the objective and nonpartisan evaluation of success?

Will governments? They should—they are supposed to be looking out for our common good. But will they, subject as they are to political agendas and election cycles? Not by themselves.

Will businesses? Shareholders might not value CEOs that directed significant company resources to immigration or terrorism or failing schools. Business will be a necessary player in social progress, but we should not corporatize thinking about our hardest problems.

What about nonprofit organizations? They have the ideals and often the vision, but do they have the resources to do it alone? The objectivity? The skills to reconceptualize and to evaluate scientifically what works?

All of these actors have to play a part in taking on our world's hardest problems. But I think universities are essential. The best universities should aspire to do research on the world's most difficult and important problems. Research is what we do uniquely well, compared with business, government, and the social sector. It doesn't mean we do it automatically (or always well). It doesn't mean we can do it alone—on many issues, effective research can only be carried out in partnerships.

But it is our calling, if we have the heart and the guts to redirect our brains. And today, you're providing a wonderful example of what a university should be.