



Chas Geer Photography

Ernie Boyer: A Eulogy

C. Peter Magrath, Ph.D.
President

National Association of State Universities
and Land-Grant Colleges

Editor's Note: The late Dr. Ernest Boyer, former president of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, passed away in December 1995. He provided early and enthusiastic support of the journal, and submitted an article for the inaugural issue.

Regardless of our personal views about afterlife, I am absolutely convinced that Ernie Boyer lives not only in the memory of his family, friends, and legion of other associates, but in the sense that Ernie's ideas and personality, and his deep human decency continue to be a warm, positive influence. It is perhaps easiest to speak of the force of his ideas and his pragmatic approach to helping solve the great problems of our society. He knew that education, applied forcefully and intelligently, is essential to America's well being, which is the message of the powerful article on the scholarship of engagement that so appropriately graces the first issue of the *Journal of Public Service & Outreach*.

Because I agree so completely with his perceptive wisdom and the clear call for university action relevant to the challenges before our nation, it is easy for me to enlist in the final mission that Ernie Boyer has proposed. But even those who might dissent (though I do not see how this is really possible!) from some parts of Ernie's passionate argument would surely concede that a strong intellectual voice speaks in this article as it did in countless articles, speeches, books, and conversations through a wonderful life of serving people.

Often an article or speech does not communicate the true person; this one really does. You can sense the passion, the commitment to the truth that knowledge is power and must be applied to serving the needs, not of colleges and universities, but of people. There is a powerful lesson and a Boyer human touch in the little tale about going to a fast-food place with his grandchildren, worrying about their energy, their getting mustard on the floor, and their changing their minds every few seconds about what they really wanted. Here, Ernie makes a point in communicating how vital and undersupported are the teachers in our elementary and secondary schools, and why what they do is so urgently needed by America. And he weaves, again, as he so often did, the seamless connection that ought to exist in all of education and the kind of engagement that we in "higher" education truly have not achieved with something that, quite incomprehensively to me, too often is called "lower" education.

If, in this article — now simply words on a piece of paper — you can sense the fire and the passion of the wonderful human being that Ernie Boyer was, you will know why he will always live. For me, as it is certainly for many who

were privileged to know him, the memory is personal. He once hired — indeed took a chance on me — to serve as president of one of the campuses in the State University of New York during his fruitful tenure there as chancellor of the system. It was then I first came to know and appreciate Ernie Boyer on a personal basis, a man endlessly engaged with ideas that could be translated to serviceable use. He was always searching for better ways to serve people and was gifted with an almost unbelievable talent as a golden-tongued wordsmith who could make ideas and concepts come to life in infinitely practical ways that we could all understand.

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I remember also his unflagging energy in dealing with the complexities of serving the largest single public-university system in the country. There was one evening of particularly great tension and debate among the SUNY presidents and other education officials in New York over issues that now seem to me trivial, for I cannot even recall them. For ten hours, through a long afternoon and evening, Ernie presided at a meeting in Albany, arguing, debating, but never losing his calm, his poise, his wit, and his good nature, despite some very abrasive exchanges. But he was tired, and he was human. At the end of the evening, perhaps eleven o'clock, I recall walking into the men's room with him and two or three other university presidents, one of whom suddenly started lobbying Ernie for more money for a pet project on his campus. At that point, Ernie — graciously, and with a smile, but also with a sigh — said, "Friend, it's rather late, can't this wait until tomorrow?" He was human, he was tired, he was gracious, but he was firm in turning off an insensitive request at an inappropriate moment. And this, too, reveals the essential Ernie Boyer: firm, strong, but always kind and gentle.

I last heard Ernie Boyer give a formal speech, which of course he always gave with a masterful informality that made you feel that he was speaking directly and personally to you, at the 1994 annual meeting of the association I am now privileged to lead. It is a good but tough audience, and they have heard virtually everything there is to hear about education and its needs, its challenges, and promises. One might have expected that Ernie would not add anything new to what, at least intellectually, we thought we knew. But his speech, as is this article, was masterful. It had a profound message. It had a call for action; and it had 1,000 men and women on their feet, cheering and applauding his practical ideas, his commitment to education at all levels for all children and men and women in our world. They were also applauding the gentle, caring decency that was the essence of this man.

Yes, Ernie Boyer truly lives and will continue to live as do all great teachers through the ages. I hope we prove in the works we do to be good students of this master teacher. ■