

Berea's Appalachian Commitment: A Regional Mission with Global Implications

Berea's 1993 review of the Great Commitments and its recently adopted strategic plan, *Being and Becoming: Berea College in the 21st Century*, both reaffirmed Berea College's core commitment to the Appalachian region. Nevertheless, some Bereans on campus and off have questions about our regional commitment. These questions, expressed by thoughtful members of the College community, have prompted the Strategic Planning Committee to reexamine this complex subject in hopes of achieving some greater clarity. We believe we have. Strategic Planning Committee members have identified and will address in this "position paper" several key tensions inherent in our complex commitments and their historical implementation. For a variety of reasons that we offer below for your consideration, we have concluded that Berea's commitment to Appalachia is worthy of Bereans' full and enthusiastic embrace.

The Historic Roots of Berea's Appalachian Commitment

Berea was founded by ardent abolitionists who believed that their Christian faith required equal educational opportunity for blacks and whites. This was John Fee's theological passion and that of those who followed him. Early in Berea's history, the Berea schools made it their goal to serve two populations: the "emancipated Negro[es]" and "the white people of the mountainous portion of Eastern Kentucky and the similar regions in other States adjoining" (1866-67 *Berea Catalogue*).

Dean Louis Smith's 1962 formulation of the Great Commitments has given contemporary Bereans a clear sense of the way in which the College's founding values can be expressed in the latter half of the twentieth century. While the dual goal of educating "emancipated Negroes" and "mountain whites" led Fee and John A. R. Rogers to form the first schools on the Berea Ridge, the first of Dean Smith's Great Commitments restates the historic dual goal when it commits us "To provide an educational opportunity primarily for students from Appalachia, black and white, who have great promise and limited economic resources." Smith's phrasing of what is now our eighth Great Commitment--"To serve the Appalachian region primarily through education but also by other appropriate services"--makes clear the value Berea places on service and on the Appalachian region even as it reiterates that providing education is Berea's primary means of serving that region. In 1993 Berea's faculty and trustees reaffirmed (with slight modifications in language and enumeration) Berea's Great Commitments. Thus, it is clear from Fee's early statements, from their reformulation by Dean Smith as the Great Commitments, and from the recent reaffirmation of the Great Commitments, that Berea's mission has always been conceived and is still conceived primarily as educational outreach to the students of Appalachia, black and white.

Some Tensions Associated with Berea's Commitment to Serving the Appalachian Region

Historical and practical tensions have arisen as Berea has tried to realize its lofty and complex eightfold mission. Members of the Strategic Planning Committee have identified at least five such tensions associated with our commitment to serving Appalachia.

Interracial vs. Appalachian Focus:

- Tension arose between Berea's commitment to interracial education and its commitment to the white population of Appalachia during the closing years of the nineteenth century. At that time Berea began to increase its emphasis on serving Appalachian whites. This tension was dissipated when the Day Law, enacted in 1904, required Berea to abandon altogether, for nearly 50 years, one of the two populations it had set out to serve. When Berea resumed educating black students in the 1950s, the historical tension that began half a century earlier reappeared and has persisted in at least one practical way: the difficulty of achieving Berea's dual commitment to Appalachian and to interracial education when currently only 8% of the population of our "Appalachian region" is of African descent. This tension surfaces often in questions about the nature and extent of Berea's admissions territory and about how we allocate our resources.

Educational vs. Preserving Traditional Culture:

- Second, while it is clear that Berea's primary mission has always been broadly construed as "educational," Berea's outreach services and efforts to preserve the folk arts and crafts of the region have competed with academic and student life programs for College resources. Some maintain that the academic programs are slighted. Others maintain that if the College were to curtail or discontinue any particular outreach program or Appalachian tradition it would in effect fail the test of its commitment to Appalachia.

Great Need vs. Appalachian Focus:

- Third, the desire to educate students "who have great promise and limited economic resources" seems to some to conflict with the desire to serve students "primarily from the Appalachian region." This tension has been expressed by some in the question, "Why not serve students of great promise and limited economic resources, black and white, from *wherever?*"

Appalachian vs. "All Peoples of the Earth" Admissions Focus:

- Fourth, while Berea has sought "To provide an educational opportunity primarily for students from Appalachia...," it has also served students from all parts of America and the globe throughout most of the twentieth century. With an international student population of roughly 5% for more than 70 years and an "out-of-territory" student population that has hovered around 15-20% for the last 30 years, Berea's educational reach does in fact extend beyond Appalachia, and has caused some to consider abandoning the Appalachian admissions focus altogether. Decisions to expand the Berea "in-territory" twice in the past twenty years may seem to some to support this course.

Regional vs. Global Curricular Focus:

- Finally, some consider Berea's regional mission unnecessarily restrictive not only in terms of geographical orientation ("Why restrict ourselves to serving those in need in Appalachia?"), as noted above, but also in terms of curricular emphasis ("Why give any preference to Appalachian Studies?") and historical/cultural preservation efforts ("Why give special emphasis to the preservation of *Appalachian* arts and crafts traditions?").

Few of the questions and tensions associated with our Appalachian commitment are peculiar to our current time and circumstances. Although our community recently reaffirmed its allegiance to the Great Commitments (1993 review) and agreed to "not simply continue, but strengthen, its institutional focus upon Appalachia" (1996 *Being and Becoming*, p. 35), the tensions described above persist. These tensions could eventually reduce our enthusiasm for serving Appalachia or prompt us to pursue alternatives (e.g., abandoning our admissions "territory") that would undermine our commitment to Appalachia. The recognition of these possible consequences of such tensions spurred the members of the Strategic Planning Committee to try to articulate the tensions and ask ourselves: what reasons warrant our community's 1993 re-commitment to and 1996 call for intensification of Berea's Appalachian regional mission and focus?

Why Should Berea College Serve Appalachia in the Twenty-First Century?

When addressing the question of "why serve Appalachia now?" it is important to acknowledge that the tensions mentioned above do not necessarily represent opposite or irreconcilable alternatives. For example, *Being and Becoming* proposes recruitment goals and strategies that are intended to serve both of Berea's foundational commitments--the commitment to Appalachia *and* the commitment to interracial education. We need not be forced to choose between the poles of the tensions if we seek ways to balance or, where necessary, prioritize our objectives.

When addressing the question of "Why serve Appalachia now?" it is also important to remember that Berea's primary *mission* has always been educational and that Berea's primary *means* of serving Appalachia has always been educating the students from the region, as stated in the Great Commitment "To serve the Appalachian region primarily through education and also by other appropriate services." It follows that, if our history and commitments identify Berea's foremost service to Appalachia as being educational in nature, then it would make sense for us to define and view the "other appropriate services" we provide to the region (e.g., outreach programs, the preservation of the arts and culture of the region, etc.) as secondary to our educational mission. *Being and Becoming* sharpens this traditional focus when it states that "Berea College should (a) develop, primarily through undergraduate education, service-oriented leaders for Appalachia and for the other places where our students will live..." (p. 35). This recommendation continues Berea's historical view that our service to Appalachia is essentially the education of 1500 students annually, and that all other activities, including labor and outreach, should be supportive of and integrated with this core mission.

With these important tensions and caveats in mind, members of the Strategic Planning Committee then addressed the question, "Why should Berea College serve primarily Appalachia in the twenty-first century?"

- First, Fee's and other early Bereans' assessment of the needs of the Appalachian region find their counterpart in contemporary studies of our region (see *Being and Becoming*, pp. 19-21). Our region remains perhaps the most economically depressed rural area in the United States. Simply put, we need not look further than our neighboring counties to find both economic and social needs of staggering proportions. Why look elsewhere for

fertile fields to sow and reap when there are so many areas in our immediate vicinity where the impact of our resources can be maximized?

- Second, Berea's location is geographically and culturally Appalachian. Thus we are geographically and culturally well placed to serve Eastern Kentuckians and individuals from "the similar regions in other States adjoining...." Furthermore, a significant national trend in the past two decades is for students to go to colleges within 150 miles of their home; this trend is especially pronounced among first-generation college students, to many of whom Berea strongly appeals. Our location strongly argues for a regional mission as we continue to serve students of limited economic means.
- Third, although time has wrought substantial changes in Berea's educational form (Berea now offers only college-level education) and outreach services (which have changed in response to Appalachia's changing needs), Berea has been consistent and faithful in educating students from its Appalachian territory. This means that public and private school teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors in our region have a perception of Berea College that has accumulated over decades. This also means that the preponderance of our alumni and donors associate Berea College with its Appalachian focus. Berea's single most visible commitment to Appalachia is its "in-territory" admissions policy, which continues to bring more than 70% of current students from the old "mountain territory." Historical momentum and these contemporary perceptions and expectations argue for retaining primary emphasis on the Appalachian region in Berea's admissions and educational policies, even as we welcome and celebrate the contributions of students from the rest of the United States and the world.
- Fourth, the strength and uniqueness of Berea's mission derives from its Christian roots and its commitment to Appalachia, interracial education, and students of limited economic resources. At a time when many institutions seek to "differentiate" themselves from their competition, Berea is in an enviable position. Our national fund-raising success and national media exposure occur because our unique mission has widespread appeal. The exceptional commitment of faculty, staff, trustees, and others to Berea's complex mission is yet another sign of the appeal of our historical mission. It would be unwise to surrender or weaken any of these elements of our mission without compelling cause.

That Bereans care deeply about the College's mission is as clear as it is important. We present this position paper in an effort to generate serious reflection on and discussion of our commitment to Appalachia because so many of our future directions and initiatives depend on our reaching clarity and consensus about what we mean when we say that Berea should "not simply continue, but strengthen, its institutional focus upon Appalachia." Preserving the folk arts and providing service in forms other than education may be linked in important ways to Berea's primary mission of educating students of limited economic resources from the Appalachian region. However, it is the education of students, most of whom are from Appalachia, that has been and continues to be the core purpose Berea College serves for the region. The compelling success stories of graduates and current students continually remind us of why and for whom we have come to the Berea Ridge and why it is a great good to serve

Appalachia. Such powerful motivations and aims make institutions great and have made Berea College virtually unique among American colleges and universities.