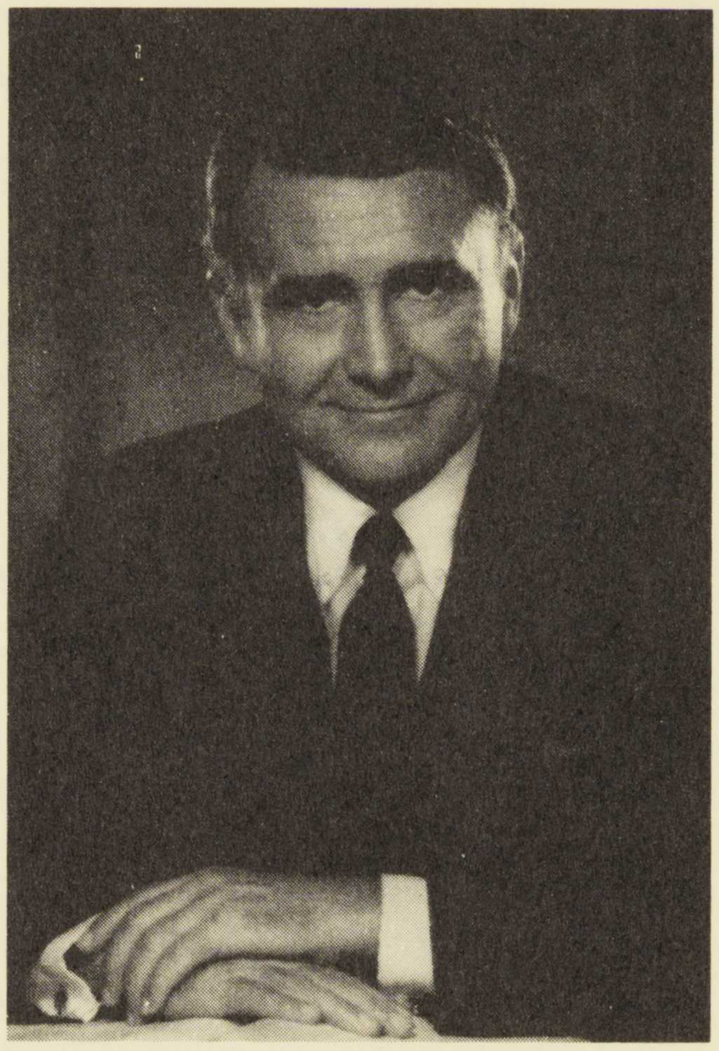
What is Equality?

by George Roche, President, Hillsdale College

In a society which has long emphasized the concept of equal justice under the law, our recent tendency has been to carry that original doctrine far beyond equality of rights, until our present goal demands equality of condition. Of course, men are no more created equal than any other member of the animal kingdom — life is always unequal. Neither the Declaration of Independence nor the Constitution ever stated or implied an equality of condition. The guarantee of the 14th Amendment that no state shall deprive any citizen of "equal protection of the laws" is only another way of expressing what we in the American experience have viewed as each man's inherent right to equality in freedom under law.

The American experience has been consistent on that definition of equality. Even two such political rivals and crusty personalities as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were in essential agreement on the point. Harkening back to the time they spent in the summer of 1776, laboring together in Philadelphia to produce the final version of the Declaration of Independence, Adams wrote to Jefferson nearly thirty years later:

> Inequalities of mind and body are so established by God Almighty in His constitution of human nature that no art or policy can ever plane them down to a level. I have never read reasoning more absurd, sophistry more gross...than the subtle labors of Helvetius and Rousseau to demonstrate the natural equality of mankind.



It has been the American insistence upon an equality measured in freedom, independence and opportunity that has characterized our system. It is the accompanying inequality of individual talents, given full play by the legal guarantee of equal opportunity, which has led to progress in religion, intellectual affairs, the production of material wealth, and the pursuit of individual meaning in life. The social advances which we take for granted have their origin in allowing the individual the opportunity to give full play to his creative resources. It is precisely that aspect of American life which is now so heavily under attack. The assault upon the merit principle today is present not only in higher education, but throughout American society as a whole. The real danger of the social engineering now under way is that the drive toward mediocrity reflected in Affirmative Action programming has behind it not only the full weight of the United States government, but the unthinking support of most molders of public opinion. One reason for this may be that equality of opportunity, as opposed to equality of condition, lacks the political attractiveness necessary for success in an age of group-interest politics. However the situation came about, the fact remains that merit is today being scrapped in favor of quotas. In the process, mediocrity is being institutionalized and equal opportunity suppressed. ♠

From *The Balancing Act: Quota Hiring in Higher Education* (Open Court, 1974), by George Roche.

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