

Walter O. Mason

A TRIO Legacy

It was due, in part, to the vision and drive of Walter O. Mason that TRIO programs were created and through his enlightened and energetic leadership that TRIO has earned central place in the scheme of educational opportunity. Mr. Mason assisted with the writing of the legislation for the first Upward Bound program and helped design the logo still being used today for Upward Bound. His life was marked by wisdom, compassion and love for all things good and just.

He was born in Honey Grove, TX, but as an infant moved to Oklahoma and grew up in Beggs, OK. He was a graduate of Langston University and began his profession as an educator in 1947 as a teacher at Arcadia Public Schools. He also taught and coached in the Perry and Oklahoma City Public Schools. He became an administrator at Langston University and also worked at Oklahoma Baptist University where he directed an Upward Bound program.

He earned a Master's Degree at Oklahoma State University and pursued doctoral studies at the University of Oklahoma. He was a World War II Veteran and received the citation for meritorious service. In 1973, he was the senior program officer at (what was called then) the Department of Health, Education and Welfare in Dallas. At the time of his death in 1986, he was special assistant to the president at the University of Oklahoma.

Mr. Mason's professional affiliations included Charter member and President, American Association for Affirmative Action; Charter member and first President of Oklahoma Association for Affirmative Action; American Personnel and Guidance Association; Oklahoma Education Association; National Education Association; Oklahoma Association of Black Faculty and Staff; National Advisory Board; Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Schools; Special Consultant, Office for Civil Rights, D.H.E.W., Dallas Regional Office; Special Consultant, National Board for Opportunities Industrialization Centers; American Council on Education and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity.

Walter O. Mason's vision:

Time period - early 1980's

(as transcribed)

Mr. Mason had been encouraging these concepts for 12 years prior, urging the organization of TRIO so that we might opt a plan change, and as a TRIO family, have a strong voice in our destiny.

He was excited about the future of TRIO because due to the efforts of Dr. Arnold Mitchem and others, TRIO won major concessions in congress, such as increased funding and recognition as a professional body. This period is referred to by Dr. Mitchem as the 12-day war. In 1976, when Carter was elected, he recommended to Congress that TRIO be cut from the budget. The time period was a difficult one in TRIO history. Three proposals were submitted in one year with one written and submitted during an Upward Bound summer! When President Reagan was elected in 1980, he too was going to recommend cutting out the grant, hence the so-called 12-day war. As a result of all the concessions gained by Dr. Arnold Mitchem and others, Mr. Mason was excited about the future of TRIO and here is what he had to say:

Any significant change in human organization involves a rearrangement of patterns of power, association, status and values. Some individuals and groups may benefit. Others may lose. Some view an anticipated change as threatening and reject it. Others may view it as enhancing and embrace it. In any case, change, typically, involves risk and fears. I only hope that you will realize that your attitudes are determined by you and how you view your life, your world, your contribution to others.

There is a continuing concern in America, a concern that the opportunities for maximum development is not available to all Americans and American subjects. The very foundation of the freedom we as Americans love and cherish imposes a social order that often functions as a social caste system. People are forced into social classes by reasons of their race, color, religion, sex and national origin. Others are classified by their cultural heritage or their native language. Some are classified by their economic or even the educational levels of their parents. The end results are, because of the economic and social classifications, a major segment of people in our society are denied the opportunity for maximum human development.

Often the lack of opportunity is directly linked to the lack of information. Some of these people are isolated from opportunity because they live in rural America. Others spend their lifetimes in small towns and communities where educational and economic opportunities are limited. Only because wealth is not evenly distributed in America, schools and other community services are often limited in their offerings. So, we have an imbalance in human potential. This imbalance in the realization potential is an All-American problem. It's not a problem that can or should be delegated to education or to any other single segment of society.

Americans cannot build a strong national defense if we cannot produce competent people for military and other critical assignments. For the first time since the industrial revolution, America is being classified as a second-rate country in industrial productivity. Due to the lack of a highly motivated and skilled work force, low productivity has caused this country, for the first time in history, to consider accepting economic aid from a foreign country.

What is the task before us? The task is a massive and unified effort to locate and identify the lost talent in America. When these talents are located and identified, we must provide these people with the information and guidance needed to plan their lives for their maximum realization of their human potential. Who should assume these responsibilities for

this task? As stated before, this is an all-American problem and, therefore, should be an All-American responsibility. The responsibility should be equally shared by federal, state and local governments.

Every agency in our society should assume equal responsibility for the resolution of this national problem. To delegate responsibility to a single agency or single function of our society only perpetuates the problem, rather than resolving it. We have been guilty of defining the problem too narrowly. We have been guilty of presenting the problem as a case for the poor and minorities among us rather than presenting it a problem of national security and national economic stability. We must develop new approaches to plan change.

Now, let's examine another concept. We know enough about learning and human development to know that such development can be promoted or it can be demoted. We know that if a person, any person, can develop a positive self-concept, and if that positive self-concept is properly motivated, and if a healthy learning environment is provided, that person can and will manage their own self-actualization. This experiment has been demonstrated over and over again. We also know that there are many forces in our society that have denied many people among us the opportunity for a healthy environment for maximum development. Such denial is an American shame. This shame is expressed in high crime rates, historical ratios of unemployment, increasing public assistance rolls, secondary school dropouts, rising attrition rates among college students and, again, low productivity. These are ills Americans cannot afford. We must promote and support proven processes to bridge the social and educational depression imposed on helpless people.

Every American citizen should be sickened by these ills. It should be the responsibility of every American citizen to develop and promote procedures to assist people to overcome the effects of discrimination of opportunities. It's proper that these programs and procedures should be focused at youth at the secondary level. These are the most formative, developmental years. This is the time when transitional programs can be most effective. What is the task? The task is to identify a person's entry or re-entry into the development cycle. Veterans, older people-and that's real recycling - and if this such person with the identification of a productive life cycle guides these persons through the development of those social and learning skills necessary for a productive life and offers assistance in the selection of opportunities and institutions for continued personal development. Who should assume responsibility for this task? Again, this is an all-American responsibility. We should be negligent to allow this responsibility to be delegated to any single agency. We must demonstrate that failure to fulfill this responsibility is to fail America. All Americans will pay the price for such failure.

Finally, we know that the most logical entry to the American way of life is through some form of post-secondary educational training. Further, we know that the real leaders, the high producers in this way of life will enter through some form of college or university training. Yet, we have no system to guarantee universal preparation for such training. We can see the need for such training and development, yet we hold to the concept that college is not for everyone.

That was the State regent's statement in 1982. Therefore, we impose a sorting process to make sure only the elect will enjoy the opportunities. The result is that we have masses of people entering our colleges and universities ill-prepared to cope with the demands of the learning process. It has been shown that this lack of preparation has not relationship to ability. Rather, it is directly related to the systemic lack of opportunities and motivation for adequate preparation. The results are for many people in our society, the open doors to our colleges and universities become revolving doors. The people who experience the early exit of our college gates re-enter the society ill equipped and socially and psychologically ill prepared to become productive citizens. They often become the burdens of society.

What is the task before us? The task is to find ways to change the philosophy and structure of our post-secondary institutions. We must find ways to capture the talent of the ill prepared people and assist them with a swift transition. We must impose development education at the postsecondary level. That was unheard of in 1982. We must find ways to link the educational processes to the professional, technical, and liberal arts curriculum for which the colleges and universities claim responsibility. In short, we must develop intervention strategies. Now, what have we been considering in this conversation? We have talked about the need to search out the hidden talents of America. We have talked about the need to re-direct those talents into a developmental process that bridges the gap of the potential societal dropout to the productive societal predicament. We have talked about the need for planned change in the ways that we administer our post secondary institutions, particularly, our colleges and universities. We have talked about intervention programs that will reduce the shameful loss of human abilities, only because we are not structurally prepared to serve their needs.

I suggest that there is not group of people better prepared to lead America in the fulfillment of these responsibilities than you assembled in this room. The problem has been and the problem is that we have not walked out of the forest so that we can see the trees. We have tried to shoulder a responsibility that should be assumed by every level of government and every social agency in America. We have become so paternalistic that we are unwilling to share these responsibilities. I now challenge your to examine some new approaches to planned change.

Walter O. Mason died August 17, 1986.

The National Walter O. Mason Award has been established in his honor. Oklahoma's Jo Conway, former East Central University Talent Search Director, was the 1990 recipient of the award.