



THE VIEW

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NO STATE LEFT BEHIND?

BY

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A couple of years ago I had the good fortune to be in the audience for a presentation by noted columnist and political observer George Will. Employing his uncanny sense of history he described to this group of community college students and educators the competitive environment in which they found themselves. Will told them that from the founding of the country through the 1800's wealth in the nation was created by the trading of land as the new country expanded westward and became populated. He went on to relate how beginning as the 1900's approached wealth was created by capital investment in factories including buildings and machinery. But in the modern era, according to Will, it is neither of these tangible things that are the focal point of wealth creation, but rather it is brain power that is the source of value. A similar chord was struck several weeks ago when CNN ran a special program on the problems facing Detroit and the automotive industry. One commentator stated profoundly that Detroit would never be the same again. He explained that Silicon Valley would be the new Detroit. Clearly he meant that brawn was about to be replaced forever by brains.

Two events that occupied my time over the past weekend have caused me to recall these remarks, and to wonder where Mississippi is prepared to fit in this new economic paradigm. One occurred on Monday night when the Mississippi Association of Partners in Education honored Dr. Cathy Grace with its highly prestigious Winter-Reed Partnership Award. The other was my participation as a presenter at the Mississippi Community College Foundation's Leadership Academy. Dr. Grace's career as a tireless advocate for the least among us – our youngest children and our Community Colleges who labor at the other end of the age spectrum in many ways represent our best hope to keep Mississippi in the economic game that is being played for keeps worldwide.

A little perspective on the challenges should be instructive. Various calculations place the graduation rates from Mississippi high schools at around 60%, meaning that 40% of our young people are long gone by the time their peers walk the aisle for high school graduation. A recent report by the Mississippi Legislature's Joint Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review contains a couple of eyebrow-raising factoids to consider. First,

Mississippi dropouts have a 70% higher unemployment rate than do high school graduates. If all of Mississippi's employed dropouts had gone on to earn a high school diploma and earned the same median income as the high school graduates, they would increase their cumulative income annually by \$1.8 billion. Now turn that over two or three times in the economy.

There was a time when few considered the direct relationship between early childhood education and adult education. Hopefully, now many are beginning to "get it." Dr. Cathy Grace has toiled in the vineyards of Mississippi's littlest children. She has dedicated a lifetime to explaining to practitioners, policymakers and taxpaying citizens that what happens beginning the very day a child exits the womb sets in motion the most important series of events of all in determining that child's life chances when they reach adulthood. At the other end of the development spectrum we have been blessed to have been one of the first at getting something right. Mississippi had the forethought to create one of the earliest community college systems in the country. In addition to preparing young people to move on into Universities these same unique community colleges stand alone in the field of education with the mission to "right the ship" of those who may have gotten blown off course and now find that they cannot go back to high school and pick up where they left off nor are they eligible to get into a four-year college.

If the Cathy Graces of Mississippi are able to eliminate the gap in achievement that is put in place in the earliest days of the lives of our little ones, then the chances of community college success at developing a workforce driven by brain power when they become adults are significantly enhanced. Even in these exceedingly difficult economic times, we have no choice but to press forward. The days of land and brawn as means of wealth creation are behind us. In this new era of brain power as the creator of wealth in the global economy, the rest of the world is not about to wait on Mississippi.



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William Martin Wiseman is Director of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Professor of Political Science at Mississippi State University. He received his Ph.D in 1986, his MPPA in 1980, his MS in 1974, and his BA in 1973, all awarded from Mississippi State University. In addition to his duties at Mississippi State, Dr. Wiseman is a guest professor at Jackson State University. Dr. Wiseman's areas of academic interest include American government, intergovernmental relations and federalism, county and municipal management, public personnel administration, and innovations in state and local government management.

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE:

Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

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