President’s Commentary
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By Dr. John Roush, President, Centre College

Centre enhances education of the mind and body. In recent years, the Commonwealth has invested considerable energy and resources to improve the academic experience and the test scores of our young people. Enhanced performance on standardized tests and in other measurable areas is critical to the state's long-term welfare, but there is another aspect of educational reform in Kentucky and across the nation that deserves our attention.

A quick review of the headlines points dramatically to the problem: an epidemic of obesity in young people (not to mention related issues of eating disorders, junk food in schools, and lawsuits against fast food restaurants). Corpulent, sedentary children grow up to be unhealthy adults.

According to statistics released in 2001 by the Surgeon General, 61 percent of Americans are overweight or obese, fewer than one-third engage in the recommended amount of physical activity, and the percentage of overweight adolescents has almost tripled from 5 percent to 13 percent during the past two decades. Research at Duke, Johns Hopkins, and the University of California at Davis indicates that the prevalence of overweight adolescents may well be higher today than when the Surgeon General's report was issued just two years ago.

How do we reverse this alarming trend? I believe the key to solving the crisis is education. While the education for the mind is of paramount importance, we clearly need to do a better job of educating our young people about their bodies and how to take care of them. (I would argue that the third element of this paradigm, education of the spirit, is also critical for living in our complicated world, but that is a discussion saved for another day.)

What do we know about education of the mind and body? A little history might be helpful. The notion that physical exercise is an essential component of education designed to achieve unity of the mind and body was, of course, articulated and practiced by the ancient Greeks. Its influence can be traced from the Roman Empire to the German and Swedish integration academic study with gymnastics to the seminal writings of American educator Thomas Dewey.

At Centre we've always endorsed the Greek ideal that a complete education encompasses both mind and body. Recognized nationally as a top-tier liberal arts institution, Centre's commitment to its academic program is widely respected, and it remains our top priority. The college, however, reflects its commitment to the life of the body through its universal physical education requirement, a campus-wide focus on wellness, and a vibrant intramural and intercollegiate athletic program involving most of our students—more than 70 percent participate in intramural sports and over 40 percent participate on our 19
intercollegiate teams.

Now, Centre is moving to take mind/body education to the next level. We've begun a two-year building, redesign and renovation project that will combine our primary academic facility and library, Crounse Academic Center, and our athletic/fitness/recreation facility, Sutcliffe Hall, into a complete resource for educating the whole person—an endeavor that will set a new standard.

We will call this complex The College Centre, a name chosen quite intentionally. Located in the physical center of campus, it will be the “centre” of educational experience for our students. It will provide a setting for the training of the mind and body where students can work, study, exercise, play, socialize, and develop their abilities to the fullest. In both its academic and athletic/fitness/recreation components, the complex will feature state-of-the-art technological amenities—for tracking down research around the world, as well as tracking the effects of aerobic exercise on a student's heart.

What implications does this have for educational policy at the elementary, secondary, and higher education levels? I would argue that The College Centre can be a model for seamless education of the mind and body that can help Kentucky expand its view of what is possible in providing first-rate education for its citizens. To believe that only the mind matters is a false promise, and we would be wise to steer clear of such thinking. We need to hold fast to a balanced view of education. In times when resources are scarce, programs in physical education, recreation, and athletics should not be sacrificed first.

Correspondingly, programs in the visual and performing arts—also part of the performance that occurs in education—should not be an easy, first target for cutting. When we are formulating our goals for educational progress in the Commonwealth, the importance of training the mind and the body should be a central principle from which we proceed. Both dimensions have lasting value. Both are essential for living full and productive lives. Both are essential to a Kentucky and nation of the greatest promise. We should settle for nothing less.