This past academic year, L. Hart Wright Professor of Law James Boyd White visited colleges and universities as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar. As he did so, he developed an ever sharper view of the remarkable role that higher education plays in American culture.

White visited the universities of Idaho, South Dakota, and Georgia, Alma College, Ohio Wesleyan, Southwestern University, Agnes Scott College and Kalamazoo College. "In each I spent a couple of days, giving a formal lecture, visiting classes and meeting with students and faculty informally," he explains. His formal lectures dealt with "Reading and Writing in Philosophy, Literature and Law" and "The Humanities and the Law."

He came away from each visit reinforced in his regard for the teachers and students who people such schools. "What is it, I wondered, that gets all these teachers up in the morning, off to offer once more a class about the origins of the French revolution, or Shakespeare's comedies, or basic biology?" he asks in his report for the Phi Beta Kappa Key Reporter. "And what is it that brings these students to class after class, arriving usually on time, having done most of the reading, performing adequately and often well on exams and papers? Not everyone meets the ideal, of course, but my impression is that all this is an enormous and collective act of faith, of belief in the value of education itself, a belief that can never be proved. These institutions, and others like them, represent a kind of institutional miracle."

Colleges and universities, he concludes, are like "the medieval cathedrals of our time. Not as beautiful as the great cathedrals, of course — though sometimes handsome enough — but like the cathedrals in the extraordinary complexity and variety of their organization, in the simultaneous multiplicity and unity of life that they provide, and in their foundation in a faith so deeply shared that no one knows it is there."

He continues: "The comparison with the cathedral is in a way not surprising after all, for the cathedrals were the great architectural creations of the middle ages and the universities their great educational inventions. We now live in a world in which institutions of all kinds are subject to systematic attack, theoretical and political in nature, on the grounds that they restrain or modify forces that would otherwise be more rationally and efficiently expressed in the market."

"But the college or university works on very different principles from those of the market, especially in its recognition that all the participants in it have something to learn, both from the past and from each other, indeed from the very tone and atmosphere of the institution itself, which is not reducible to the views or minds of its present population."