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**“Insurmountable Opportunities: Liberal Education in a Changing Climate”
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I am honored and delighted to have the chance to speak at the University of Richmond Faculty Colloquy today. From conversations I have had with former campus leaders like Rich Morrill and Ken Ruscio, and with President William Cooper and Provost June Aprille earlier today, I know that this is an institution that is asking the right questions about the liberal arts. I especially wish to commend you for standing on the front lines of engagement with one of the most challenging and consequential questions of American—and global—higher education. That question is: how to preserve, renew, and transmit the tradition and practice of liberal education at a moment when all social, economic, and political dynamics seem to be pulling us away from that tradition?

That the process of designing effective liberal education is challenging goes without saying. Every university faculty I have served on has struggled with it, especially its initial component, general education, albeit in very different ways. The solutions at Columbia University and the University of California, Los Angeles, for example, could not be more dissimilar. At Harvard University, where I serve on the Board of Overseers, the issue continues to roil the waters—waters already ruffled to begin with. I know from Provost Aprille that it does here at the University of Richmond as well. About general education, one can say, with the authors of the second General Education Committee report at Harvard, that it is “a concept with many foster parents” and a complex—if not contradictory—lineage. And you will probably not be surprised by their observation that “The confusing genealogy of the idea helps to explain why almost every time a university has attempted to devise and implement a new scheme of general education, it has taken its faculty several years to reach agreement.”¹ About liberal education, one can recall what Niels Bohr said of particle physics: “If you are not confused by it, you don’t really understand it.”

The task of developing a curriculum that will advance liberal education is challenging precisely because it is so consequential: to our students, to our work as scholar-teachers, and to the character of our colleges and universities. But I want to stress today that the challenge of constantly renewing liberal education is especially consequential because of an inconvenient truth: the climate surrounding higher education is changing in worrisome ways. The model of liberal education is about to be tested—quite literally—in the next

1. “Report of the Committee on General Education,” Harvard College Curricular Review, Harvard University Faculty of Arts and Sciences, November 2005, 7. September 11, 2006
http://www.fas.harvard.edu/curriculum-review/GENERAL_EDUCATIONR.pdf

few years. We will be able to cope with the effects of this climate change only if we are certain what we are about.

What is the nature of that change? We know that American higher education is the subject of increasing scrutiny and even controversy, much of it fairly broad-brush and distorting, but most important, we can see that the terms of reference have shifted. There was a time when our society thought of national and state systems of higher education as a public good, as a benefit to the entire community. These systems of higher education—although the recipients of substantial public investment—were very decentralized and were granted a large measure of independence. American society trusted the leadership of its colleges and universities. In sharp contrast to that view, higher education today is more likely to be presented as a consumer good, in which most of its benefit inures only to the individual who purchases it. Moreover, we are told, the buyer needs to beware. What was formerly honored as the leadership of educational institutions is now portrayed as an “academic establishment” resistant to change and not to be trusted because it protects its own entrenched interests. Today, the emerging view is that the “accountability” of higher education can be assured only by stringent government regulation. New measures of oversight—including testing and assessment—are now being called for to assure that the consumer is sold a product that merits its price. And indeed, prices and costs must be better controlled by the government, even as public investment in higher education declines.

What has caused this change in the climate of opinion? As in the geophysical environment, the causes can be traced to human action, and as with almost all social phenomena, the causation is overdetermined. Many factors come into play, including the arguably legitimate self-interest of many who see higher education as yet another industry that requires rationalization and, perhaps, privatization. But clearly one of the most salient dynamics is the public perception that the changing nature of the global economy is a threat requiring increased national and individual “competitiveness.” Hence the power of metaphors drawn from the market and applied to education.

These metaphors and the logic behind them abound in the report approved on August 9 by the Commission on the Future of Higher Education appointed by US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. That report presents a view of our enterprise that we ignore at our peril. The Commission posited a clear starting point for its inquiry by noting, “We want a higher-education system that gives Americans the workplace skills they need to adapt to a rapidly changing economy.”² Its alarmed conclusion is that through “unwarranted complacency . . . American higher education has become what, in the business world, would be called a mature enterprise: increasingly risk-averse, at times self-satisfied, and unduly expensive. It is an enterprise that has yet to address the fundamental issues of how academic programs and institutions must be transformed to serve the changing educational needs of a knowledge economy.”³ The “academic

2. Commission on the Future of Higher Education, “Draft Report,” 3. September 11, 2006
<http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/0809-draft.pdf>.

3. Commission 1, 4.

establishment,” it regrets, is not prepared to deal with a “consumer-driven environment.”⁴ The Commission recommends, therefore, that “[t]o meet the challenges of the 21st century, higher education must change from a system primarily based on reputation to one based on performance.”⁵ It urges “a robust culture of accountability and transparency throughout higher education,” one that includes “the development of new performance benchmarks designed to measure and improve productivity and efficiency.”⁶

I do not have the time this afternoon to present or critique the entire report. It makes many points with which one cannot disagree. The report correctly affirms the importance of higher education as the most reliable engine of social mobility. It candidly observes that health care competes with higher education for scarce public funds, thereby pointing to issues of inter-generational equity. It calls attention to the serious obstacles to access and affordability with which all of us must wrestle. But what is disturbingly most relevant to our discussion today is that a serious and well-considered pronouncement of our national leadership has reasoned and advanced a vision of education so narrow and so confining that one can hardly square it with the adjective “higher.” There is no hint in the report of the lofty yet fundamental goals established by the Steering Committee of the Task Force on Undergraduate Education here at the University of Richmond, in its Statement on Liberal Education, of “intellectual curiosity, intellectual openness, and intellectual rigor.”⁷ The report’s focus on education-as-workforce-preparation does not show any inkling of the transformative power of education to empower individuals by opening up their vision to the richness of disciplined thought. The report discusses—at length—the real problem of financial access to educational institutions, but not how education can give access to ways of knowing that are unbounded by courses and programs.

So, how to respond? Should we try to sever the link between education and work? Indeed, some fierce defenders of the liberal arts have chosen to recoil from this connection. My friend and predecessor as president of ACLS, Stanley N. Katz of Princeton University, for example, has decried the “attempt by educators to clothe a process [liberal education] they . . . believe to be good in itself as utilitarian. The notion of ‘school to work,’” he warns, “has been as damaging to tertiary as to secondary education.”⁸ Stephen Fix of Williams College, speaking at a conference on the future of the liberal arts college co-sponsored by the ACLS in 2003, also lamented what he saw as the deleterious impact of linking education and work:

. . . a college degree is often seen today primarily as a vehicle to economic success for the individual, and for the society at large. For the individual, it’s a relatively sure ticket to a life of financial security, as well as political and social influence.

4. Commission, 3.

5. Commission, 21.

6. Commission, 19.

7. “Proposed Reforms to the General Education Curriculum at the University of Richmond,” 3. September 11, 2006 http://provost.richmond.edu/committees/TFUGE_Curriculum_Proposal_FINAL.pdf.

8. Stanley N. Katz, “Liberal Education after the Ruin of the University.” Presented at Dartmouth College Conference, “The Liberal Education – Dead or Alive,” November 6, 2004.

Thus, the panicked earnestness with which parents coach their kids to compete for admission to the best colleges and universities, and their drum-beat of questions not about what majors their children will do, but what their children will do with their majors. Thus, too, the fear of not being affluent that keeps some of our most promising graduates from choosing careers as high school teachers, or ministers, or agents for non-profit organizations.⁹

But let me suggest today another approach. I do not think that as educators we can dismiss the very real anxiety many feel about the economic future of our country and our children. We can, however, make the case that liberal education in fact prepares students well for an ever-changing workplace and mandates a culture of continuous innovation. We can reaffirm the dual value of the liberal arts both in and of themselves *and* as applied in professional practice. We can vindicate liberal education and the general education that is essential to it, without diluting their complexity and rigor.

We can assert that as the world becomes more complicated, the premium on the analytical, expressive and conceptual skills of liberally educated individuals will only increase. Indeed, Stephen Fix, whom I just mentioned, while skeptical about a purely instrumental and materialist argument for liberal education, is nonetheless equally convinced of its vocational relevance. In that same talk given at Williams, he recounted a conversation with the head of human resources for a major aerospace company, who confessed to a preference for hiring philosophy majors. Why? These graduates, he observed, may not, initially, know much about aeronautics or business, but they understand complexity. And that's something the company cannot teach them.¹⁰

Making this case is of critical importance not just for institutions such as the University of Richmond, but for the domains of knowledge we value and draw upon. This is especially true for the humanities, not just because any effective general education program must include them—often in fact, as John Guillory recently pointed out, to the exclusion of everything else—but equally because the humanities concern themselves with the whole range of human inquiry and knowing. Yet any responsible consideration of the problems we face today that is confined to one discipline's methods and concepts is likely to be limited, if not impoverished; we are not just looking for what Guillory terms “a crash course in the classics.”¹¹ This is a point that many have made, of course, and one that appears to have taken especially firm root in the natural sciences. E. O. Wilson's argument for “consilience,” “the ‘jumping together of knowledge’ across disciplines ‘to create a common groundwork of explanation,’” has been embraced with enthusiasm by the National Academies and the major federal and private funding

9. Stephen Fix, in a response paper presented for a session titled “Mission and Achievement in Historical Perspectives” at a conference on Liberal Arts Colleges in American Higher Education, Williamstown, Mass., November 13-15, 2003. *Liberal Arts Colleges in American Higher Education*, ACLS Occasional Paper No. 59 (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 2006) 42.

10. Fix 43.

11. John Guillory, “Who's Afraid of Marcel Proust?” in David Hollinger, ed., *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006), 27, 30.

agencies, who are convinced that “disciplinary ‘silos’ need to [be] broken and interdisciplinary connections are absolutely fundamental [as] the interfaces of the sciences are where the excitement will be the most intense.”¹² This is true for both research and education, and it is the ideal that orients the most thorough-going general education curricula.

Given the resistance the term often encounters, it may be instructive here to keep in mind that interdisciplinarity is in fact not all that much newer on the horizon than disciplinarity. The term entered academic discourse back in the 1920s, when the Rockefeller Foundation provided funding to establish the Social Science Research Council because it was already concerned that the just barely emerging social science disciplines were already becoming ossified. (The early appearance of this concern reminds me of a comment Eisenhower is said to have made, that “Never before have things been so much the way they are as they are today.”) Many of my colleagues in the humanities roll their eyes when the term “interdisciplinarity” is invoked, impatient with what they see only as an increasingly tiresome mantra being chanted by funding agencies and administrators alike who are always looking for the next new thing around the corner. They will point out that many quite venerable disciplines are inherently interdisciplinary—classical and medieval studies, just to name a couple of those on the cutting edge—and they are absolutely right. But just as our understanding of the ancient world has depended on contributions from literary, historical, linguistic, papyrological, and archaeological expertise—to name just a few—so innovation and discovery in more recent and emerging fields like area, ethnic, gender, cultural, environmental, and cognitive studies have required and will continue to require the contributions of multiple disciplines. It is that inquiry-driven methodological nimbleness that we seek to convey to our students through the general education curricula.

Now don’t get me wrong: I believe the liberal arts disciplines are vital, and vitally necessary. Without them, we may lose some of the mental focus and rigor, the very discipline, that is one of the values of liberal learning. But if we are not prepared to leave what have been called the “gated communities” of our disciplines and mix with others in our own neighborhood, how can we be ready to travel to the “World of Work”? It is not just a question of solving problems that require collective effort and multiple perspectives, it is a question, too, of being able to explain the value of what we do to those who live in another world, whether it be in another field or someplace outside of the academy altogether. Indeed, venturing beyond the familiar language and territory of a discipline is an excellent preparation for moving into the world.

What about the changing climate’s demand for accountability? Should we reject it outright? This is not a complicated question. All public institutions—and all colleges and universities are public institutions whether or not they are sponsored by governments—must by their nature be accountable. Here, too, I suggest that we engage

12. Wilson, E.O. *Consilience: The Unity of Science* (New York: Knopf, 1998). Cited by Diana Rhoten in “Interdisciplinary Research: Trend or Transition,” in the Social Science Research Council’s *Items & Issues*, Vol. 5, No. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2004), 6-8. September 11, 2006, http://www.ssrc.org/publications/items/items_5.1-2/interdisciplinary_research.pdf.

the issue by taking affirmative responsibility for framing it. Understanding and measuring the effect of education over a lifetime is a complicated research question. Nonetheless, there are many who are prepared at this moment to assess student outcomes through high-stakes testing, a program we might characterize as “no undergraduate left behind.” If we are to assert that the value added by liberal education is not easily, simply, or immediately measured, we must clearly and convincingly specify what value is added.

The view from abroad is helpful here, and I know that the University of Richmond is especially committed to providing its students with that experience and does an exceptional job of accomplishing it. I think it is an interesting paradox that just as policy discussions regarding American higher education ignore the values, and value added, of a liberal arts education, those less than tangible benefits are becoming increasingly prized overseas. In spite of the fact that the liberal arts college is today a “distinctively American” institution, some educators abroad have been studying its principles and practices, in order to establish similar institutions in their own countries. For Americans, this presents a rare opportunity to re-examine the rationale for our own activities, a rationale we might have been taking for granted. As I am sure you well know, trying to explain what we do to others often leads us to fresh insights.

It is often a useful thought experiment to imagine what life would be like if some element taken for granted were eliminated, something like Jimmy Stewart’s vision of Bedford Falls without him in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. We do not have many such opportunities in life, but if we imagine higher education without a core of liberal arts and general education, we get a pretty close approximation of the educational systems of today’s continental Europe. Here I would like to draw briefly on conversations between Andrzej Tymowski, the Director of International Programs at ACLS, and some of his colleagues in eastern Europe.

Most universities outside the United States have never deviated from the Humboldtian model introduced in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. As you know, Humboldt sought to “professionalize” higher education, that is, to establish universities based on disciplinary departments in fields of academic research, a vision that was of course to influence the development of the American research university as well. General knowledge is presumed, and perhaps the relative rigor of the European secondary school education can permit this presumption; students enroll in specified departments and receive intensive training in a given discipline for five years, leading to a master’s thesis. (Under pressure from the European Union’s Bologna process, European universities have begun to divide the five years into a “bachelor’s degree,” conferred after three years, followed by a master’s after completion of two more. However, the basic, rigidly disciplinary, curriculum has not been changed by this new way to parse the experience.)

Although these universities produce competent specialists, some educators have become intrigued by the American style of liberal education, which posits a “college experience” between the general education of secondary school and the professional training provided intensively in graduate institutions.

A professor of sociology at the University of Warsaw, Elzbieta Kaczynska, who has often taught in North America, was once asked to describe the difference between her European and American students. Not surprisingly, she said that European students were much better informed. As she put it, “With first-year students in Warsaw, you can discuss a wide range of topics, especially historical ones. It is not necessary to explain who Bismarck was before talking about his policies.” In North America, students are not likely to possess this knowledge, but, she noted, “they know how to get the knowledge they need to fulfill an assignment. They can go to the library, put together a bibliography, and write a paper. Warsaw students can’t do this nearly as easily. They can write down everything they know about Bismarck, but are not really capable of independently organizing material, synthesizing it, and presenting it in coherent written form.”¹³

In this situation how do educational innovators in Europe define the need for general education and the liberal arts? Jerzy Axer, professor of Classical Languages and director of the emerging College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Warsaw, puts it this way:

We believe that a liberal arts college experience will prove the best preparation for university graduates’ contributions to society, whether they choose to stay in academia to do independent research, or enter public service, or work in the private sector.

To live in a diverse and changing world, to maintain a sense of cultural and national self while not closing themselves off from others, to be able to respond to the challenges of the twenty-first century—students must be able to draw on more than what is provided in the narrowly professional and narrowly disciplinary education that now dominates in our country.¹⁴

What intellectual ammunition can we provide Jerzy Axer against his critics, who charge that liberal education is a “distraction” from disciplined study and that it encourages “dilettantism”?

I am sure you have your own ideas. I would begin with three reasons:

First, it emphasizes “learning to learn.” In the experience of a liberal arts college, students acquire general skills such as critical reading, writing, analytical thinking: in other words, how to study a given topic. This will be useful for them no matter what professional life they choose—academic study, working in the private sector, or public service.

13. Private communication, Elzbieta Kaczynska to Andrzej Tymowski, 1991.

14. Jerzy Axer and Marek Waşowicz, draft version of letter to Presidents of Liberal Arts and Sciences Colleges and Universities, August 19, 2006.

Second, it stimulates creativity and independent analysis, going beyond the accumulation of data to explore their meaning. “Factographic” history—the sort that regards the historian’s only proper role to be the discovery and publication of heretofore undiscovered and unpublished facts—is more prized by, and characteristic of, the Humboldtian university than it is by historians in the American system.

And third, it emphasizes the motivation to study “for its own sake,” that is, to pursue knowledge because it makes one a more complete human being, one capable of evaluating moral dilemmas and problems of social action. We cannot know the future, but because of the constant changes in the world situation, we can guarantee that the issues facing the next generation will be different from the ones facing their parents. Knowledge of historical cases, and preparation in sorting out complex issues, will prove indispensable in problem solving, no matter what the specific area of life in which they occur.

Let me conclude by renewing my congratulations on the opportunity you have before you to reason together on the difficult specifics of improving liberal education and general education in real time in a real place. My quick review of your reform process suggests that you have recognized what some crucial and fundamental goals ought to be, even as their implementation may prove less swift and easy than anyone would wish. I do not gainsay those difficulties, but let me recall for you the bizarrely cheerful conclusion to an old “Pogo” comic strip, the cry that “We are surrounded by insurmountable opportunities!” It may indeed be a steep climb, but your opportunity to formulate and present a high-minded vision of higher education could not be more timely, nor more important. And I have no doubt that you possess the resources to get it right. Thank you very much.