

The College of Wooster
Convocation
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Grant H. Cornwell

Liberal Education and Social Responsibility
in This Global Era

Introduction

Welcome to The College of Wooster as we launch the new academic year. I'm the new guy. Welcome Trustees, alumni, members of the community, and guests. Welcome faculty and staff of the College. Welcome students.

One of the wonderful things about college life is that we get to begin anew each year. For some of us here today, this is our first beginning. For the seniors, this is the fourth and final beginning of your undergraduate career (assuming all goes well). For some faculty and staff, as it is for me, this is the first Convocation at Wooster. For others, it is their 10th, 20th, 30th, even their 43rd new beginning. For The College of Wooster it is the 138th new beginning.

What I want to do in my remarks today is talk about our mission. It is important at this time to reflect on our core purpose, our *raison d'être*, our reason for being. What is it that calls us together, that warrants not just our attention, but our passionate commitment? What is it that justifies the significant investment of time and resources, not just from families, but also the resources donated to our mission from alumni, patrons, foundations, and the government?

The answer better be good. And it is. The first sentence of our mission statement reads:

The College of Wooster is an independent residential liberal arts college offering a rigorous and comprehensive education to students with the capacity and motivation to become educated leaders in a complex society.

This is why we are gathered here. It is why The College of Wooster was founded in 1866 and why it exists today. Though we have a variety of roles in this undertaking, we are each here to engage in this noble work.

What does this mean, “liberal education”? Today, I will draw upon two scholars whose thoughts on this topic have inspired my own. For John Dewey the mission of liberal education is nothing less than the reproduction of democratic society. Drawing on a long lineage of thinkers in some sense going back to the Greeks, Dewey acutely grasps that for democracy to flourish a society requires a citizenry that is first, sophisticated enough to be able to engage in deliberation about public policy formation, second, skilled in the arts of communicating across differences, since that is the very nature of democratic deliberation, and third, sufficiently equal in power and access to social goods that deliberation can be fully representative. For Dewey, the goal of liberal education is the preparation of a citizenry for democracy.

The philosopher and legal scholar, Martha Nussbaum, defines liberal education by reaching back to the Stoics. The project of liberal education is, as she says, the cultivation of humanity. In a book by that title and elsewhere, Nussbaum advocates an education designed to produce “citizens of the world,” people of cosmopolitan subjectivity, who see a world full of equally valuable human persons, all of whom have a claim on our sense of moral obligations.¹ Nussbaum believes that the task of liberal education is to enable us to imagine the realities of peoples distant in time and space, to understand both what humanity has in common but also the variety of ways in which it manifests itself. Through the reading of history, literature, and poetry, by the study of the social and natural sciences, liberally educated persons develop empathy without borders.

¹ Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Harvard University Press, 1997)

For these reasons Nussbaum believes our mission as a liberal arts college is to cultivate an ideal of cosmopolitanism and teach the critical reasoning skills that liberate one from ethnocentrism or from the kind of patriotism that says “My country, right or wrong.”

The Privilege of Liberal Education

Given what I have said, it follows that young people everywhere deserve the opportunity that liberal education provides, the opportunity to prepare themselves for effective participation in a democratic society, the opportunity to cultivate and nurture their humanity, mentored by erudite and caring faculty.

Liberal education should not be a rare privilege, but it is. These four years are a time set aside for rigorous, relatively undistracted inquiry, for reflection, for intellectual, aesthetic, and ethical development, in short for liberal learning. To be able to spend these years engaged in this project is a privilege a fraction of a fraction of your global peers have access to.

Consider some compelling numbers:

- There are approximately 6.5 billion people in the world today, and though it is tough to get a handle on this, probably around a billion of these are roughly your age peers, 18-22 years old. In the U.S. alone there are approximately 20 million in this age group.
- Out of this billion people, out of this 20 million people, how many have access to the kind of education you are now engaged in? Around 350,000. Perhaps that sounds like a lot, but it means that you are part of a very privileged group of your global peers.
 - Let’s play with those numbers a bit in a little illustration. If all of the people assembled here today – look around - represented all of your college-age peers just in the U.S., how many of us would be attending a selective liberal arts college? Around two dozen of us, at most.

- If we think globally, it is hard to illustrate. Why? Because if those assembled represented the world's college-age population, not even ½ of one of us would be attending a selective liberal arts college. Maybe – maybe – three of us would be pursuing some form of higher education.

What is my point? Luke 12:48: "to whom much is given, much is required." With privilege comes responsibility: the responsibility to pursue this opportunity with seriousness of purpose, to use this time well.

Students, I know it doesn't feel this way to you right now. I know many of you certainly don't feel privileged; you worry about the debt you have taken on to pursue a degree, you worry about the competitive environment of your chosen career path, and as some of the first-year students have been reporting in their discussions of *The Riverkeepers*, your sense of political agency and efficacy is fragile. Still, compared to your peers, both national and global, the prospects you have, and the capacity for your choices to have influence, means that you occupy a position in the global order that you need to understand.

The world is a place full of problems to be solved, and they create a context of urgency for our work here. Your education isn't just about you; it is about your role in the world's affairs and your capacity to create positive change. In one of my favorite lyrics of Stevie Wonder he says: "Change your words into truth and then change that truth into love and maybe our children's grandchildren and their grandchildren will tell."² Each of these transformations, changing one's words into truth and changing truth into love, is enormously difficult, but this is one way of describing our work here: discerning what is true and putting that truth to work in the world motivated by compassion.

Wooster is one of the finest, resource-rich liberal arts colleges in the country, and you will leave here with the

² Stevie Wonder, "As", *Songs in the Key of Life* (Motown, 1976)

knowledge, skills, and credentials to have what we might call “social access.” You will go on to graduate schools, and professional schools, and to jobs that situate you to have significant influence on this and future generations, not just locally, but globally.

When you graduate you will be part of an educated elite; I do not use this term as praise, but as fact. As graduates of Wooster you will be members of a transnational, multicultural cosmopolitan class. In time, you will have access to leadership positions, to the ranks of those conceptualizing and influencing the direction of globalization. Some of you will be stockbrokers, business executives, and corporate lawyers. Others will be U.N. workers, Peace Corps volunteers; some will work for NGO’s, or environmental or social activist groups. If history is any guide, many of you will yourselves be college professors. Others still will be teachers, lobbyists, artists, and writers. Whatever you do, you will be voters, consumers, and, yes, stockholders.³

What this means is that we all – students, faculty, staff - have a profound social obligation, to this and future generations, to graduate alumni who can and will use their access and influence to work for social justice, environmental sustainability, and world peace. Through our work, we are all accountable to the near and long term future of humanity.

Responsibilities of Being a Student

In every culture, every age, being a student is a noble social position. But it comes with expectations. What are the responsibilities of being a student given what I have said thus far? I will mention three.

First, as students you have the responsibility to seek knowledge and cultivate understanding. These are not passive endeavors. A liberal education is not something we or anyone

³ Many of the ideas here are drawn from a body of work published with my co-author, Eve Walsh Stoddard. See especially “Peripheral Visions: Towards a Geoethics of Citizenship” (*Liberal Education*, Vol. 89, No. 3, Summer 2003, pp. 44-51) and *Globalizing Knowledge: Connecting International and Intercultural Studies* (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 1999).

else can give you. It is not something you get just by showing up. Seeking knowledge and cultivating understanding are hard tasks and call for all of the focus, determination, and seriousness of purpose you can muster.

Let me comment on a couple critical dimensions of this work. You cannot overestimate the importance of your relationship with your faculty. I have deep and abiding respect for faculty and I encourage you to do the same. They have dedicated their lives – and their considerable intelligence – to the pursuit of knowledge and the cultivation of understanding, and through their dedication they have developed expertise. Their passion for their expertise – whether it is a body of literature, a period of history, a science, a theorem, or an art - doesn't just mean they know a whole lot about it, it also means that they have deep insight into why it matters. Further, by pursuing their vocation at Wooster, they have signaled that they have a commitment to teaching. They are here to share their passion, knowledge, and insight with you, so that you can pick it up, carry it on, and contribute to it.

There is something a little misleading about the name of Wooster's hallmark program, the I.S., or Independent Study. You see, on the one hand, an undertaking such as this calls for independent critical thinking, creativity, and motivation, but on the other hand it is an undertaking that cannot possibly be done by oneself. Epistemologically, there is nothing independent about study. It would be at least as accurate to call the program "Interdependent Study", since all liberal inquiry is relational and dialogic.

Your I.S., as with all of your learning here, emerges from the network of relationships you have, not just with your faculty, though these are fundamental, but also with your peers, with the coaches and counselors and conductors and student life staff. But as a student you are also in a relationship with the authors of your books, your musical scores, your scripts, and the ideas, theories, postulates, facts

and formulas you encounter in your studies. This is what is meant when we say that knowledge is socially constructed.

The social, relational nature of liberal inquiry is why diversity matters so much in our enterprise. The more homogeneous a community of learners, the less rich the ferment for inquiry. Part of the meaning of “liberal” in liberal education has to do with liberating oneself from the confines of one’s personal experience, and there is no better way to do this than by learning to listen and speak and collaborate with those who come to the project with different backgrounds, different identities, and different existential commitments.

We would not be able to go about our business of liberal inquiry if we had a campus of faculty and students who represent only one point of view. That is never the case, of course. But put in the positive, the knowledge we create together is made more complete and reliable with the more points of view we bring into the mix. It is through the very process of triangulating different points of view, understanding the differences and seeking the possibility of reconciliation, that new knowledge is created. This is why diversity is constitutive of excellence for a liberal arts college. And this is why we have an obligation as an institution concerned with excellence to strive to become a much more diverse and inclusive community of learners. The mandate is implicit in our mission.

It follows that there are correlate responsibilities of students. Since liberal inquiry is essentially social, and since social relations are possible only in and through communication, you have the responsibility to develop your skills in writing, in speaking, but perhaps most of all in listening. Listen for differences. Seek them out. Don’t surround yourself only with those who see the world as you do. Each person here knows things you don’t and has perspectives on things that will be new to you, that will challenge you. It is

the multiplicity of points of view that makes truth a collaborative project.

We do not have good models of listening, of collaborative inquiry, in popular culture. Television talk shows, radio shows, even shows that represent themselves as news portray different points of view screaming past each other. The necessary virtue of real listening “is a disposition not to meet differences with a desire to win, to have one’s own point of view triumph over others, but instead to meet differences as a project” to be engaged.⁴

The second responsibility you have as students is to make meaning of your liberal learning. Meaning is the narrative that gives purpose to knowledge and understanding. If you haven’t, I encourage you to read *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre. In this work of existential literature, the protagonist slowly comes to realize that purpose and meaning are not given; they are not inherent in reality. Unmediated reality is devoid of meaning; it is absurd. When the protagonist glimpses this realization, he is overcome with waves of nausea: vertigo caused by meaninglessness.

But the nausea is also a reaction to the burden of ultimate freedom. If meaning is not given, then if it is to exist, it is the responsibility of each person to create it out of nothing. Sartre talks about life as a project; it is the responsibility of each person to bring meaning to experience, to create a coherent narrative as an act of will.

This is how you should face the project of your liberal education. Without a sense of purpose, a project, you can move through the curriculum, checking off requirements and mistakenly think that you are fulfilling the mission of this college. There is a character like this in Sartre’s novel. He seeks erudition by reading his way through the library alphabetically. Perhaps my favorite book on liberal education is the edited volume of essays by bell hooks called, *Teaching to*

⁴ Cornwell and Stoddard, “Peripheral Visions,” p.50.

Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom. Like Sartre, she sees the project of education as coming to terms with the full weight and responsibility of freedom, not to vote, or to speak, or to buy things, but the freedom to create meaning in a world that is otherwise meaningless.

The third responsibility of being a student is to put your learning to work in the world. This is how you justify the resources invested in your education. This is how you pay off on the privilege of these four years. You need not wait until you graduate. The College offers numerous opportunities for you to engage in service locally, nationally, and internationally. But in closing I want to share with you a couple of portals where you can put your learning to work right now.

I am encouraging you to become intellectual activists. I am encouraging you, by your own will, to reach beyond this campus community and engage in global, collaborative knowledge formation as a kind of activism to address the world's most pressing issues.

Let me show you a couple ways you might do this. I am very interested in the democratic potential of cyberspace, especially in what is made possible through what we call social software. For decades we have theorized about the social construction of knowledge, about how collaboration and innovation so often come together. In the early 1950s, the philosopher Karl Jaspers wrote in his famous text, *Way to Wisdom*, that "the truth begins with two." And yet, until the advent of social software, true collaboration, dynamic collaboration, collaboration not between two but among several...or hundreds...or thousands...was slow and difficult if not impossible.

What I am talking about is Web 2.0, the whole world of blogs, wikis, podcasts, tagging, folksonomies, and social bookmarking. From where I sit these modes and methods of socially constructing knowledge are of huge significance to the

mission of liberal arts colleges, and you, students, are ideally positioned to engage them.

Here are some claims I would make about Web 2.0. It repositions students so that you are not producing knowledge for the consumption and judgment of your professors or campus peers alone, but instead for engagement with a local or global community of knowers. These technologies enable those who use them to interact with a vast diversity of people globally around the most critical issues of our time. Social software decenters and distributes authority and expertise; it accelerates criticism and innovation by orders of magnitude over traditional scholarship; and it quite thoroughly blurs any line between the academy and the global public.

I want to show you a couple of web sites. Don't worry about the addresses right now; I will make them available to you later. The first of which is called "Taking IT Global" (takingitglobal.org). This is an on-line, transnational NGO by and for young people to engage global issues. There are segments with member-posted reports and action plans on global environmental issues, peace and conflict, poverty and globalization, social justice and human rights. The site connects young people around the world with one another and serves as a nexus of communication where they can share their views on how these issues look from where they all stand. It is a kind of distributed, yet collaborative, global network of knowledge production.

This first screen is an index of global issues that can be used to navigate to a wiki of sorts where you can learn about issues or contribute to the knowledge base.

This second screen is an index of podcasts on global issues or on projects or actions being undertaken to address them. Each podcast has an associated on-line discussion forum.

This third screen is an example of a country site. There is one for every country, and they serve both to inform global

participants about national issues and to help organize local projects and actions within particular countries.

Finally, this screen contains downloads of action guides, which are essentially toolkits for community organizing. So this site connects global youth to one another within their countries and across borders. It is designed to advance understanding and organize activism.

The second web site is called "Dropping Knowledge." It, too, is a web-based NGO. Here is what they say about themselves:

A non-profit initiative, dropping knowledge operates as an international non-governmental organization supporting social change. Using advanced web technology the initiative links the voices of individuals and organizations. Through multimedia-based campaigns and events dropping knowledge functions as a social amplifier, offers uncensored knowledge and invites people to take responsible action within an international network. The web-platform enables the global public to ask and answer questions, exchange ideas, and start initiatives around the most pressing issues of our time.

This screen is an index of YouTube-like video podcasts where folks from around the world have posted their questions about critical issues and ideas. It includes postings from a group of students in Mumbai, from Laurie Anderson, Arundhati Roy, a hotel concierge in Hanoi, and Daryl Hannah.

What I find most interesting about this project is its core concept. The project and the site are built on the premise that the first step in advancing global understanding is the posing of critical and well-formed questions: a premise shared by our own I.S. methodology. Interpersonal or cross-cultural dialogue are modes of inquiry, but the most important intellectual task is the formation of the problems, the issues, the questions to be examined.

This visual browse tool enables you to navigate your way to global dialogues taking place on all of these issues.

Conclusion

My conclusion, then, is this. I am not suggesting that cyberspatial global engagement is any substitute for the very intimate business of liberal inquiry we practice here. Nor is it a substitute for local activism, for testing one's beliefs and values by putting them to work in our local community. What I am suggesting is that advancing understanding, making meaning, and ultimately cultivating humanity are, in their essence, social projects that are global in scope.

Therefore, my understanding of the mission of The College of Wooster is for us all to be committed to the rigorous work of changing our words into truth through dialogueand then changing that truth into love through civic engagement.

With that, with pride and gratitude, I hereby convene the 138th year of The College of Wooster.