



On Purpose:

Independent Minds, Working Together

Convocation Address

2009

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Introduction

Welcome. Welcome alumni, members of the community, and guests. Welcome faculty and staff of the College. Welcome students. Today we begin, officially and in earnest, a new year of liberal inquiry. It is an honor, a privilege, and a joy to launch our noble work together.

Let me extend a special welcome to those students, faculty, and administrative staff members for whom this is their **first** new beginning at The College of Wooster. Know that you are joining a community of learners that has been committed to the enterprise of liberal education for 140 years.

Today I will share thoughts about our mission, our common purpose as a liberal arts college. I think it is important to remain

mindful that our work here together is a **social investment into the future**, not just the future of our students, but of global civil 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 important work in the only way it can be done: **together.**

Every once in a while, an organization like Wooster which have been around for a long time needs to ask itself existential questions, questions that help sharpen our shared identity and reason for being: Who are we? Why are we here? What is our purpose? Is what we do consistent with what we are here to do?

This coming year will be a year of planning for The College of Wooster. We will involve students, faculty, staff, trustees, and alumni in a process that will clarify our vision of the future of this distinguished college, setting goals for ourselves, articulating aspirations about what we want for the college, and how we can continue to improve and thrive.

The foundation of strategic planning is a shared sense of identity and purpose. We can only agree on where we want to go and how we hope to get there if our values are clear and

consistent, and if we all share common assumptions about who we are, why we exist, and what we are trying to achieve.

Therefore, I have two objectives in this Convocation address. First, I will offer a re-statement of the College's mission, not as the final word on the matter, but as a way of beginning a conversation about our sense of purpose. I will also talk about what I believe are the core values that govern and inspire our work together.

My second objective in these remarks speaks directly to students. As you listen to the core values and mission of The College of Wooster, I ask you to reflect on the extent to which they resonate with your own purpose for being here. Is your reason for being here the same as the College's? Compatible? Harmonious? Or are they discontinuous in some ways?

The Mission of Wooster Circa 2009

I begin, then, with the mission statement. I hope this will sound familiar, obvious even. It makes no radical departures from our tradition, but instead seeks simply to capture the essential qualities and character of The College of Wooster, drawn from our history, our current practices, and the stories we tell about ourselves. It is not meant to signal any basic change in who we

are or what we do, but to express the essence of the Wooster I have come to know and love since my arrival.

The College of Wooster provides a rigorous and dynamic education in the liberal arts and sciences to students in preparation for productive lives as responsible global citizens. Wooster graduates creative and independent thinkers with refined communication skills and exceptional abilities to research complex questions, analyze problems, and create solutions.

That is the whole of it. It is short and simple to say, but what it promises is profound and difficult to realize. Let me unpack its elements.

First, it declares that we are a liberal arts college. As I have said before on this occasion, there is no one here who does not want, or value, a good job, a meaningful and prosperous livelihood. The good news is that an outstanding liberal education, while it is a substantial investment by any measure, is the best preparation for working one's way to the most meaningful and prosperous livelihoods in today's global economy. But our work here is not about job training, but something much more fundamental and profound. This is something of an irony of liberal education; it is the most effective launch pad for access to

leadership and a rewarding career and yet that is not the first purpose of our mission.

Now, I suggest that Wooster's program of liberal education is both rigorous and dynamic, and it needs to be both. Why rigorous? A liberal education is not something you can buy, or that can be bestowed upon you; it cannot be achieved easily or quickly. It is difficult; it calls for commitment, persistence, and a willingness to stay with a program of study that is not always immediately gratifying or stimulating. In this way, it runs counter to the trends of our times, where speed and immediate gratification sometimes substitute as standards of quality.

Further, Wooster's program of liberal education is both traditional and dynamic, as it must be. We persist in our belief that the best education calls for breadth, depth, and integration of knowledge and the cultivation of skills in inquiry, reasoning, rhetoric, and creative expression. But as knowledge changes, as the modes of inquiry and communication are transformed by technology and the dynamics of globalization, as our understanding of the world, both natural and social, becomes more complex and nuanced, so must we change both what we teach and how we teach. Liberal education is not a dead or static

endeavor; it calls for continuous innovation and constant rethinking.

I submit that the purpose of liberal education is to prepare students for productive lives as responsible global citizens. What do I mean here? Liberal education is an American invention, the purpose of which from the outset has been to equip citizens with the knowledge and skills they need to participate in a vibrant democracy. I believe the globalization of culture, politics, civil society, and economies means that our students will participate in a public life that is not bounded by the nation. They are, as Martha Nussbaum puts it, “citizens of the world.”

I have a great deal of affinity for her views on liberal education. According to Nussbaum, the project of liberal education is nothing less than the **cultivation of humanity**. In a book by that title and elsewhere, Nussbaum advocates an education designed to produce citizens of cosmopolitan subjectivity, who see a world full of equally valuable human persons, all of whom have a claim on our sense of moral obligation.

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, through the study of the social and natural sciences, liberal education is the cultivation of all that it means to be human: to reason, to feel, to seek answers, to solve problems, to care, to love, to understand, to express, and most of all, to act.

To continue, The College of Wooster graduates creative and independent thinkers. We are distinguished for this. As one college guide puts it, Wooster does not teach students **what** to think, but **how** to think. In this way, we seek both to uphold and to cultivate freedom of inquiry. Sometimes students will make the mistake of trying to divine what they believe the professors wants to hear. I promise you, this is always wrongheaded. In every discipline, professors at Wooster want to see careful reasoning, good evidence well deployed, and each student's earnest attempt to articulate her own grasp of an issue or text or problem.

Wooster graduates are also distinguished for their exceptional abilities to research complex questions, analyze problems, create solutions, and express insight. Nowhere else has as effectively or thoroughly used the mentoring of undergraduate students in the process of research and creative expression to

achieve the learning outcomes that distinguish our graduates. At Wooster, you develop the skills to become an active **producer** of knowledge, instead of being a passive **consumer** of someone else's knowledge. At Wooster, you study other people's research en route to conducting **your own**. This is a signature excellence of The College of Wooster; it is what we do that makes us who we are.

As evidence of my claims, let me quote from a Wooster alumna, who is also the parent of one of our first year students. She wrote me on the occasion of preparing to deliver her daughter here to begin her own liberal education. She writes, reflecting on my talk to prospective students and their families:

In your talk you referred to how students' lives were changed in the four years at Wooster, particularly in the process of Independent Study.... I was a philosophy major, and...my thesis advisor and mentor was Dr. Rich Bell. What an amazing teacher. He inspired me not just to become a good scholar but to strive to be a good person, to live a life of integrity and compassion, and to find a life's work that had meaning and passion.

I felt that I had only begun when the Independent Study was finished. (After graduating) I went on to Yale

Divinity School. But the pull to "do something" was strong, and I left after a year to become a nurse practitioner. My husband, also a graduate of Wooster, and I then worked with migrant farm workers for five years, and then both went to medical school at Harvard. We completed our residencies in 1996 and returned to work with farm workers as physicians. In 2000 I came to teach (medicine) and am now the Chief of General Medicine (at the university hospital where I work).

I was recently asked to apply for a grant...on wisdom in medicine. ... I realized that this was essentially an extension of my Independent Study from years before! I ran down to the basement to find the box that had all my old papers in it, found my I.S. and read it cover to cover. It wasn't quite as good as I had remembered, but it was good enough to get me started on the grant, and it became the foundation for a 1 million dollar grant to study the development of wisdom out of adversity. The study was funded last year. The end products will include two training DVDs and a PBS documentary on coping with adversity.

So I suppose that I am still on that journey that began with my I.S., and the College of Wooster continues to

change my life! Rich Bell, Ron Hustwit and others worked some kind of magic with me that year, **taking me from someone who could describe what other people thought to someone who could think for herself.** I am so grateful that my daughter will have the same opportunity.

My daughter had her choice of colleges. Wooster came out on top hands down, over and above many very prestigious places. Thank you for all that you and your colleagues do for your students. You are changing lives every day.

Core Values and Institutional Integrity

One of the things that attracted me to Wooster, and I will bet attracted many of you, too, is its fundamental integrity; we are a place that does what we say we do. What are the core values that hold the place together and govern our shared pursuits? What are the ideas that we, as a community, hold true? Again, more to begin a conversation about these questions than to tender any conclusion, I would offer the following:

- **Independence of Thought:** We take seriously the motto that we are a community of independent minds, working together. We place the highest value on the free exchange of different points of view, vigorously champion academic

freedom, and seek to sustain a campus culture where the understanding of each is made more complete through an on-going process of dialogue with others who think differently.

- **Intellectual Honesty and Academic Rigor:** As a community of learners, we hold ourselves to high standards of sound evidence, careful reasoning, proper attribution, and intellectual integrity in all activities of teaching, learning, research, and governance.
- **Social Responsibility:** Within the campus community we uphold the Wooster Ethic, a commitment to academic and personal integrity and a culture of honesty and trust. We recognize the privilege of being able, collectively, to pursue the mission of the College, and therefore we seek to extend the benefits of learning beyond the campus and beyond ourselves, endeavoring to analyze problems, create solutions, and contribute to the welfare of humanity and the environment.
- **Diversity and Inclusivity:** As a college that changes lives, we welcome students from a wide variety of backgrounds and starting places, so long as they have the capacity and seriousness of purpose to engage our mission. We believe

that excellence in liberal education is only possible in a community of learners that includes members who bring a diversity of identities and beliefs to our common purpose. I am sure that these will be revised, made more accurate and elegant, as we discuss them as the first step in our planning effort this year. As I said, building a consensus about our mission and values is the critical first step in developing a vision for our future.

Alignment: Are we all here for the same reason?

This last section of my remarks is specifically directed to students. My question to you is this: does the mission of The College of Wooster, what I am suggesting as our core purpose, our reason for being, align with your **own** purpose, your own reason for being here?

I am encouraging you to develop in yourself one of the hallmarks of a liberally educated person: **a commitment to intentionality**. I am encouraging you to question the purpose of your own work here. What are you trying to accomplish? Why are you here? Do your reasons, values, and goals align with Wooster's?

I have many favorite thinkers, but one of them is Jean Paul Sartre. I recommend to you his novel, *Nausea*. In this work of existential literature, the protagonist slowly comes to realize that

purpose and meaning are not inherent in reality: the opposite, in fact. Unmediated reality is devoid of meaning; it is absurd. When the protagonist glimpses this truth, he is overcome with waves of nausea: vertigo caused by having no direction that is fixed or given.

But the nausea is also caused by his grasp of what follows from the fact that one's purpose is not given, one's meaning not provided. This realization unmasks the burden of ultimate freedom. If one's purpose is not given, then if it is to exist, one must create it out of nothing. Sartre talks about life as a project; it is the responsibility of each agent to bring meaning to experience, **to create a coherent narrative as an act of will.**

This is how I would urge each of you to face the project of your liberal education. Without your own sense of purpose, the meaning we intend in our curriculum might hold no meaning for you. Moving though it can leave you like the autodidact in Sartre's novel, who seeks erudition by reading his way through the library alphabetically.

Conversely, if you seek clarity within yourself, if you craft, scrutinize, and revise your own strong sense of purpose, you will have a fundamentally different kind of relationship with the faculty, and really, have a fundamentally different relation with

the College. Your efforts will be aligned with our mission. You will be a producer of knowledge, not a passive consumer. You will not risk drifting through here, fulfilling requirements that mean nothing to you, and collecting “collegiate experiences” as an entitlement of passage.

Instead, your liberal education will be your own; you will create its meaning through your own act of will. Further, and this is the point about the alignment between Wooster’s mission and values and your own sense of purpose, if you do this you will be here for the very reason this college exists. **In realizing your purpose, you realize ours.**

Therefore, with great respect for our common purpose and profound optimism for our common future, the 140th year of liberal education at The College of Wooster is hereby convened.