



EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: A CALL FOR CREATIVITY, LEADERSHIP, AND INNOVATION

Opening Remarks by Don M. Randel for the Inaugural Weekend Symposium, Saturday, November 3, 2007

We celebrate at this symposium the inauguration of a new president for Oberlin by discussing Oberlin's most important activity, namely education. Naturally, we are inclined to look forward. We are encouraged in this by being only seven years into a new century, since we cannot give up our fascination with the number 10, about which the Arabs taught us a very long time ago. Everything conspires to make us declare that things will now be different—indeed, that they must be different. We will frame an account of the past to support this view. We will warn of the perils that lie ahead. And we will declare the ways in which we will be their equal.

Historians (and politicians) have a suitcase full of tropes on which to draw for such purposes. I am reminded of the title of a friend's novel: The Lies Boys Tell. There was, for example, a golden age in the past from which we have grievously fallen and to the ideals of which we must now return. Or, we stand on the brink of disaster brought on by a failure to recognize the evils at work around us or the change that is about to overwhelm us or the opportunities that fate sometimes thrusts on people as clever as we are.

Without wishing for a moment to detract from the celebratory character of this occasion, I suggest that we try for a bit to avoid some of the tropes that often attend such events. I must warn you, however, that you are listening to a former university president and that all such people (unlike newly inaugurated presidents, of course) should be listened to with some skepticism. For example, if one perseveres to page 310 of Derek Bok's book titled Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should be Learning More, one finds the sentence, "It may seem surprising that a former college president would write an entire book on the weaknesses of American undergraduate education." One may be reminded of the recently retired chairman of the Federal Reserve Board and thus inclined to say, "And now he tells us!"

Perhaps the greatest peril to be insured against is the pursuit of novelty for its own sake. Even colleges and universities, which ought to be the institutions best able to resist this pursuit, are often drawn in to it. This is because we prize originality in the work of both students and faculty. And we like reading about ourselves in the newspapers, which means, given the state of newspapers these days, that we need to be the first to have done this or that or to have proclaimed this or that. But some of the things that matter most do not in fact change all that rapidly. This is especially true of some of what matters most in education. Hence, in discussing education for the 21st century, we will want to think some about education for any century whatever.

Let's begin by thinking about the past for a bit. The first point to bear in mind is that there never was a golden age in education or in much of anything else. All of us have our fond memories, to be sure. A recent book on the current failures of higher education begins with a lovely example in which the author describes taking a seminar with the chairman of the philosophy department at a well-known New England college. I change some of the names to protect the innocent:

The seminar was titled "Existentialism." Most of the other students were juniors and seniors, and I felt a bit over my head. The readings were difficult. We read Kierkegaard's Either/Or, Sartre's Being and Nothingness, and The Mystery of Being by the great Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel. We met once a week, in Professor X's home at the end of Main Street, a few blocks from campus. Each session lasted three hours. We broke in the middle for tea, and there were always fresh cookies (courtesy of Mrs. X). The fall came on, the days shortened, the air grew chilly. The [hills] were covered with scarlet and gold. When we arrived at Professor X's home, late in the afternoon, we



found a fire going, and his two golden retrievers asleep like bookends beside the hearth. [Anthony T. Kronman, Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life, pp. 4-5.]

Who could want to disturb such a memory—perhaps by inquiring about the racial and ethnic makeup of those seated around that fire or about the talents and professional options for Mrs. X, who seems to have played a crucial role in Professor X's pedagogical effectiveness with his admiring students? The mere suggestion of such an inquiry would prompt from this particular author a charge of political correctness, a topic to which I will return. Suffice it to say that a good deal of the mischief and misfortune in the world today has its roots in this and earlier pasts, and some of it could even be said to have been caused by people who, in the last century, attended or were closely associated with famous New England, Mid-Atlantic, and California colleges and universities. Hence, the fact that I and many others have warm memories of our undergraduate days is neither a reason to suppose that the past was ideal so far as the state of the world is concerned nor a reason to suppose that the present embodies a decline that imperils our future in the new century.

It has always been possible to get a very good education, even at some of the most famous institutions, I might say. But it has also always been possible for fortunate young people who were given this opportunity to waste it, and many have. For example, it was even possible back in the twentieth century to graduate from such an institution and go on to attain high office without seeming to know anything about any other part of the world. That cannot strictly be said, however, to have been the fault of the institution and its undergraduate curriculum in this or any other such case. This suggests the possibility that higher education cannot by itself do what needs doing, and it never could. Our students have parents, they went to schools, and they live in a culture (largely being created and sold to them by grownups) that powerfully affect what we will be able to accomplish with them in our institutions. Thus, although I have no doubt that higher education is the single most important industry in the United States, we are often in some danger of over-selling it. And we sometimes try to sell it in the wrong terms.

If we begin by asking the question “What is education for?” we are likely to get off on the wrong foot. This suggests an instrumental view of education and the pursuit of knowledge that is at its heart. In that sense, education should not be seen as a preparation for life as, say, a taxpayer—the common denominator of all professions. Education is a way of life. Hence, the discussion about what undergraduates ought to do in college should not begin with the list of things that we will want them to do in life, even, I would insist, if that list is made up of high-level things such as “communicate,” “have high ethical standards,” “be a good citizen,” “live in a technological age,” “function in a global society,” to say nothing of “earn a living,” as necessary as that will inevitably turn out to be. There is no doubt about the very substantial monetary return on investment in higher education. But this should be understood as a by-product of the deeper return that comes from making a life as opposed to making a living. And making a life is making a work of art whose meaning derives from an act of will. A. R. Ammons's poem Garbage includes lines that capture this:

...art makes shape, order, meaning,
purpose where there was none, or none discernible,

none derivable: life, too, if it is to have meaning,
must be made meaningful; if it is to

have purpose, its purpose must be divined, invented,
manifested, held to....



All very well and good, you may say. But don't undergraduates need to know certain things, and shouldn't they be taking courses with certain words in the title like "science," "globalization," "ethics," and so on? Beware "how to" courses, I say, even with the most elevated titles. If the future politician or businessperson needs to take a course with "ethics" in the title, it is probably already too late. And it turns out to be notoriously hard to make the list of those facts, terms, courses. The biggest danger comes in thinking that there is some closed list of facts or books that everyone should master. The goal ought to be to make clear that there can never be a list that will be a sufficient basis for the life worth living. In that sense, I often think that the thing we teach best is lifelong regret—regret that you didn't get as much out of college as you should have, regret at every stage of life that you don't know half as much as you would like to know or ought to know. What we want to give students, then, is an experience that will further their ability to make that work of art that is their life. For this, however, we need some raw material to work with. What is that?

Anyone who has ever held a newborn child, perhaps one who is still slathered in vernix caseosa, knows that they are born hard-wired with curiosity. Anyone who has ever watched a young child at play knows that they are hard-wired with imagination. The problem is that schools—with help from others, sometimes even parents—proceed to try to beat these qualities out of them. There is no excuse for the fact that the biggest single problem in schools is boredom. Yet, if we were to say what were the most important qualities to be sought in students entering higher education they would be relentless curiosity and boundless imagination, coupled with an ability for and inclination to hard work. Assured of these ingredients, there is no limit to what can be accomplished in higher education—and in life. Absent these ingredients, the challenge for higher education is daunting and puts higher education into the mode of competing as just another kind of entertainment for young people while we wait for them to grow up.

Any critique of higher education early in the new century does need to take account of what higher education is given to work with and the environment in which it is obliged to work. Consumerism is a very big part of this environment. It is now somewhat difficult to say out loud that there is a reason why some people are called the teachers and other people are called the students. In some fields this is easier than in others. Oberlin here has the great advantage of a strong presence of musical performance at the highest level on its campus. Here is a field in which deciding to do what your teacher says and deciding to work hard make all the difference.

The sciences, too, would seem to make this clear. If you want to be a physicist, you have to know and be able to do certain things. Unfortunately, this may sometimes set to one side the reasons for wanting to be a physicist in the first place or the reasons the nation thinks it important—to a modest degree, to be sure—that there be physicists. These reasons are too often the contributions of physics to the gross domestic product or the contributions of physics to the national defense. No one should want to be a physicist for these reasons alone, as significant as they may be, for they overlook why one might want to be a human being.

Much of what we contend with in higher education, in any case, is a culture in which young people expect to be both programmed to get ahead or win in some competition and to be entertained. Unfortunately, some of these horses simply refuse to drink. And it does no good to blame colleges and universities for this, as if certain expectations had not been encouraged long before students arrive on campus. This is not to say that colleges and universities could not do a great deal more about making the culture of campus life resistant to what surrounds them rather than complicit in fomenting some of the anti-intellectual character of America. For a start, intercollegiate athletics is in great measure a national academic scandal, even in some small colleges, though it need not be. This affects not only the athletes themselves but also the atmosphere that surrounds them and the behaviors that this atmosphere encourages. But our students did not learn about this culture on our campuses. They came well prepared for this just as many of them did with their problems of substance abuse. It sometimes seems as if colleges and universities are expected to act in loco parentis for parents that the students never really had in the



first place. Too many parents would like higher education to accomplish with their children what they were never able to accomplish themselves. The high cost of higher education sometimes converts this hope into a sense of entitlement.

The current critique of higher education—which now goes back even decades—sometimes makes common cause with this expectation that higher education can and should do it all. The problem is often said to be the faculty. Some have said this in the most vicious terms, and even Derek Bok very politely says as much. What is the matter with the faculty?

For some of the critics it is all about research. One writer describes research as the snake in the garden of a proper undergraduate education. Faculty members in this view care only about their research on steadily less relevant subjects and neglect the intellectually hungry undergraduates who would sit at their feet (between their golden retrievers). For readers of Middlemarch, it is as if all of the faculty were Casaubons and all of the undergraduates Dorotheas.

Research is not the problem. And it does not even make a good surrogate for the problems that do exist. For one thing, the conflict between research and undergraduate teaching, if such there be, exists in only a relatively small number of institutions in the country. In the rest, and even in some of the institutions where the conflict might be thought to be a problem, the faculty is so burdened with the responsibilities of undergraduate teaching, especially in the humanities and social sciences, that there is simply no time to pursue research in any sustained way. One only hopes that such faculty continue to aspire to research and keep alive the quality of mind that engages in research.

Let us take the case of a faculty member who teaches in the kind of freshman humanities seminar program that now exists on many campuses and in which I myself have taught. And let us imagine a week early in the semester when a writing assignment of a mere two to three pages is given in a class with a statutory maximum enrollment of seventeen. Writing “B, Good” at the top of a paper accomplishes nothing. To read and comment thoughtfully on such a paper will require as much as thirty minutes. With seventeen papers, this is an eight-hour day by itself. Then to have any real effect, it will be necessary to have a conference with each student. This is where one can seriously engage what matters most, namely the quality of thought, the structure of argument, the originality that makes for good writing worthy of the name. This can scarcely be managed in less than thirty minutes per student, and it is likely to take somewhat more. At best this will require another whole day—for a short paper early in the term. Then there is still the need to prepare the three or so hours of classroom time with the class as a whole. And of course there is another course or two to be taught at the same time. And there are committee meetings, not to mention walking the golden retrievers and baking the cookies, since your spouse also teaches and has all of these same duties.

This is part of why college is so expensive, and it helps to explain why Johnny can’t write. The typical high school English teacher may have five or six sections of thirty students each. For such a teacher to assign one or a couple of pages, never mind the kind of paper that colleges might hope that students had written in high school, is to ask for a crushing amount of work in which it is bound to feel like being in the emergency room of a hospital at the time of a major disaster.

If you think that college is too expensive, ask yourself what you would do if your child had a serious medical or legal problem. You would not shop for services based on price, even though paying for the services might impose a hardship. Yet your investment in your child’s education is likely to be the single most important investment you will make in that child, barring a truly serious medical or legal problem. And a young assistant professor who attends your child in college will make about half or less of what a beginning associate in any law firm of consequence would make with a good deal less training and experience.

Research is not only not the problem, it can be part of what is best about undergraduate education. To be trained in research and to engage in it is, as much as anything, to question received opinion. A faculty member who does not bring that spirit to



bear on the teaching of undergraduates will give them a greatly impoverished experience. And an undergraduate who leaves college without having participated in that spirit will be far behind as an adult in responding to the torrent of change that life will present. Perhaps even more important, such an undergraduate will not be one of those adults who brings about change.

Let me describe my own experience of this from the faculty perspective. Don't worry: I've never had dogs, and for most of my career I didn't have a fireplace either. The best ideas I have ever had as a scholar—the core of published papers that are actually still read and argued about years later—came to me as I prepared an undergraduate class. I would read the existing literature and conclude simply that unwashed but sentient human beings could not possibly believe that what was found there could be an adequate account of the topic. I would need to think up something better. Undergraduates don't know enough not to ask hard questions. They are often more challenging and stimulating than graduate students, who have already begun to be socialized to a discipline and may already be learning things about what established disciplines regard as the legal questions and the illegal questions.

Conveying the spirit of research to undergraduates ought to be a very high priority. Better still is to give them the experience of actually conducting research. For what is research after all? It is making sense out of some body of information—finding or creating meaning where it has not been previously found or made. And what will one be called upon to do throughout life? In instrumental terms, as for example in exercising a profession, it will be to make sense out of information, whether for the sake of formulating a course of action or discovering an opportunity for some altogether new undertaking. In terms of making a life, it will be to make shape and meaning where there was none, or none discernible as Ammons says.

The other matter that is often raised in the context of blaming the faculty for the current ills of higher education is so-called political correctness. Some writers, like the one with the golden retrievers and the tea and cookies, go on at considerable length about how this has brought on the demise of education as it should be. The term has come to be the mindless insult thrown from right to left as if there were no serious questions entailed. For a start, it is important to bear in mind that if the term refers to anything worth discussing, it exists on the, as it were, right every bit as much as on the, as it were, left. Political correctness, in current usage, came to be an issue only when the voices of multiple identities began to assert a right to be heard. The complaint about political correctness is most often the complaint of a voice that thought itself to be the one true voice of mankind. But if this was ever an issue, it is high time we got over it, for it flies in the face of everything we would like now to assert about the need to live in a diverse society and a globalized world. There are clearly multiple identities in the world and in American society, and hence there will necessarily be identity politics of various kinds. One should not doubt that there is an identity politics of white males that is most often simply assumed tacitly rather than articulated. In the struggle between the self and the other, the terms are reversible. All sides are equally capable of excess, and all sides are equally thin-skinned. The time has come to skip the name calling on all sides and recognize that there are many different subject perspectives among us and that education worthy of the name will need to incorporate them all in some way.

This is not the same as saying that we now plunge into a hopeless relativism, a related complaint about higher education in some quarters. A long tradition in American philosophy leading from Pierce and Dewey to Rorty and others takes up relativism and related issues in a serious way that repays study in the present context. But this is a topic for another time.

No, it is not as easy as blaming the faculty for the present or the recent past. But perhaps we should think now instead about the future. What is, after all, different about the twenty-first century that might call for a new kind of education and what would that education be like?

I suppose that what strikes most people as novel about the twenty-first century is new technology and science, with their rate of change, and globalization, whatever that in fact means. To start with technology and science, we can probably all agree that the rate of change has accelerated and that the effects of technological change have been powerfully felt on human health, the



environment, material comforts (for many if by no means all people), ethical questions, communications, and more. None of this is entirely new, however. Human health has been steadily improving for a long time (once again, for many but by no means all of the world's people). It's actually the dirty old technologies that continue to place the greatest stress on the environment. Heat, light, sanitation, and electronic entertainment have steadily improved and reached more and more people (though not everyone). The ethical dilemmas posed by new science and technology today have many precedents that live with us still, whether we speak about what constitutes human life or our greatly enhanced ability to destroy one another. Communications, including travel, have at various times in the past made transforming leaps forward (though the Transportation Safety Authority, working closely with the airline industry, may cause us all to long for a transforming leap backward).

If we take globalization, what is usually meant here is something that comes as a surprise principally to the United States. We have had the luxury of supposing for a long time that we were so big and so powerful that we could define our relationships with the rest of the globe—that we didn't need to know their histories, learn their languages, take account of their cultures in doing our business with them. The Netherlands and a number of other countries that one could easily name, on the other hand, have always known about globalization in this sense. They have had no choice but to find their place in the larger world and prosper in it by learning other people's languages and so forth. The extent of the phenomenon is much greater now, in large part because of the increasingly powerful role played by some of the so-called developing countries. But the phenomenon itself does not come as news to anyone who troubled to think about such things back in the twentieth century.

In thinking about the twenty-first century, let's remember, too, some things that are absolutely not new but that have very strong claims on our attention. People continue to slaughter one another at extraordinary rates over sometimes minute differences in race, religion, ethnicity, and real estate. The record of what we are pleased to call Western Civilization is not proud on this point, and we can ill afford to look askance at others. Given the abundance that the world is capable of producing, an unconscionable number of people live in suffering and ignorance, which ought to be the principal enemies of us all.

Well, then, what is new in the twenty-first century? What we had better hope will be new in the twenty-first century is that we will take a number of not unfamiliar problems very much more seriously than we have in the past. For the stakes are now very much higher. And what will be the ingredients of an education for this century? A great many things that are also not unfamiliar from the kind of education that thoughtful people have long been engaged in trying to provide.

Let's start with science and technology again. No one has seriously proposed in the past that young people should not know something about science and technology. We should include mathematics in this discussion as well, of course. And in fact, students arriving at Oberlin and elsewhere are very much better prepared in these subjects than they were when I was their age. Once in college they are offered a richer array of ways to pursue these fields than ever. And speaking of research and undergraduate teaching, I have known Nobel laureates in chemistry and physics who are as committed to teaching science to nonscientists as one could possibly be.

It's not that we need new objectives here. It's that we need to take these objectives even more seriously and find ever better ways of achieving them. As a nation we need to aspire to having many, many more of our citizens in all kinds of institutions have a serious encounter with science and mathematics. This is not because we will expect all of them fifty years later to be able to solve the same calculus and physics problems that they solved when they were freshmen or because we will expect them ever to be able to penetrate more than the first few pages of Science magazine. It is because we will want to deepen their curiosity about the natural world and enable in them a deeper appreciation of its awesome beauty. This, we can hope, will make them better stewards of that world and, as citizens and voters, more likely to see the value of scientific pursuits. We do, nevertheless, need more of them actually to become physicists, mathematicians, and the like. Here again, it is hardly the fault



of the faculty in the math department that young Americans do not much want to become mathematicians. To change this, higher education will need a lot of help.

The many things related to globalization present a similar picture. Have we not always believed in higher education that it is a good thing to know other languages and cultures and to know our own history in relation to the history of others? But this too we need to take much more seriously, for we are daily witnessing the horrendous price of an appalling ignorance of history and the languages and cultures of other people. In this, too, higher education will need a lot of help. To name but one aspect of this, we will need parents to demand and schools to provide instruction in foreign languages from the very beginning of schooling rather than waiting until the best language-learning years are past.

Then there are those other things that we would like undergraduates to be able to do in the twenty-first century that are clearly and obviously not new. We want them to be able to think effectively about difficult things and, in relation to thinking, to be able to write effectively. (Writing cannot be taught independent of thinking. I used to tell my students in freshman seminars, who were writing about music, that every paper must have at least one real idea, and “I like it” and “I don’t like it” don’t count as ideas.) We want them all to be good citizens, with all that this implies about being well informed and accepting their responsibilities. These have long been thought to be among the objectives of higher education.

To these I would add a couple of things that we have sometimes been a bit squeamish about but that nevertheless underlie some of the things that we have steadily asked undergraduates to do in college. We really would like them to think hard about the meaning of life and about their responsibilities to the people and the world around them. Have we not always told undergraduates that the unexamined life is not worth living? College needs to be that supportive environment in which one can safely look over the edge of the ground on which one stands. I would be prepared to say that you have not had a serious education if at some point you have not wrestled seriously with whether or not there is a god and whether or not you should be a socialist. And however you came out on these questions, you should have been left with some respect for the opposite conclusions.

How will education in the twenty-first century address some of these matters? In many of the ways that we addressed them in the twentieth and would imagine addressing them in any other. I do not believe that we need a new list of courses or set of requirements with currently fashionable words in the title. We need primarily to reaffirm and take ever more seriously things that we have forever believed. We don’t ask young people to read Aristotle because we believe that one should have done this in order to join the ranks of the well-to-do. We read Aristotle and other ancient writers because they continue to speak to us powerfully about the human condition. But there are modern books that do this too and books by people with a variety of skin colors and using a wide variety of languages. We read imaginative literature and we teach and make art not only for amusement and in order to be able to make polite conversation but also because the greatest imaginative literature and the arts in all cultures teach us about ourselves and one another as powerfully as do books of philosophy and psychology.

The raw material of the curriculum will forever grow and must be allowed to grow. But the underlying pursuits will remain largely the same. What will be required if we as people engaged in higher education and we as a nation are to take all of this very much more seriously?

The words taken as the title for this symposium—words deeply rooted in Oberlin’s culture—capture these requirements very well: creativity, leadership, and innovation. Innovation, as I’ve said at some length now, does not mean some radical departure from the values and beliefs that we have always held. It means finding better and better ways to achieve our objectives in higher education. Creativity does not mean something that has not always been at the heart of great teaching and scholarship. It means ensuring that our imaginations are always the equal of new and unimagined challenges and opportunities. Leadership is not something entirely new either if we think about the very considerable contributions of higher



education to society at large. But I do believe that a more active and forceful kind of leadership is called for in higher education today. The classic mistake of intellectuals is to suppose that the truth has its own leavening power—that if we just make plain the facts and clear the arguments based on them, the right things will result. This is unfortunately not entirely true. And the forces in our society and around the world that are not committed to this principle now have more and more powerful and effective means of opposing it.

We cannot suppose that because we are in the truth and beauty business we do not have work to do in asserting its value and in selling it to young and old alike. And I've said that we cannot do everything alone. We need a genuine engagement with society at every level in order to confront the resistance to our enterprise, on which, nevertheless, the future prosperity of the country and indeed of the world now more than ever depends. This resistance is sometimes, though by no means always, innocent enough, and that is perhaps when it is hardest to overcome. It lies in our increasingly short attention span as a nation and in the deep anti-intellectual streak in our history.

Oberlin and institutions like it will need to exercise a kind of sustained and more vigorous leadership than we have known. By this I do not mean only that college and university presidents should be issuing more grand pronouncements. Some critics of higher education would like to blame not only the faculty but also the presidents for not being the leaders they were once thought to be. But the record of the past is much spottier here than such critics usually suppose. What I mean is a kind of leadership that inhabits the community as whole—students, faculty, and staff, including, yes, the president—a community committed to improving the communities around it and beyond it. At the heart of this, however, must be leadership by example—a living demonstration of a commitment to the life of the mind and to the power of ideas as humankind's best hope.