

**THE DISCIPLINE AND THE FURNITURE OF THE MIND  
UW SYSTEM PRESIDENT KEVIN P. REILLY**

Phi Beta Kappa Induction Banquet  
UW-Madison  
Saturday, April 22, 2006

Students, my sincerest congratulations to you on your election to this honor society. Families and friends, if you don't know already, you should know that not just any student is invited to join Phi Beta Kappa. The students you are here to support tonight are among the top five percent of the academic undergraduate ranks at this great university – and there are more than 28,000 undergraduates on this campus! Perhaps more importantly, we're honoring your students for their achievement in liberal arts studies, or what we sometimes call simply "liberal education."

Students, how many of you have been asked by a friend or relative, "But what kind of job can you get with a philosophy degree?" Or, "How's that English degree going to get you employed?" (*show of hands??*)

For those of you looking for a snappy answer to these interrogations, I offer my own academic background as a bit of encouragement. I'm a "dirty BAMAPHD," as one character says to another in Edward Albee's award-winning play, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" By the way, that's one of literature's great titles — certainly better than "The Discipline and the Furniture of the Mind," the title of my talk this evening. But I'll get to the meaning of my title in a few minutes.

That "BAMAPHD," of course, is B.A.-> M.A.-> Ph.D., in my case, all in English. My special areas of teaching and scholarly interest are Irish literature and culture, especially biography and autobiography written about, and by, Irish writers. A liberal arts education, to be sure. And, to the surprise of more than one friend and neighbor — not to mention my mother and father — it's an education that's qualified me — evidently — to be a university president!

One might even argue that close study of Irish writers' life writing — a thoroughly vicious field of inquiry — is a particularly appropriate preparation for my current post. It was Jonathon Swift, the great Anglo-Irish satirist, who said of his countrymen on the backside of that hyphenated identity: "The Irish are a fair people. They never speak well of one another." Whether in Ireland, here, or elsewhere, what better caution to keep in mind for high-level academic administration!

Now, all this might not make me a poster child for liberal education career planning, but it does, I think, give me some credibility to speak to you about this tonight. Loved ones, take heart. Your students' achievements make them among the nation's most eligible, most dynamic, and most-prepared-for-success individuals outside the classroom walls. There's proof. In a previous life, I directed a project in the state of New York that

examined how well university programs prepared those students with Ph.D.'s for employment outside of the academy. I assure you, they were prepared, and our research on the employment available to them filled a whole book.

And students, as alumni of the UW System's flagship campus, you'll be in the company of some of the world's most capable, accomplished, and respected citizens.

There's a wonderful quote that reminds me of the value and importance of a liberal education. It is the inspiration for the title of my talk tonight, from a report issued by then-Yale College in 1830. It reads:

"The two great points to be gained in intellectual culture are the discipline and the furniture of the mind; expanding its powers and storing it with knowledge."

Let me repeat this. (*repeat quote*)

Paints a nice mental picture, doesn't it? The discipline and the furniture of the mind... Discipline, stick-to-it-iveness... I know you've all got that down. You would not be here without it. But furniture? I like where Yale College was going with that... even if it was about the period intellectual furniture of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

More and more, we now view a liberal education as essential for preparing students to become productive citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. You all know that we're in an increasingly diverse global society, driven by a rapidly changing knowledge economy. It's information and know-how that makes today's world go round, and graduates like you... with your liberal education... with your skill, habits of mind, and values... with your discipline and furniture... it's you who will advance human potential, lead us to a prosperous economy, and emerge as world citizens.

The UW System is working closely with the Association of American Colleges and Universities on a national campaign to increase the public awareness of the importance of a liberal education. That association defines liberal education as:

*"A philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility."* They go on to say that it is, *"characterized by challenging encounters with important issues,"* and that liberal education is *"more a way of studying, than specific content."*

Through your UW liberal education, you've furnished your minds with the tools you need to negotiate the world around you. You've got coffee tables, of sorts, on which to stack your volumes of knowledge. You employ figurative mirrors in your critical thinking... examining issues from all angles. You have the chairs you need to invite many ideas to the problem-solving table. And your competencies in cross-cultural, technological, and scientific arenas are couched in all corners of your mind.

Thanks to your liberal education, you are strong communicators. I hope you're using your education to make sound ethical judgments, and to give back to the society that supports you via taxpayer subsidy of the cost of your UW education. Despite what the skeptical inquisitors might say, your education is practical. You know how to transfer and apply what you've learned in any situation. In short, it's true — you can do anything you put your furnished mind to.

With such skills and knowledge comes responsibility. Society will turn to you to help transform what sometimes seems like an over-abundance of information into applicable knowledge, and to provide guidance as that knowledge is used to make judgments, and take action. As more and more baby boomers retire, employers will ask you to step up and will rely on your abilities to understand, and work within, complex systems and with diverse groups of people.

And down the road, my fellow elders and I will trust you to apply your intellectual agility. We'll look to you to manage rapid change and uncertainty, both in your own lives, and in politics, economies, and societies around the globe. And that will require you to use what you've learned to truly know yourself, and to stretch yourself to come to know and respect the identities, histories, and cultures of others.

As representatives of the top five percent of this university's undergraduates... as representatives of the mere 24 percent of citizens who earn four-year college degrees in Wisconsin... you are the agents who will help this state, this nation, this world, struggle to achieve a more just society, and a globally connected community.

Sounds like a tall order. It is, but skills and knowledge like yours have never been more important in surmounting it.

My heartfelt admiration to each and every one of you for your many remarkable accomplishments — and for others yet to come. As the weather gets warmer, and as exams come to an end, may you find yourself with slightly less-disciplined days, but extraordinarily disciplined, well-furnished minds.

It's been a real pleasure to be here with you tonight. I leave you with a description of a liberal education by the actress Tallulah Bankhead, who said:

“I read Shakespeare, and the Bible, and I can shoot dice. That's what I call a liberal education.”

So as your newly minted Phi Beta Kappa key grows old with you, may it always find you reading well, and being lucky. Thanks for listening.