

Opening Day  
6 September 2005

Welcome to the start of the 2005-2006 academic year. Standing before you today is difficult for me, because, perhaps unlike many of you, I have actually enjoyed these opening day talks in the past. Thinking about today's talk, my fourteenth, however, has felt very different than in years past. It feels like the University and all we value have been under attack from a host of directions of late. I was tempted to provide you with a litany of those attacks but thought that doing so might not be the best way to begin a new school year.

I was tempted to simply say, and I would prefer not to hear any applause right now, that, because of budget cuts and lack of interest (and lack of time given how long the last session ran), my remarks have been cancelled. But that didn't feel appropriate either.

After considerable reflection, I decided that it might be worth taking some of the time we have together to discuss what it is we actually do – to put the negativity aside, at least for a short period, and focus on our goals and accomplishments.

As everyone in this room knows, and like many of you, I care deeply about the value of education and the importance of the liberal arts. Before I say anything else, however, I want to make it perfectly clear that I believe it is possible to lead an honorable, engaged, productive and happy life without having experienced the joys and challenges of higher education. Education comes in many forms and not all forms are attractive to everyone. Beyond that, as a society, we need people with a wide variety of skills and backgrounds. We make a serious mistake when we imply that higher education in general and an exposure to the liberal arts in particular are essential for everyone.

But what we provide to students is important for many and is absolutely essential for society at large. No, what we do is not the only thing that is critical for society, but it is most assuredly one of the critical things society needs. The difference between the impact education has on individuals and society is worth talking about for a minute or two.

When I speak to parents and students, as well as the broader public, about the value of the liberal arts, I usually focus on the inherent value that this sort of education provides to individuals. Not surprisingly, I talk about how we work with students to ensure that they are better communicators. How we work with them to help them become critical thinkers. And how we work with them to learn how to learn, so they'll be prepared to deal with complex job and social issues that haven't yet been defined.

I stress the fact that a liberal arts education, regardless of major, prepares graduates for a wide array of jobs. I tell them what we know so well; that history majors can do much more than become historians and philosophy majors, philosophers. I remind them that survey after survey indicates that employers are looking for liberal arts

graduates rather than those with narrow specialties. And, finally, I do something I don't particularly like – I talk about earning power. Statistics suggest that, on average, life-time earning of a person with a bachelors degree is one million dollars higher than that of a person with a high school diploma. I'm not convinced that it's healthy to sell higher education on personal economic grounds; students who are interested in learning rather than students who are interested in being presented with an academic credential are better students typically. But I do it because it is something that parents and students seem to understand.

All of this is leading me to the following point. I'm coming to the realization that we're making a mistake when we explain the values of a liberal arts education in terms of personal gain. Instead, or rather, in addition, we need to talk about the bigger social value of education.

People understand that our society would fall apart if we stopped producing plumbers, electricians and doctors to name just three professions. (I almost included lawyers in that list, but I'm not certain that everyone would agree.) People need to begin to understand that the presence of liberal arts graduates in our midst is just as important to society.

In a participatory democracy such as ours, people who understand the nature of science and appreciate the value of art, who are able to frame complex arguments cogently and comprehensively, and who have the potential to become sophisticated and skeptical consumers and voters are increasingly valuable assets. Similarly, in a world that seems to be shrinking every day with various cultures coming into conflict, people who have cross-cultural experiences and understanding are desperately needed. In short, there is significant public value in addition to private value in educating students. We need to talk more regularly about this aspect of the liberal arts.

Let me digress just slightly and relate a narrowly focused story to help bring this point into greater clarity. Sally Lundeen, the Dean of the College of Nursing at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee likes to tell people about research that indicates that mortality rates are lower for patients treated by nurses who have earned a bachelors degree relative to those who have only earned a nursing certificate. Because the main difference is the liberal arts component of their education, it is not unreasonable to assume that nurses are learning something very valuable in their liberal arts courses. As Sally has put it, the liberal arts saves lives.

By promoting the public value of a liberal arts education, perhaps we can offset the growing belief that colleges of letters and science are an expensive luxury that we simply cannot afford. We need to make it clear that the ideas in which we traffic, the education we provide and the new knowledge that we create are absolutely essential to the well-being of our society.

Last year on opening day, I discussed a wonderful metaphor coined by Carol Geary Schneider, the President of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

I mentioned that she has written extensively about the conspiracy of voluntary silence that seems to surround the liberal arts. That conspiracy keeps us from discussing the importance and value of the liberal arts and drives us to promote other aspects of higher education or encourages us to hide the liberal arts aspects of what we do. Last year I urged us to break this conspiracy of silence and to be much more intentional about our values.

Now, a year later, I would like to report on some of the successes we have had and look to the future to see just how much more we might be able accomplish. I am very pleased to report that a System-wide committee on the liberal arts on which I serve made a good deal of progress. In fact, we have teamed with Carol Geary Schneider's Association of American Colleges and Universities and have made Wisconsin the central player in their efforts to promote a greater understanding of the liberal arts. Their program's acronym is LEAP and it stands for Liberal Education and America's Promise. Let me quote from a recent press release announcing our partnership with AAC&U:

AAC&U's new LEAP Campaign is designed to champion the value of an engaged liberal education, both for individual students and for a nation increasingly dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality. The campaign...will expand understanding of the value of a college education, and how learning can empower students to succeed and make a difference in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

"The state of Wisconsin is ahead of the curve in bringing the crucial issue of what students need to learn in college to the attention of its residents," said AAC&U President Carol Geary Schneider. "Business and civic leaders in Wisconsin and around the nation agree that providing an engaged and practical liberal education to all who aspire to a college education is key to Wisconsin's civic and economic future, and the success of all the state's college students."

Liberal Education and America's Promise is designed to spark public debate about the knowledge, skills, and values today's students need; to challenge the belief that students must choose either a practical education or a liberal education; to make visible current inequities that steer low-income students to programs that teach narrow job skills, while more advantaged students choose liberal education; and to document national and state progress in providing every student with access to a high-quality, liberal arts education.

I find this program to be infused with exciting prospects and I'm very pleased to report that AAC&U has just received a \$50,000 grant from the Carnegie Foundation to promote these activities in Wisconsin. One of the things that is already in place is a web page presenting best practices for promoting the liberal arts. The first item on that page

is our project to incorporate specific statements about the liberal arts into syllabi across the College.

If you haven't yet taken a look at our web page listing those liberal arts statements I recommend that you do so. There are some very thoughtful statements there and I thank those of you who shared those statements with the rest of us. If you've incorporated such a statement into your syllabus but haven't shown it to colleagues, I urge you to send it to the COLS electronic bulletin board, or directly to me. If you haven't yet included such a statement in your syllabus, I urge you to think about doing so. It's important for students to hear about this from as many of us as possible.

Another piece of potentially good news is that our liberal arts scholarship competition is being replicated at the state level. The System-wide liberal arts committee has agreed to run its own scholarship competition using the criteria we set forth for the one we run in the College. Because the criteria are identical, it seems likely that our students might have an advantage in the state-wide competition. And I urge you to promote the College's competition to your students. I'll post, on the COLS electronic bulletin board, the information we've recently sent to students.

Along these lines, I'd like to mention three initiatives that I hope College will make progress on beginning this semester. The first is the final stage of the writing across the curriculum program we put in place about 15 years ago. At that time, we recommended that all students have a writing intensive experience in their major during their junior or senior year. The College passed a recommendation rather than a requirement because the folks in charge weren't confident that all majors would be able to mount such a course. Because of significant curriculum reform and careful thought in all departments and programs, all of the courses needed to turn this recommendation into a requirement are now in place. If we believe that the ability to write well should be a significant part of a liberal arts education, it is time to take this final step.

Second, I'd like the College to move forward with an initiative I first mentioned early last semester. Although there was widespread support, progress was lost in the press of business associated with the budget cuts we had to face. The initiative is one that I've called liberal arts across the curriculum. Like our writing across the curriculum program, liberal arts across the curriculum is designed to be sure that students have ample opportunities to explore and reflect on the liberal arts. I envision us outlining 4-6 aspects of a liberal arts education that we would expect students to experience in their majors. We could then ask each department and program in the College to explain which of these traits their majors promote, and we could have the expectation that each major should successfully deal with (at least) some significant subset of the whole. In addition to enabling us to assess whether we're addressing the issues collectively we feel are important, a program of this sort would all but ensure that our students regularly hear about the value of a liberal arts education. Early in the semester, I plan to call for volunteers to help work on this initiative.

Third and easiest, a change in our Humanities requirements will be before each of the College's four divisions early this semester. The change mirrors those already made in the Math/Science Division and the Social Science Division and is designed to provide both students and faculty more choices. As in those divisions, the change should permit departments to offer slightly more upper level courses while removing the stigma associated with courses labeled with the general education tag. I hope that the proposed changes move swiftly through our approval process.

There are two activities that we've already put in place that I would like to mention this morning. First, this past year saw the first time the College of Letters and Science gathered as a whole to discuss issues of importance. Under the auspices of the Faculty Committee, monthly faculty and staff meetings have begun to be held. I'm pleased to say that these meetings will continue this year and I hope that many of you will make the time to attend because the meetings provide an opportunity to discuss issues of importance to the College while dispelling many unfounded rumors. The Faculty Committee will be presenting the schedule for these meetings shortly.

Second, as I've announced on the COLS electronic bulletin board, we're starting a new study abroad program this year. With the help of four faculty and staff members, we are actively recruiting students for our European Odyssey program. Students and faculty in this program will spend the spring semester traveling through various portions of Europe. I hope you help promote the program to your students and I hope you consider being part of a team to offer a similar experience, either in Europe or in some other portion of the world, to students in the future. Administratively, the beauty of this program is, if student interest exists, the program will pay for itself and thus not be a drain on any College resources. Additionally, under these circumstances, we can run more than one program in any semester. Pedagogically, the beauty of the program is that we are able to provide our students with an in-depth international experience. As an aside, I want to congratulate those of you who have participated in study abroad programs this year. We're regularly sending more students each year to a wider array of countries. That's something that all of us should be proud of.

I've not said a word about the budget this morning and I don't plan to say much. But it's worth noting that we've accomplished a great deal, and as I've outlined, even more is possible, despite very significant budget cuts. And, in addition to all I've already said, as you all heard last hour, our Department of Biology and Microbiology was named the System's outstanding Department by the Board of Regents. In these trying times, it is particularly important to keep these successes in mind.

But we have to do more than simply keep our successes in mind. In addition to providing, under adverse conditions, our students with a first rate education and in addition to following our scholarly and artistic passions and creating new knowledge, it has become increasingly obvious that we have to take steps to define the university, the liberal arts and our profession to an increasingly skeptical public.

We can no longer afford, and I think that afford is exactly the correct word, to let others set the agenda for higher education in Wisconsin. Politicians and newspaper editors, alike, are of the opinion that they can generate a good deal of popular support when they attack the university. We need to show them that the costs of doing that far outweigh the benefits. In essence, we have to fight back by telling our own story.

It seems to me, that we can do that in two ways. First, we have to be a little more shameless about attempting to generate more positive publicity for all of the wonderful things we're doing and all that our students are accomplishing. We need to be pro-active about discussing the liberal arts and, as I said earlier, about promoting the public value that education provides. All of us need to begin to do this – we can't leave it to others, either within the University or beyond its walls. I urge you all to play a more active role in this respect than you ever have in the past and I urge you to initiate a discussion on the COLS electronic bulletin board about possible ways to do this. Our relationship with AAC&U in Project LEAP, along with the money from the Carnegie Foundation, means that it may be more possible than ever before to implement some of your ideas.

The second thing we need to do is be much more aggressive about defending our interests. As far too many politicians have discovered, if you don't respond quickly and loudly to misinformation, the misinformation quickly becomes accepted as fact. What's true in politics is true when the academy enters the public arena. One example will demonstrate my point. When the UW leadership this past year opted not to argue with the Legislative Audit Bureau study claiming that 25 percent of all UW employees were administrators, it was a huge mistake. You and I know that the 25 percent figure is an absolute absurdity, but the vast majority of the public, including decision makers in government and the media, don't know that. In fact, policy is being made and budget cuts are being levied based on just this sort of misinformation.

Am I being too extreme in asserting that we need to be more aggressive? I don't think so – and it turns out that Lt. Governor Barbara Lawton agrees with me. When the UW liberal arts deans met in Oshkosh last spring, I invited the Lt. Governor to join us for a discussion of educational policy. During that meeting, in response to questions about the latest round of budget cuts imposed on the UW system, she made some surprising comments. Lt. Governor Lawton said that for years she's been shocked that the UW system and all of its parts have been so quiet as their budget was pared and slashed.

A couple of years back she asked then System President Katherine Lyall why there wasn't more opposition to the cuts. She said that President Lyall told her that she and the Governor had an agreement that he would do what he could for the System and she wouldn't complain. Lt. Governor Lawton said that as long as such an agreement was in place, politicians would continue to cut the System budget. She said that we should have been complaining years ago and that we had better start now. So, I implore you to follow the advice of our Lt. Governor. Make your voices heard. Write letters to newspapers and to politicians. Speak formally at civic organizations and informally to your neighbors. Set the record straight. Be both reactive and pro-active.

In his 1801 inaugural address, President Thomas Jefferson reminded his audience that “every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle.” Although I think these are very wise words, I also believe that there are times when differences of opinions, in fact, are differences of principle. Unfortunately, these are times in which differences in principle with respect to the value of higher education seem to abound. While we should remain polite, we should not avoid pointing out when we have differences of principle. While we shouldn’t go looking for such fights, I think the evidence is clear that avoiding those fights has done us great harm.

There are those who believe that Universities should be nothing more than job training centers. As I said before, the well educated liberal arts graduate is well positioned to undertake a host of jobs, but our mission is beyond job training.

There are those who believe that sports are central to university life. While athletics, broadly defined, certainly should play a role in the academy, it is a mistake to let it overshadow the core of our mission.

There are many other examples of differences of principle that I could mention but I’ll let you fill in your own specifics. My point is that if we want to preserve the American tradition of higher education, public higher education in particular, we have to articulate what we believe in.

Our task should be easy given what we stand for. The great physicist Niels Bohr put it most succinctly when he said, “Knowledge is itself the basis of civilization.” Staying within the scientific community, Werner von Braun, the father of the American space program and, unfortunately, of the German V2 rockets, made a similar point. In his biography of von Braun published this year, Bob Ward relates an after dinner conversation as follows:

The conversation turned to what was truly important in life, what had lasting value, aside from love of family. Von Braun spoke of how generations of his family were raised to believe in conserving their ancestral lands, then passing them on to the next generation. They were taught that the land would sustain them, always, and that it was the most important thing in the life of the family. But then, von Braun and his brother saw their ancestral lands lost to war and political events, “and we came to realize that all one can be sure of leaving one’s children is what’s inside their heads. Education, and not earthly possessions, is the ultimate legacy.”

Our task then, shouldn’t be all that difficult but remarks of the 18<sup>th</sup> century inventor Oliver Evans reminds us that that’s not necessarily the case. He lamented, in a sexist manner, “He that studies and writes on the improvements of the arts and sciences labours to benefit generations unborn, for it is improbable that his contemporaries will pay any attention to him.”

Whether it is difficult or easy, I don't believe that there is any choice left to us but to take aggressive steps educate the public about the value of higher education. As the new semester begins, collectively we will have the attention of more than 11,000 students. As you work with them over the course of the year, introduce them to the excitement that is inherent in each of your fields. Show them what it was that captivated you to such an extent that you've devoted your life to your discipline. Convince them that if they wanted, and if they worked hard, they could make contributions to that field.

But, please, never lose sight of the fact that most of your students are not going to follow in your footsteps; they're not going to become professors. Think, then, in all of your interactions with your students what it is you want the general public to know about your discipline. What is it that's most important that people beyond your field understand? Amid all of the details of your specific subject, be sure you don't lose sight of this because your students are, in fact, the general public and they are likely to become the leaders of tomorrow.

In addition to appropriately educating the leaders of tomorrow, please, let's not forget about the leaders of today. Engage them in any way you can, in any venue that presents itself.

I'll close by making reference to the great philosopher Dr. Seuss, who asked, in his environmental classic *The Lorax*, "who will speak for the trees." Similarly, I ask you, who will speak for the liberal arts?

Thank you for all you do and for your attention this morning.