

CONVOCATION ADDRESS 2012

Linda Eisenmann, Provost
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In closing this ceremony that prepares us for the year ahead, I would like to pick up on the ideas that President Crutcher introduced, as these same issues about the evolution of liberal arts education have been on my mind. As the President indicated, you cannot read a paper or a popular website today without seeing evidence of the public's concern – what he called the “disconnect” – about the state of higher education, whether it is the purpose (to prepare students for their first jobs, or for lives as citizens?), the success (why do only half of higher education students complete a bachelor's degree?), the methods (including daily news about a new on-line partnership or free provision of courses), or, perhaps the biggest concern, cost.

As I talk about these issues, I'd like to focus particularly on how they affect students, especially you Seniors who are looking at one final year to use Wheaton to its fullest.

Each year, when I think ahead to my Convocation remarks, I conjure up this setting: several hundred newly-minted seniors, gathered as seniors for the first time, and also for the first time, wearing their graduation robes. Donning those robes is a wonderful tradition, as it signifies the commencement of your last year at Wheaton, which will be fittingly completed when you put these robes on again at your May Commencement. By that date, we've added a capital "C" to the commencement event, marking it as your major foray into the world, backed up by the knowledge, skills, and understandings you have gained at Wheaton.

This all sounds lovely, but I'm willing to bet that there's a definite low-level anxiety today in each of the seniors that comes from the mixed excitement of being ready to strike out on your own, but worrying about what that future will look like, and whether you will be ready for it.

So, my goal for today is to convince you that you *are* ready for these challenges; you will know how to face them, examine them, generate possible approaches, and try again if your first efforts don't succeed. I have this conviction because I believe that the liberal arts education you have been building - each of you in a slightly different way - gives you those tools and capacities. We have been teaching you - and you have been practicing throughout your years at Wheaton - the ability to make observations, ask questions, think critically, articulate connections, and attempt solutions.

When I say that you have been "practicing," I don't mean to diminish your intellectual work. In fact, it's the opposite. Practicing something is the best way to develop it, hone it, and understand it. I think of our President, the cellist, who deeply understands that he has to find consistent time in a job that does not lend itself to quiet, personal activity to practice his cello if he plans to perform around the world, as he does several times a year. And I'm certain that each of you who plays an instrument knows that same need for keeping skills sharp. It's the same demand whether your equivalent of the cello is your voice, or your ability to throw a ball or perform a dive, your capacity to speak French or read Latin, or your ability to identify a plant or interpret an analysis of variance.

Practicing a skill is more, though, than simply keeping it from diminishing. If your skill has really become a part of your life, you feel incomplete without exercising it. I'm sure the President feels that way when he's been away from his cello for too long, just as a distance runner gets twitchy when he hasn't been on the track for a while, or a poet feels a bit off-kilter if she hasn't been taking time to craft images into words. These efforts have become habits of mind, they characterize the way we think, and we rely on them to help us understand the world.

The word "practice" has an additional connotation, too. It often refers to a professional's work. So, we talk about the practice of law, or of medicine, or of clinical therapy. Most professions require advanced training to learn the building blocks of that particular practice. So, before being able to treat a client, a therapist has to learn about psychological development, along with physiology, pharmacology, and behavior, among others.

Yet, behind that specific professional knowledge lies a base of broad and deep understanding that comes from fields found in the liberal arts and sciences. For instance, understanding religion and sociology can help that therapist with a client's effort to fit into society. Experience with another language might help the therapist understand the challenges the client's family is facing. Sensitivity to visual, musical, or language arts can provide another mode by which to reach the patient. Awareness of political and economic issues helps to realistically discuss the client's options.

There's a book I used regularly when I taught doctoral students in a higher education leadership course called *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, written by Dr. Ronald Heifetz of Harvard

University. Heifetz is both a musician and a psychiatrist, an unusual background for someone writing about leadership. I suppose that varied background made his work stand out for me among so many dry and pompous books about leadership.

Early in the book, Heifetz divides issues and situations into what he calls "technical challenges" and "adaptive challenges." *Technical* situations are those that can be analyzed readily and need certain - although not necessarily easy - approaches or skills to handle them. An example might be knowing how to pilot an airplane in difficult weather, or what steps are necessary to marshal a piece of policy through a town council. *Adaptive* situations are those where the situations and the approaches aren't as clear-cut. Knowing how to craft a budget that really addresses multiple constituents, for example, or thinking through what sort of campaign will be most effective in educating families to manage obesity both call on adaptive approaches. You can probably think of your own examples, perhaps from working on a sports team or a student government committee or a group class project. Knowing how to handle an issue is *necessary*, but it isn't always *sufficient* for a good outcome.

Heifetz recognizes that many situations have both technical *and* adaptive elements. The person addressing the situation could stop at the technical, but realizes that using adaptive skills makes a much better result. Let me give you one of the cases in which he outlines these differences.

He talks about a patient whom a doctor has treated for a long time. The man is married, and he and his wife have two young children. After a routine visit, the doctor finds test results that concern her, and she suspects cancer. She draws on her technical skills to order diagnostic tests,

and then works with other physicians and the patient to explain what she finds. The news is not good. The man has a type of cancer from which he will not recover. There is treatment available, but at best it will prolong the man's life only slightly; he will not be cured. Heifetz traces how the doctor moves from the highly technical work of diagnosing the disease and assessing treatment options to the more adaptive work of helping the patient consider how to manage what is likely to be the last year of his life. In addition to applying medical knowledge, she has to understand her patient's relationship with his family, his work, his faith, know how their economic situation will affect what he can do, etc. The doctor cannot, and should not, take the place of the man's spouse or pastor or financial adviser, but she has to understand all these issues to be a good coordinator of the man's care. This requires a much different sort of practice for the physician.

I mentioned that I always enjoyed teaching this book because it takes such a different approach to leadership and practice. Heifetz continually relies on his training as both a musician and a psychiatrist, showing how the different perspectives of these fields affect his understanding. He explains that different fields and disciplines develop particular skills, but they also build in their practitioners a distinctive world view, way of knowing, and way of judging data and information. Think about the courses you have taken at Wheaton, both general courses and your major, and think about the professors who have taught those courses. I'm guessing that your biology professor doesn't approach problems or data the same way that your art history professor does. Your music theory professor probably uses material differently than your anthropology teacher. Your astronomy class likely pursued different sorts of questions than your philosophy class.

This is because disciplines approach knowledge differently, and they develop habits of mind that are distinct from each other.

A great strength of the Wheaton curriculum is that we ask you to develop both a deep perspective - through your major - and a generalist view - through the Foundations and elective courses. Further, by asking you to choose sets of explicitly Connected courses, we have emphasized that different disciplines bring you different understandings. But, we have also given you practice in reconciling or highlighting those differences. When you look at the development of cities through connected courses in Economics and Geology, you learn about cities in a very wide way. When you study evolution through 19th century British literature and biology, you set Charles Darwin's work into a quite complex picture.

Those different understandings are in the toolkit you will take into the world in May. If you find a job in finance, you are naturally going to use the skills you learned in Economics. But you will also bring to that job a rounded person who knows how to apply sociological and philosophical principles to the context in which financial issues develop. If you are managing a nonprofit youth program, you will need skills from psychology, education, biology, art, and beyond. In each of your roles, you will draw on *both* sets of disciplinary understandings: those you know deeply through your major, and those that give you an overview of connections through electives you have taken. My hope is that exercising these skills will have become a habit for you – the years of practice will make their use comfortable and demonstrable. I also hope that – like the colleagues who play an instrument or craft art or play a sport – you will feel incomplete if you don't use what you know well.

So, let me end by reassuring you that you are equipped to deal with what the future is bringing. If we have taught you well, and if you have been open to learning, you will have both the technical skills to manage situations, as well as the adaptive strengths to bring more to bear. You will go beyond the doctor (or teacher or lawyer or researcher or manager) who addresses a problem with only one set of options to the one who can draw on a range of approaches – different but connected approaches – in tackling an issue with creativity. You will take your liberal education with you. Thank you, and make good use of the year ahead.