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Matriculation Convocation 2017: What Do We Stand For?

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David, thank you for your leadership of the Public Events Committee this year.

Thank you Kathrine Handford for providing an organ prelude that sets the stage for this and all our Convocations. Thank you Phillip Swan, Steven Sieck and members of the entering class for beginning our year with such beauty. I look forward to many future performances. And thank you, Howard Niblock, for your thoughtful selection of the opening and closing words for today's ceremony.

I am grateful to Monica Rico and the Public Events Committee of last year for assembling a provocative and engaging Convocation series for us to enjoy. I hope you will join me in attending them.

I would like to dedicate this matriculation convocation address to the many families, including Lawrence families, who have felt the direct impact of Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and their aftermath.

Welcome to the academic year. I want to specifically welcome first year students, transfer and Waseda students, nine new tenure line faculty, their spouses and partners, our new Provost and Dean of the Faculty, Katie Kodat, our new Vice President for Student Life, Chris Card, and many other new faculty and staff. I know you will join me in extending a warm welcome to all new members of our community.

This has been a trying and troubling year. One that felt more like a nightmare than a dream. On the global stage, among other challenges, the refugee crisis continues unabated. According to the UN High Commission on Refugees, over 65 million people are now forcibly displaced from their homes due to political strife, environmental degradation, and other calamities. Over half of these displaced people are younger than 18.

And in the US just this past month, we have borne witness to what many people described as a terrorist attack by white supremacists and neo-Nazis on the University of Virginia and its host municipality, Charlottesville. The death of Heather Hayer and the wounding of eighteen others by one of the demonstrators as well as the loss of two state troopers added to the horror of this series of events.

In response to that horror, James Murdoch, chief executive of 21st Century Fox whose family owns Fox News, the Wall Street Journal and other media outlets, wrote, "It has not been my habit to widely offer running commentary on current affairs . . . but what we watched this last week in Charlottesville and the reaction to it by the President of the United States concerns all of us as Americans and free people. These events remind us all why vigilance against hate and bigotry is an eternal obligation — a necessary discipline for the preservation of our way of life and our ideals . . . I can't even believe I have to write this: standing up to Nazis is essential; there are no good Nazis. Or Klansmen, or terrorists."

My own response turned toward the role of the liberal arts college in such a time of conflict. I believe that the extraordinary pain, dislocation, and tragedy in the world dramatically reinforce the importance of our mission. Lawrence's mission statement is simple and clear. It includes this statement: "The university is . . . committed to the development of intellect and talent, the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, the cultivation of sound judgment and respect for the perspectives of others. Lawrence prepares students for lives of achievement, responsible and meaningful citizenship, lifelong learning and personal fulfillment."

We continue to honor the intent of this statement. But in a time when external turmoil affects our own community, as it will, we need to restate the enduring truths that define us, even as Murdoch felt the need to do after the events at UVA. In a time when forces threaten to pull us apart, we need to remember who we are and what values hold us together.

This need to reconsider what one would expect to be commonly held principles became clearer to me a few weeks earlier, on July 4th. Like many media outlets, National Public Radio used our country's Independence Day to circulate the Declaration of Independence. This year they decided to tweet it. Reactions underlined the forces at work in society. One person tweeted: "So, NPR is calling for revolution. Interesting way to condone the violence while trying to sound 'patriotic'. Your implications are clear." Another person tweeted, "Glad you are being defunded. You have never been balanced on your show." A third responder wrote, "Seriously, this is the dumbest idea I have ever seen on twitter. Literally no one is going to read 5000 tweets about this trash."

Each of these comments and many others provoked thousands of re-tweets and favorites before NPR could post the entire document and make it clear they wanted simply to celebrate this national holiday with the Declaration itself.

We have come to a cultural moment in which the words of the Declaration of Independence are seen by some as a leftist conspiracy just because they were broadcast on NPR. Instead of listening for value, people from all sides of the political spectrum immediately assume the other side is wrong without consideration. At a time when enduring values have never been more important, we are finding it difficult to determine our own core principles. But if we still believe that education, learning, personal growth, and change must be the way forward, then we need to try to state clearly the nature of our enduring values as individuals and as a community. We need to ask ourselves and one another: what do we stand for?

There have been other moments in the development of human society in which institutions, cultures, countries have questioned and sought to reestablish their enduring truths. I learned how transformative determining community values could be when I studied the post-colonial period in Africa as an undergraduate. Leaders like Leopold Senghor and Julius Nyerere spent their lives redefining concepts like nationhood, a state's obligations to its citizens, and the role of language and culture in nation building.

Another period that has direct implications for our own learning community is the period of the enlightenment when philosophers like Kant, Rousseau, Voltaire, Hume, and Smith created a world-view that has direct bearing on colleges today. In *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, Peter Gay offers a holistic sense of the values expressed by what he calls a "clamorous chorus" of thinkers. Core beliefs of the time included the power and accuracy of science, specifically the efficacy of medicine; social sciences as an important tool to evaluate and improve the human condition; the impact of art and literature to humanize the soul, and the individual's responsibility to oneself and by extension to the welfare of others. These values clearly influence society today. More specifically, these beliefs speak directly to college communities like the one we have here at Lawrence.

Even within the framework left to us by the Enlightenment, tensions exist for us. For example, if we assert the accuracy of science, how do we determine whether human activity has impact on changes in global climate? Our federal and state governments seem conflicted on this issue, but a vast majority of scientists assert that human activity of different types has a deleterious impact on the Earth's climate. Their research supports this view. If the accuracy of science is one of this

institution's core principles then we must agree with the scientific view over the political, and we need to act accordingly in the classroom and in the way we steward the college's operations. As Maria Mitchell, the first woman elected to the Academy of Arts and Sciences said, "knowledge that is popular is not scientific." Our mission statement also suggests we will respect the perspectives of those who differ, but we will act in accordance with the confidence in science inherited from the Enlightenment.

Given the forces at play in society today, however, we need to go beyond the framework granted by the Enlightenment to truly accomplish our mission as an institution. If we ask what we stand for today, we have our Mission Statement and Statements on Academic Freedom and Diversity to use as a framework for our answer. But we need to look more closely at the enduring values that we continue to uphold as a community.

To help foster this conversation, let me propose three possible values as contenders: 1) To teach emotional intelligence and practice empathy; 2) To reinforce our commitment to academic freedom and freedom of speech with limits; and 3) To pursue equity in all that we do. I believe these values are intrinsic to who we are as Lawrentians, and as members of a learning community.

I would like to start with the first proposed value: to teach emotional intelligence and to practice empathy. For me empathy is an extension of a humanistic education. In an essay entitled the *Natural History of German Life*, George Eliot, a leading author of the Victorian period, describes the impact of art on human beings. She wrote, "the greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies . . . a picture of human life such as a great artist can give surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment." Eliot's description of the power of art to move us toward an awareness of others rather than ourselves could be described today as emotional intelligence and a predisposition toward empathy.

Beyond empathy, we need to be aware that developing these skills is useful preparation for our careers. In *Sensemaking: The Power of the Humanities in the Age of the Algorithm*, Christian Madsbjerg advocates for the importance of a liberal education. Madsbjerg endeavors to show that study of the humanities prepares one for corporate life. He defines "sensemaking" as "a method of practical wisdom grounded in the humanities" and he likens it to the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, the "artful synthesis of both knowledge and experience." He believes that a critical ingredient for corporate success is the ability to analyze "nonlinear data" -- a skill taught only by the humanities.

But a successful career is only part of the benefit that the teaching of empathy confers on us. In a paper published with a former student in 1990, Peter Salovey, then a member of the psychology department at Yale, coined the term "emotional intelligence," which he defined as "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions." Now president of Yale, he believes that his faculty, students, and staff must teach and act empathetically. His goal is to cultivate emotional intelligence in the culture of their institution.

I think that our re-commitment to the arts and humanities must lead us as well to cultivate emotional intelligence and to engage each other with empathy, especially in times of stress and conflict. This approach will not only increase our readiness to learn, but also, as Madsbjerg argues, will develop essential skills for a successful career.

The second enduring value is one we have spent a great deal of time discussing and fighting over recently, that of academic freedom and its corollary: freedom of speech. The faculty passed an updated Statement on Academic Freedom last winter which includes this statement: “In the classroom, laboratory, and studio, teachers must be free to teach and students free to learn; we must be free to challenge each other’s beliefs, to explore new ideas and critically examine old ones, and to listen to others without disruption. Knowledge, skill, understanding, and creative expression are acquired through interactions that are often complex and even controversial. Although these interactions may at times cause discomfort, they may not be obstructed. Intellectually honest and vibrant communities engage in complex interactions and the ability, hereby protected, to exchange ideas in a spirit of mutual respect is essential to our educational mission.”

I am grateful for the work the Provost, Curriculum Committee, and Faculty Governance Committee invested in updating this very important principle. What concerns me now is the extension of this value into the everyday life of our community. In *The Contours of Free Expression on Campus: Free Speech, Academic Freedom, and Civility*, Frederick Lawrence, a constitutional legal scholar and former president of Brandeis University, asks: when does hate speech, which is protected under the First Amendment, become a potential action that can be disciplined by a university?

One perspective that was helpful to me as a novice in the law is that our Constitutional protection of hate speech is fundamentally different from those of many other democracies. For example: in Germany, punishable speech includes attacks on “the human dignity of others by insulting, maliciously maligning or defaming segments of the population.” In the United Kingdom punishable speech includes “threatening, abusive or insulting words, or behavior” intended to “stir up racial hatred” or likely to do so. Frederick Lawrence suggested that we look at the actor’s intent to decide if disciplinary action is warranted. If the speaker intends to cause harm to a particular victim then he believes the institution can step in and adjudicate. Do we want to accept this limitation?

Our response depends partly on our sense of the effect such a limitation might have on our learning environment. Recent studies have tied the presence of psychological safety to the ability to learn. In a paper entitled “Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams” Amy Edmondson, a faculty member at Harvard states, “Team psychological safety is not the same as group cohesiveness, as research has shown that cohesiveness can reduce willingness to disagree and challenge others’ views, such as in the phenomenon of groupthink, implying a lack of interpersonal risk taking. The term is meant to suggest neither a careless sense of permissiveness, nor an unrelenting positive affect but, rather, a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up. This confidence stems from mutual respect and trust among team members.”

This balance is difficult to obtain, but multiple studies show that if we create a learning environment that both fosters diverse opinions and responds in all situations with mutual respect and trust, we will enhance our ability to be a community of learners.

The past few years on campus have made it abundantly clear that we still have a distance to go to create a learning community that fosters diverse opinions and is based on mutual respect and trust. Hate speech directed at members of our community has had a negative impact on our ability to create psychological safety. Too many times members of our community have been targeted, making them feel vulnerable, unsafe, and unsure about their connection to Lawrence. For example, similar to many other colleges, last spring a series of messages were posted around campus targeting specific groups. I directly experienced this targeting, when a member of our community left a note on the windshield of my car that made a hostile accusation based on my identity as a gay

man. The accusation made me question my connection to Lawrence, my willingness to be open to all members of our community, and my concern that this person was unwilling to discuss their concerns with me directly.

We must find a way to more actively respond to hate speech in our community. An absolutist interpretation of the First Amendment will not create the learning environment we need at this time.

The third enduring value I would like to suggest for us as a community is striving for equity. In a document entitled “Step Up & Lead for Equity,” the Association of American Colleges and Universities lays out a case for the centrality of equity in our mission. The pamphlet begins: “For generations, the United States has promised universal access to opportunity. It is part of our history and the engine of our economic and civic prosperity. But opportunity in America continues to be disproportionately distributed.” Although inequity faces multiple groups within our society, the pamphlet emphasizes socio-economic class and race. It cites significant disparities in median income by race, and disparities in academic achievement. It also argues that earning a bachelor’s degree significantly increases equitable outcomes.

It is tragic that Martin Luther King’s words, spoken in 1963, are still true for many of us. He said: “Negroes are still at the bottom of the economic ladder. They live within two concentric circles of segregation. One imprisons them on the basis of color, while the other confines them within a separate culture of poverty.” I believe we have a calling as an institution and as educators to do all we can to change this dynamic. We can only reach our full potential as a learning community if we strive for equity in all that we do. Our country’s economic and social prosperity depends on our success.

It will not be easy to uphold these enduring values: empathy, creating a learning community based on free exchange and psychological safety, and striving for equity. Many forces are aligned against us, including the increasing impulse to take aggressive action if one feels wronged. In a time when, as scholar Joshua Clover explains “the riot has returned as the leading tactic in the repertoire of collective action” we must work as a community to foster meaningful, humane, civil discourse of the issues of our time. But I believe if we are all focused on our core community values we will be successful. This will require us to be patient with each other and willing to learn together. This is our chance to be clear about who we are and who we want to be.

Thank you for listening to me today. In an effort to foster a community conversation about these issues we will host a panel discussion under the Polvony Lecture series this fall where we will hear from experts in free speech who see this issue from multiple vantage points. The President’s Committee on Diversity Affairs will also host a series of community conversations with the direct intent of fostering dialogue across difference.

I look forward to the academic year ahead. As a community we must define these enduring values or they will be defined for us. The conversation will not be simple but the result will strengthen our learning community in urgent and essential ways.

Again thank you for your time. Good luck with fall term. It is a pleasure to have you all back here in Appleton.