

9-26-2002

Liberal Education and Civic Engagement

Richard Warch
Lawrence University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses_president

Part of the [Liberal Studies Commons](#)

© Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Recommended Citation

Warch, Richard, "Liberal Education and Civic Engagement" (2002). *Presidential Addresses*. 10.
https://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses_president/10

This Convocation is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of the President at Lux. It has been accepted for inclusion in Presidential Addresses by an authorized administrator of Lux. For more information, please contact colette.brautigam@lawrence.edu.

**Liberal
Education and Civic Engagement**

Richard Warch
Matriculation Convocation Address
September 26, 2002

Sixteen years ago, my eighth matriculation address was called “That’s the Deal,” a title I derived from a quotation from John Gardner in his book Excellence: “Freedom and obligation, liberty and duty—that’s the deal.” The theme of that speech related to our commitment to public service, and this morning I wish to return to that topic. Sixteen years ago, I announced that Lawrence had just become one of the first 100 colleges in the country to join Campus Compact, an organization designed to promote the civic purposes of higher education by encouraging community service that develops students’ citizenship skills and values in order best to prepare them to be active, committed, and informed citizens and leaders of their communities. Today, Campus Compact has 850 members, and this year Lawrence—thanks in large measure to the efforts of Dean Paul Shrode—has been one of the founding institutions in the establishment of a statewide Campus Compact in Wisconsin.

But Campus Compact is not, as they say, the only game in town. Efforts to promote volunteerism and service have proliferated in recent years and are escalating, due in some measure to the aftermath of September 11 and to President Bush’s State of the Union Address last January. In that speech, the president said that “we want to be a nation that serves goals larger than self” and went on to call on “every American to commit at least two years—4,000 hours over the rest of your lifetime—to the service of your neighbors and your nation.” That charge echoes proclamations by previous presidents, most particularly President Kennedy, who famously stated in his inaugural address, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country,” sentiments that echoed the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes and especially Warren Harding, who said in 1916 that “we must have a citizenship less concerned about what the government can do for it and more anxious about what it can do for the nation.” When the first President Bush established his 1000 Points of Light program to recognize community service and volunteerism, and when President Clinton established AmeriCorps—extending what had been Volunteers in Service to America—they were following the same ideal of celebrating and promoting volunteer service.

Active and informed citizenship is indeed a worthy aspiration for each and every one of us. Kennedy made good on his pledge by establishing the Peace Corps, and Bush has pledged that the government today would do its part in elevating service as a national goal by recruiting more than 200,000 new volunteers through USA Freedom Corps to serve in AmeriCorps and Senior Corps and by doubling the volunteers in the Peace Corps.

While those increases have not yet occurred, what has transpired, through the president’s establishment of the Freedom Corps, is the amalgamation of a New Deal-like plethora of programs, the creation of web sites, and a continuing chorus of those who advocate and celebrate

volunteerism. And the higher education community in Washington has joined that chorus, as it were, and has created and allied with a variety of programs and agencies designed to encourage public service. In concert with Campus Compact, an alliance of higher education associations has launched CampusCares, an initiative aimed at giving greater prominence to the broad array of civic and community service activities undertaken at and by American colleges and universities. And other non-governmental agencies have been created to play a role here as well, among them the Partnership for Public Service, which is dedicated to recruiting and retaining top-flight talent in the federal workforce. Lawrence has joined that organization. Those educational associations and others have asked that people like me speak about service on occasions like this.

And it is fitting that I do so, not only because enjoined by folks in Washington DC, not only because after September 11 our sense of responsibility for others has been elevated, but because doing so is a way for us to recognize and express a central element of Lawrence's mission, specifically the statement that "Lawrence prepares students for lives of service, achievement, leadership, and personal fulfillment." It is only fair to note, however, that mission statements in and of themselves do not tell you much. In fact, a quick review of the mission statements of other colleges in the Associated Colleges of the Midwest indicates that service, or some language akin to service, is important to those institutions as well. In addition, expressions of the centrality of service are also to be found in the statements of purpose of the five national fraternities and three national sororities at Lawrence, as well as in the aims and ideals of Lambda Sigma, the sophomore honor society, and Mortar Board, the senior honor society. So endorsing service is not something unique to the college itself. The point, however, is not so much naming service as a purpose or a goal as effecting service as an activity.

But how do we do that? Not by offering a curriculum centered on service, or even by listing courses that have service as their sole and central theme. Nor by requiring service as a graduation requirement, something that was all the vogue with a number of high schools some years ago and that has been attempted by a small number of colleges. Perversely, I will admit, we often invoke service as part of a sanction for a judicial code offense, which sends the curious message that service is somehow punitive rather than redemptive, that service involves a kind of involuntary volunteerism, and that one serves one's community only when one has somehow violated its rules and expectations.

Happily, service as sanction represents but a minor fraction of the good work performed in volunteer roles by Lawrence students. The Volunteer and Community Service Center promotes and coordinates a vast array of service opportunities for students, and many student organizations make such opportunities available to their members on their own. Last year, according to a calculation done by the Center, Lawrence students contributed in the neighborhood of 18,000 hours to various service projects in the Fox Cities communities and beyond—a figure that is impressive enough, but that may well understate the case. The range of agencies and causes served include Habitat for Humanity, the VITAL tutoring project, Oxfam, the Housing Partnership, the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, the St. Joseph Food Pantry, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, PIECE (which works with children in Jamaica), the Literacy Coalition, and Lawrence Assistance Reaching Youth. As you may know, LARY (as it is called) was named by the first President Bush as his 312th Point of Light in 1990, and last month the Appleton

Education Association named the program as the recipient of its annual “Friend of Education” award for commitment to and involvement with public education.

Lawrence students are certainly playing their part, on and beyond campus, during their undergraduate years and as alumni. Over the past seven years, for example, we know that nine Lawrence alumni have enrolled in the Peace Corps and eleven in AmeriCorps in the year immediately following graduation and more, surely, have done so at later points. Other graduates have gone on to serve a variety of non-governmental service agencies. Some alumni, in fact, have contributed their time and talent in particularly meritorious ways in lives of service. Alice Heath, Milwaukee-Downer Class of 1940, established the second hospice in the United States in 1976 and then opened a home for AIDS patients and their families, one of the first in the country. John Van Hengel, Class of 1944, founded Second Harvest—later known as International FoodBanking Services—pioneering the concept that surplus food could be used to feed the hungry. David Toycon, Class of 1969, is the president and CEO of World Vision Canada, an agency that provides relief services to the needy in 103 countries of the world. Jack Hafner, Class of 1950, left his career as a clinical psychologist to establish the Family Resource Center for the Chippewa Tribe in Wisconsin. Chris Laing-Martinez, Class of 1987, serves as a lay missionary in the Dominican Republic and has taught in the barrios of Nicaragua and Panama as well. Billie Pollard, Class of 1937, retired from teaching in 1981 and founded Literacy Education Services in Appleton to serve the Hmong community. And Connie Pfitsch Vanderhyden, Class of 1972 and a high school Spanish teacher, has worked with Mayan refugees who fled Guatemala to escape a government-sponsored terror campaign and helped them organize the cooperative community called *Nueva Esperanza*, New Hope, where she has lived and to which she returns each year. Joining them, though perhaps less prominently, are thousands of other Lawrence alumni whose service on behalf of others inspire us all to recognize that individuals can and do make a difference.

Lawrentians are also doing their part in government service, an arena that many of you may well wish to consider as you plot the trajectories of your post-graduate years. In the next three years, more than half of federal workers will be eligible for retirement, and more than seven out of ten top government managers can claim their pensions by 2004, so opportunities should abound. You should also know that 80 percent of all federal jobs are outside of Washington DC, so if you want to work for the government, you don’t have to go to the Puzzle Palace on the Potomac to do so; indeed, the federal government alone will try to fill more than 200,000 civilian jobs this year. Hundreds of Lawrence alumni have already seized such opportunities and hold positions of responsibility in federal, state, and local government. Their positions cover a range of areas and interests: several hold positions in the State Department, including Chuck Hunter, Class of 1983, who is with the U.S. Information Agency in Jerusalem; Susan Raddant, Class of 1999, a foreign service officer in Pakistan; Shaun Donnelly, Class of 1968, the former ambassador to Sri Lanka, who is now Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs; and Chris Murray, Class of 1975, who serves as Deputy Director of the Office of European Union and Regional Affairs. Thomas Skinner, Class of 1983, serves as the Great Lakes Regional Administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency, and here in Wisconsin, Rick Chandler, Class of 1974, is Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Revenue.

Other graduates serve in the Social Security Administration, the Census Department, the Department of Labor, the Department of Education, the Food and Drug Administration, the Treasury Department, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Park Service, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Defense, and the Central Intelligence Agency. Still others serve in a wide range of state agencies and programs, two are state representatives in Wisconsin, one is a candidate for lieutenant governor here, and others hold elective offices at the local and county levels throughout the country. Many serve in attorney general and district attorney offices and as judges. One is an investigator with the Las Vegas police department and another the forester for the City of Andover in Minnesota. The opportunities are many.

One of the dismal legacies of the Reagan years was the president's overt demeaning of those in government service, an attitude shared in some measure by the current President Bush, and columnist Thomas Friedman recently took the latter to task for it. Writing in the wake of the collapse of Enron and other corporate scandals, Friedman noted that what set the United States apart from most of the rest of the world was not that we don't have crooked C.E.O.s or bogus accounting excesses and that other countries do. Rather, he wrote, "what distinguishes America is our system's ability to consistently expose, punish, regulate and ultimately reform those excesses." Friedman goes on to point out that other nations may have "all the hardware of capitalism, but they don't have all the software—namely, an uncorrupted bureaucracy to manage the regulatory agencies, licensing offices, property laws and commercial courts. Indeed, what foreigners envy us most for is precisely the city Mr. Bush loves to bash: Washington. That is, they envy us for our alphabet soup of regulatory agencies: the S.E.C., the Federal Reserve, the F.A.A., the F.D.A., the F.B.I., the E.P.A., the I.R.S., the I.N.S." The people working in these agencies, Friedman asserts, are "the unsung guardians of America's civil religion," which is why, he wrote, he finds "Mr. Bush's constant denigrating of 'the bureaucracy' so offensive. After his own E.P.A. issued a report in June linking fossil-fuel use to global warming, Mr. Bush dismissed the study by saying that he 'read the report put out by the bureaucracy,' as if that explained why it couldn't be credible." Friedman concludes by asserting that "so much of America's moral authority to lead the world derives from the decency of our government and its bureaucrats," things not to be "sneered at" but "to be cherished, strengthened and praised."

To be fair, Mr. Bush has also spoken more positively of federal employment, calling it "a noble calling and a public trust" while vowing to make federal jobs "more challenging, more satisfying, and more fulfilling." With trust in government at a 35-year high following the tragedy of September 11, and with the anticipated turnover in the federal government workforce, Mr. Bush's pledge is promising, and government employment may well prove attractive to many of you, not so that you can become worker bees in the bureaucracy, but persons who can help craft and implement policies and programs to serve the general good. Through the offices of Kathy Heinzen in the Career Center, we will be working with the Partnership for Public Service to make such opportunities known to the Lawrence community. Interestingly, this morning's mail brought a Partnership for Public Service booklet entitled "Red White & Blue Jobs: Finding a Great Job in the Federal Government," which provides much useful information on the topic.

I recite all of this to make the point that Lawrence has much to celebrate regarding the commitment to volunteerism and service evidenced by members of our community and alumni, and to have that point stimulate all Lawrentians to engage in such service in the coming

academic year and beyond. But, one might well ask, is this record simply a matter of coincidence, or is there something about the style and culture of liberal education at Lawrence that contributes to it? I believe that it is the latter, though not in a simplistic and straightforward way. To be sure, education for the public good has long been the stated and assumed purpose of higher education. Colonial colleges took as their missions the task of preparing graduates to serve church and civil state, and the land-grant universities were established in the last century with the aim of serving the needs of the people of the several states. Independent colleges have shared in that purpose for centuries.

In the main, however, liberal education as practiced at Lawrence promotes students' aptitude for service not by exhortation—though you might hear this speech as exhortation—but through the values and attributes we seek to realize in our academic endeavors. In his book Experience and Nature, John Dewey asked a telling question: does the scholar's special knowledge, when "referred back to ordinary life-experiences...render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful? Or does it terminate in rendering the things of ordinary experience more opaque?" Clearly, at Lawrence we hope it is the former, and that through courses beginning with Freshman Studies—in which some of the most important and abiding human concerns are examined and debated—and those dealing with the experiences and cultural expressions of different peoples and societies over time and in the present, students will find themselves equipped with the knowledge and perspective to render our life experiences and our obligations to our fellows more luminous and fruitful. Not every course in every instance will meet this objective, but many do, and you should make use of the information and skills they can impart to you. Our degree requirements should certainly provide you with ample opportunity to do so.

In a recent op-ed piece in The New York Times, Dartmouth government professor James Murphy wrote about the teaching of civic virtues; his focus was on secondary schools, but his point has validity for higher education as well. Murphy reviewed the moments in American history when "patriotic" education was popular, but then observed that "just because civic virtues must be learned, does not mean they can easily be taught—and still less that they can be taught in schools. Nearly every political scientist who studies how people acquire knowledge and ideas about good citizenship agrees that schools and, in particular, civics courses have no significant effect on civic attitudes and very little, if any, effect on civic knowledge. Contemporary political science ratifies the wisdom of political philosophers, ancient and modern: public virtue is acquired only by active participation in public affairs." The moral aims of education, Murphy goes on to write, "are academic or intellectual virtues like thoroughness, perseverance, intellectual honesty...namely, the acquisition of traits that lead us to be conscientious in the pursuit of truth." At Lawrence, we express and enact our conscientious pursuit of truth through the Honor Code, by which we affirm the intellectual values of integrity and honesty and thus build a community of trust.

Indeed, these intellectual virtues are precisely the ones you should strive to develop at Lawrence. Stanley Katz, among whose claims to fame is the fact that his son teaches here, recently wrote that the challenge for higher education "is to train an elite cohort (these days increasingly selected on egalitarian terms) to lead society politically and socially, as well as to run its businesses and laboratories." In particular, he noted, that cohort needs to be "prepared in

those general critical thinking skills that have always been thought basic to liberal education.” Liberal arts colleges are better equipped to provide such preparation than other places, and I hope Lawrence especially so. Should we fail to accept this charge and obligation, if, to quote novelist Toni Morrison, we do not take seriously and rigorously our role “as guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or ménage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us.”

My point is that the call to civic engagement at Lawrence is represented by, but runs even deeper than, explicit calls to participate in charitable and public-sector activities. From the classical world to the present day, liberal education has been at its heart the education of individuals to be effective and exemplary citizens within a free society. The habits of mind you learn and apply here, the abilities you nurture and strengthen, the virtues you come to respect and enact, should help you serve society directly through the forms of work I have described and indirectly, but no less importantly, through your contributions as a liberally educated person to the communities within which you live and work. Education, wrote William Mather Lewis, “is not concerned primarily with intellectual luxuries, but with elements which make the individual a valuable member of society.”

If Lawrentians are to play their role in leading society politically and socially, therefore, it will involve more than providing service or seeking employment in government. It will require a kind of civic engagement that will become itself a kind of vocation. The new student issue of *The Lawrentian* referred to the Lawrence “bubble,” in which the so-called “real world” does not intrude. True, up to a point. But in his editorial Peter Gillette went on to encourage students to ““stay informed”—as indeed you should—about foreign policy, international affairs, domestic politics, and more. And once informed you should express your convictions on these issues, and let your voice and vote play a role in shaping our collective future. We have choices as a nation, and we elect officials who make them. We should choose the choosers wisely.

Finally, service may be, as columnist David Broder wrote recently, “the sturdy foundation of patriotism,” but service is no substitute for action. It is right and good that we seek to help the less fortunate, that we assist and assuage the poor. But we must remember that assuaging the condition of the poor is not the same as working to remedy the root causes of poverty. We can contribute goods to food pantries, raise funds for worthy causes through bake sales and the like, but patriotism—to country and to humankind—prompts us to undertake more radical action. William Sloane Coffin, who will be speaking here in two weeks, makes the point that we need “to see the difference between charity and justice. Charity is a matter of personal attributes, justice a matter of public policy. Charity seeks to alleviate the effects of injustice, justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it. Charity in no way affects the status quo, while justice leads inevitably to political confrontation.” Coffin goes on to say that the axis of evil about which President Bush has spoken does not consist of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, but “environmental degradation, pandemic poverty, and a world awash with weapons.”

Our stewardship of our planet, our concern for our fellow man, our hope for peace and security beckon us beyond service to civic engagement, to a commitment to apply our critical thinking skills to the realization of that justice that will confront the causes of environmental

degradation, pandemic poverty, the spread of nuclear weapons, human rights abuses, and other causes and crises, here and abroad. We should do more than alleviate the consequences of these evils; we should seek to rid the world of them. Our pursuit of truth should embolden us to pursue justice.

Inevitably and properly, each of us will contribute only modestly to such purposes. But we should understand the purposes, and we should contribute as we can. So serve and volunteer, and through those contributions of your time and talent become more aware of and sensitive to the problems you are seeking to alleviate. And then apply your skills and knowledge to change the causes of those problems. Let your time here prepare and stimulate you to be a valuable member of society. Liberal education for a life of service and civic engagement demands no less.