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Sustaining Dialogue: Educating for a Diverse Society

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Sustaining Dialogue: Educating for a Diverse Society

Matriculation Convocation 2014
Delivered by President Mark Burstein

Tim, thank you for that generous introduction.

It is an absolute pleasure to be here today to celebrate the opening of our 166th academic year. I want to begin by thanking you, the Lawrence and Appleton communities, for a first year of learning, growth, and forward momentum for this University we hold so dear.

I specifically want to thank Kathrine Handford for today's excellent organ music, Phillip Swan, Steve Sieck and members of the freshman class for beginning our year with such beauty. I look forward to many future performances. I also want to thank Tim Spurgin and the Convocations and Commencement Committee for assembling a thoughtful and provocative series for this year. I hope you will join me in attending each Convocation.

I start today needing to provide a disclaimer. I received many insightful responses to last fall's convocation speech, *Crossing the Threshold: Community as Curriculum*. One that stood out for me came from a member of the class of 2014 during my first open office hours. He explained that I did not understand Lawrence's culture. I had laid out a number of ideas in my convocation speech, but I had not followed up with a concrete plan to change the university in response to those ideas. This senior then informed me that my window was closing; I needed to get to it right away!

I have found our students uniformly smart about how change happens in the world - and certainly at Lawrence. (The only moment I debated this view was after reading a comment in the *Lawrentian* that I was the best looking man on campus. We may need to reconsider how we teach aesthetics.) But I return here today with ideas about the challenges that face higher education and how they affect our present and future - again without a strategy to implement change starting tomorrow. I hope you will give me a pass for lack of planning, and continue to engage with me and with each other on the ideas discussed at all our Convocations.

Ferdinand Tonnies, a German sociologist, starts his seminal book, *Community and Society*, published in 1887, with a deceptively simple idea about human interaction. He wrote, "Human wills stand in manifold relations to one another. Every such relationship is a mutual action . . . These actions are of such a nature that they tend either toward preservation or destruction of the other will or life; that is, they are either positive or negative." Tonnies believed that successful social connection requires speaking and listening. Without this engaged interaction, human connection would be destroyed.

Over the past twenty years, many have mourned the decay of human interactions. Robert Putnam, for example, in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, assembles voting patterns, survey data, affiliation to religious and social

service organizations, and other information to show that American society has slowly lost its social cohesion. For example, he writes, eighty percent of Americans said we had become less civil in a survey taken in 1996. In a 1999 survey two thirds of Americans said that civic life had weakened in recent years and that our society was focused more on the individual than the community.

This general concern reappears in the writing of many people who believe we tend to associate, to live, to interact mostly with people like ourselves. Charles Blow, in the New York Times, coined the term “self-sorting” to describe the trend to live grouped by race, education, and income.

Faith Popcorn, a futurist hired by many corporations to determine social trends lists “Clanning” – the tendency to belong to a group that validates one’s own belief system – as one of the seventeen trends that reveal the future. Just from one vantage point, political beliefs: we now gravitate to red or blue states, and we choose car brands, stores and news media according to our political views. We do this, she thinks, because we need to find a familiar anchor in an unstable world.

These trends affect us personally, but how do they affect those of us who care about higher education and the campus communities we foster? Essays collected by Ellen Condliffe Lagemann and Harry Lewis, former deans of Harvard College, argue that we in higher education are at least partially responsible for this trend. The editors write: “colleges and universities have a broad responsibility for the future of citizenship. They have become the central switching stations of life in the United States and other democratic societies.

Free societies will not thrive,” they warn, “unless colleges . . . understand that the civic health of the nation is one of their central responsibilities.” They believe that colleges have over emphasized the preparation of students for careers – instead of educating them to be citizens.

In another essay in this collection, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, former president of Bates, suggests that liberal arts colleges have a unique role in this effort to educate an informed and skilled citizenry. Hansen argues that colleges must teach listening: “Listening is a powerful and difficult skill,” she writes, “learning how to listen to what is unfamiliar or disturbing to received opinion and commonly understood ways of thinking should be essential to . . . higher education.” For her, even listening is not enough. We need to learn to engage with speakers who have “unfamiliar” or even “disturbing” views.

This skill needs to be taught in college, she believes, because the dialogue that results will strengthen our civic life.

Hansen’s view has been echoed by many including Father Ted Hesburgh, former president of Notre Dame, who supported the university’s invitation to Barack Obama to speak at commencement in 2009 -- even though the president was clearly pro-choice and the university’s public stance is pro-life.

He said that Notre Dame should offer a crossroads of ideas. Universities must be, “a commonplace where people who disagree can get together, instead of throwing bricks at one another” he said where they can discuss, from different perspectives, the difficult problems facing society today. “Solutions are going to come out of people from universities,” he predicted. “They aren’t going to come from people running around with signs.”

Hansen and Hesburgh both argue that in order to create citizens, colleges and universities need to fight the trend toward self-sorting, or clanning. We need to open up dialogues on our campuses to the widest possible range of views.

It is time for colleges and universities to ask whether we are succeeding in creating environments where students learn to listen to views different than their own. Maybe even disturbing perspectives. But, the list of cancelled commencement speakers this past spring, cancelled because campus communities disapproved of them, indicates that we need to work with students, faculty, staff and alumni—to create the “central switching stations” our societies need: to shape environments where we can learn to listen—even to what is “unfamiliar, even disturbing.”

Instead, at colleges like Haverford, Rutgers, and Smith, communal opposition to opinions outside the campus mainstream led, last spring, to declined or rescinded commencement speaker invitations. In response some commencement speakers insisted on the central role universities must assume as communities where opposing opinions are discussed, evaluated, and debated.

Michael Bloomberg, former mayor of New York City, whose invitation to Harvard’s commencement incited many to demand a retraction by the university, used much of his speech to discuss this theme. He said, “Tolerance for other people’s ideas, and the freedom to express your own, are inseparable values at great universities. Joined together, they form a sacred trust that holds the basis of our democratic society . . . that trust is perpetually vulnerable to the tyrannical tendencies of monarchs, mobs, and majorities.”

Others also spoke out against the “tyrannical tendencies of majorities” to control campus speech. The most moving example, I believe, was Ruth Simmons, commencement speaker at Smith. The first African American president of Smith and later of Brown, Simmons was asked to substitute for a commencement speaker who in the end declined her invitation because of campus objections.

Simmons offered a personal experience to illustrate her main argument: “One’s voice grows stronger,” she said, “in encounters with opposing views. My first year after leaving Smith, I had to insist that Brown permit a speaker whose every assertion was dangerous and deeply offensive to me on a personal level. Indeed, he maintained that Blacks were better off having been enslaved. Attending his talk and hearing his perspective was personally challenging but not in the least challenging to my convictions about the absolute necessity of permitting others to hear him say these heinous things.”

“I could have avoided the talk as his ideas were known to me, but to have done so would have been to choose personal comfort over a freedom whose value is so great to my own freedoms that hearing his unwelcome message could hardly be assessed as too great a cost.”

Simmons continued to develop her view of the essential role universities must play to create environments that allow dialogue to thrive. She said, “Universities have a special obligation to protect free speech, open discourse and the value of protest. The collision of views and ideologies is in the DNA of the academic enterprise.” Many of us here can cite experiences like Simmons’ – moments when hearing opinions different from our own reinforced – or changed our conviction. As she said, this activity is central to who we are as a university. It’s an activity that must not, as Bloomberg warned, be censored.

In the end what does this mean for us, here, at Lawrence? As a community, we clearly believe that a Lawrence education should prepare Lawrentians for more than career success. As we say in our mission statement: “Lawrence prepares students for lives of achievement, responsible and meaningful citizenship, lifelong learning, and personal fulfillment.” Many, if not all of us, would also agree with Bloomberg, Hansen and Simmons that engaged listening, and openness to a wide range of views are essential skills. We depend on students learning these skills to fulfill the aspirations described in our own mission statement.

But do we live up to the expectations we place on ourselves and that others suggest are necessary to fulfill our mission? I know that faculty here work hard to include a broad range of views in the classroom. And conflicts over speakers have rarely happened here. But are we a place that invites a range of opinions? Have we created an environment in which unfamiliar, maybe even disturbing perspectives on crucial topics are heard? Or does much of what we discuss here in Appleton reflect views that are comfortable to us?

On the central questions that face society today like: the definition of marriage and gender, the role of religion in society, the moment when life starts and ends, the level of human impact on the environment – are we mostly hosting speakers and guests who represent the viewpoints of the campus majority?

There have been moments in our history when we took full advantage of our location in a purple state, when we hosted speakers with dramatically different political beliefs. An extreme example of such inclusiveness occurred when students invited George Lincoln Rockwell, the founder and head of the American Nazi Party, to speak on campus in 1967. The invitation caused much campus unrest.

In response to one of the many letters President Tarr received against Rockwell’s speech he stated, “At some age each person must decide what he wishes to hear and read. Certainly young people have arrived at this point in life when they enter a college or university. To tell the students that they cannot invite Mr. Rockwell, despite what he represents, is really to tell our students that they should not decide these important

matters for themselves. This is hardly in keeping with the quality of a university education.”

Many alumni who were on campus at that time cite this event as transformative in their Lawrence experience. Certainly sitting in that audience provided for many in our community an experience like the one President Simmons had in her first year at Brown.

To be sure, hearing thoughtful views that reinforce our own perspectives provide the reassurance Faith Popcorn suggests we hunger for at a time when the world feels turbulent and unsafe. But the tendency to reinforce existing views and opinions in no way reaches the goal of creating a “central switching station” for democracy and does not teach us how to listen to views that are unfamiliar or even disturbing.

Frank Bruni recently wrote in the New York Times: “ As we pepper students with contradictory information and competing philosophies about college’s role as an on ramp to professional glory, we should talk as much about the way college can establish patterns of reading, thinking and interacting that buck the current tendency among Americans to tuck themselves into enclaves of confederates with the same politics, the same cultural tastes, the same incomes. That tendency fuels the little and big misunderstandings that are driving us apart.”

For us to create the Lawrence we aspire to, we all, including me, will have to put aside our desire for reassurance in these troubling times and encourage debate from diverse perspectives on the critical issues that face the world. I do not doubt that working to better foster such a campus environment will cause pain for some, if not many of us as Simmons related, and as many alumni urgently insisted in the weeks before Rockwell spoke on our campus.

But if we are successful, we will learn the skills we need. They are essential skills. They can help us all to prepare ourselves and one another, -- “for lives of achievement, responsible and meaningful citizenship, lifelong learning, and personal fulfillment.”

I believe we can act, influenced by this debate happening in our society. Let us find ways to enrich the dialogue we offer and engage in on this campus. If we succeed, we will be nourishing the roots of democracy here and in the world. I look forward to speaking with each of you on how we can accomplish this goal.

Thank you for joining us today and best wishes for an excellent academic year.