RECLAIMING THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Remarks delivered by
William G. Durden
President, Dickinson College
at the
BRINGING THEORY TO PRACTICE
Recognition Luncheon
June 7, 2006

Ladies and Gentleman, thank you for this opportunity to address you as we celebrate the importance of the Bringing Theory to Practice project. My remarks today suggest a symbiotic relationship between theory and practice that is deeply rooted in the genesis of American higher education and is defining of the post-American Revolution intention of learning in the new world. Regrettably, I also lament that, today, this organic relationship has fragmented beyond recognition. This fragmentation has brought us to a crossroads that demands we reexamine, recontextualize and redefine for the 21st century the relationship between these two concepts in American higher education. This project—Bringing Theory to Practice—can, better than any other, achieve these ambitions.

A Distinctively American Higher Education

A distinctively American approach to higher education coincided with recognized independence of our country at the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783. Our founding fathers instinctively understood that a nation whose success depended upon engaged and informed citizens required an education that reflected the demands of the new form of government; thus, they advanced active synergy between the classroom and the community—an education that linked theory to practice.

Just as our founding fathers hammered out the parameters of a new democracy, they also handed us the guidelines for an approach to undergraduate education that differed significantly from the isolated, “monkish” ivory tower model prevalent throughout 16th-, 17th-, and18th –century Europe—a model that also characterized American’s colonial, theologically oriented colleges and universities.

One of the most passionate and eloquent advocates of a distinctive American education was Dr. Benjamin Rush, who founded Dickinson College. Rush's fundamental precepts, debated regularly with Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, John Dickinson and others, offer us valuable guidance as we seek to bridge the chasm that has developed between theory and practice and, by so doing, reclaim those elements that are distinctive to American higher education and admired throughout the world.

For Rush, an American liberal arts education was to be, above all, useful—useful to oneself, but also to society. This education was to accomplish nothing less than preparation of those citizen-leaders who would shape the economy, government and social structures of the young democracy. The liberal arts were not effete; they were grounded in and enhanced by the commerce of people and "things."

Rush adamantly believed that students must be engaged with their society in order to prepare them to lead in it. Rush had no tolerance for "the college high on the hill," physically and symbolically removed from the people. For this reason, he strategically located Dickinson College a short walk from the county courthouse, fully expecting students to make the trek after class on a regular basis to observe government in action. Through the creation of debating societies, Rush sought to give students the opportunity to discuss the most pressing issues of the day, an opportunity that connected rather than isolated them from emerging national developments. Rush even went so far as to recommend that students live not on campus, but with families in the town where they could be mentored daily in community values and citizenship.

Rush's conception of an American liberal arts education did not draw arbitrary boundaries among students' classroom experiences, their extracurricular activities and their living arrangements. It was an educational approach designed to encourage character development and one that valued public service as a form of patriotism. Indeed, Rush identified two types of patriotism in America—taking up arms when appropriate and, as importantly, caring for other human beings.

American Higher Education in the 21st Century

We have, I am afraid, lost this vision of a distinctively American approach to higher education. A comprehensive and ultimately useful liberal arts education has fragmented; we have

compartmentalized its parts. There has been a rupture, a disconnect between the student life and academic sides of our enterprise.

While Rush's idea of having all students live with families in the community is unrealistic in the 21st century, is the fundamental premise behind this idea outdated? Shouldn't we still be striving to provide daily mentoring to our students in community values and citizenship? Isn't it our responsibility to develop the 21st century contexts that accomplish this most basic, and most important of goals? Isn't this our challenge as we seek to bring theory to practice? And should not the current "accountability movement" in higher education extend beyond the measurement of disciplinary academic ability to that of citizenship? Shouldn't we be seeking evidence of informed voting in public elections, community volunteerism, monetary contributions to non-profit organizations, standing for public office, and submitting articulate, logical letters about issues of public importance to the media?

Higher education has derailed on both the academic and student life sides of the house. The academic side would like to claim that it has held steadfast to its mission and faculty, all too frequently, placing blame on student life for the failure to make these important connections. This line of thinking, however, ignores the fact that student life divisions are a relatively recent creation in American higher education and that faculty should also, as they have in the past, shoulder the responsibility of providing a comprehensive educational experience for our students. Indeed, in Dickinson College's original 1783 charter, the faculty has total responsibility for the behavior of students in and out of the classroom.

In fact, in too many instances, faculty have become far too entrenched within the academy and their respective fields of study. Increasingly insular and disengaged from the communities and the world in which they are located, faculty are talking to and writing for only those within their narrowly defined specialties.

And what about student life? This division has burgeoned at most institutions over the past two decades—but in too many instances, we have allowed it to mushroom without clear purpose or

direction. Instead, we have reacted helter skelter in our rush to meet rising student demands and challenges. We are "over-offering" and thus introducing a hyper-consumerism into the academic setting. We have built 24-hour student unions and fitness centers that resemble cruise ships. In our haste to demonstrate that we understand that engaged students are healthy, energetic students, we have scrambled to provide them with opportunities to engage in—well, everything—to include every conceivable aspect of their own selves and its unfettered desires.

We have not, however, organized this plethora of activities into a cohesive or progressive series of meaningful, educative experiences. Instead, we have provided our students with a shopping mall of choices without overarching purpose. In the process, we have created a lot of busy, busy students, many of whom are intent on adding activity upon activity to their undergraduate resumes. We have, in short, succeeded in giving students the opportunity to be busy—but simply being busy is not the same as being meaningfully engaged with society and understanding the connection of those activities to the larger educational mission of the institution.

We are now recognizing that many of today's students are arriving with different baggage than those of previous generations. The 21st century student, many experts claim, is fragile, distracted and, in many instances hell-bent on succeeding in a preconceived course of study. Many approach college already confirmed in a personal ideology (often politically partisan) and they wish college not to challenge, but rather to confirm their notions and aspirations. Relying frequently on excessive parental affirmation that extends into the classroom, the residence halls and the athletic fields, many students are increasingly eschewing the responsibility of making their own decisions while focusing instead upon fully anticipated personal gain, on the accepted fact that they will succeed no matter what they try. They are, in a word, not self-absorbed, but self-important. They are as Jean M. Twenge claims in her recent book, *Generation Me,* "confident, assertive, entitled," and yet, "more miserable than ever before!"

The type of "usefulness" that builds good citizens through service to society has all too frequently fallen by the wayside. While there is a notable rise in community service or volunteerism among college students today, this often occurs because such activity is viewed as a necessary component for "credentialing" personal aspirations. Of course, there are notable exceptions to these negative

trends. Yet, in general, it is this decoupling of the academic from student life that has resulted in today's undergraduates experiencing what Harry Lewis, former dean of Harvard, describes provocatively in his recent book, *Excellence Without a Soul,* as "the hollowness of undergraduate education," the total abdication of colleges' "moral authority to shape the souls of students," and the absence of any definitive statements about what it is to be an educated person.

Reclaiming our Distinctiveness

It is time to reclaim and revitalize the distinctiveness that characterized American higher education during the earliest days of our democracy. At the dawn of a century that promises to be breathtaking in both its challenges and opportunities, we must ensure that our students are prepared and willing to take on the responsibility of global citizenship and shake free of their obsessive focus on themselves. We must insure that they know how the United States "works" and what it values (in all that complexity) and they must be prepared to engage and listen carefully to opinions expressed by the rest of the world. We must be willing to admit that we have lost the connection between theory and practice that will most readily make this global understanding possible, and we must seek to redefine this connection in a 21st century context.

To do so, we must return to a conception of undergraduate education that is comprehensive and does not compartmentalize students' experiences into artificial components. We must return to the notion of a "useful" education that encompasses personal *and* public usefulness, demonstrating to our students that personal success is most complete when it contributes to the public good. Dr. Rush was very early onto this notion. In a 1773 letter to his countrymen on patriotism, he stated, "The social spirit is the true selfish spirit, and men always promote their own interest most in proportion as they promote that of their neighbors and their country." Such ambition will require us to rethink totally our approach to undergraduate education.

As a starting point, we must conceive of and treat student life and the academic program as co-equal partners in a shared endeavor that begins as a student prepares for the transition to college and

which continues as an organized and purposefully sustained priority until commencement. The residential experience continues to be *the* characteristic that distinguishes American undergraduate education from that found in other countries and it should remain a centrally defining feature. The challenge is to incorporate it into the entire educational experience rather than treating it as an ancillary, less serious partner. Failure to do so places the historic advantage of an American higher education at risk and lends increasing advantage to many for-profit universities that offer a new—and far less costly—business model for higher education that eschews athletics, residential life and student life for the bottom line.

We must find ways to encourage faculty to think differently about how they reach and relate to students. The answer is not, as some have suggested, merely to coax faculty into living in residence halls, a concept which presumes that physical juxtaposition will establish a cohesive educational experience. Rather, we need to think creatively about how to bridge the artificial chasm between academic and student life more fundamentally conceived. We need to focus on ways to engage students in a seamless experience that moves easily and naturally in and out of the classroom—an experience that involves faculty in both arenas.
We all have been inspired by a professor whose passion for his or her discipline is absolutely contagious. We need to enhance the ways in which our faculty can model behavior that shows students what it is like to be an engaged scholar who is connected to the wider world with a sense of wonder, bliss and obligation. Equally important, we need to give our students glimpses of faculty interactions in their own communities. They must see the "whole" professor—an individual who lives beyond his or her discipline with an inquisitive curiosity and a commitment to better the world by seeking rigorously more understanding. We need, in other words, to illustrate to our students—through proactive mentorship—that a liberal arts education is a lifelong habit of the mind and action. And finally, we need to make certain that the graduate schools are incorporating these concepts as they prepare the next generation of the undergraduate professoriate.

Similarly, we must demand student life professionals who push beyond attention to the endlessly affirming desires of our students. We must ask them to act as far stronger role models for advancing a campus climate of discourse about issues that matter beyond the highly circumscribed topic of the

self and how it “feels at a particular moment.” We must ask them to encourage students’ engagement in an expansive interpretation of the life of the mind and to advance a more realistic commentary about students’ performance and aspiration that tempers their unfettered, often ungrounded self assessment. We must ask them to do so with a candor not found in education—collegiate or pre-collegiate—for decades.

We need, in the final analysis, to push beyond the ivory tower mentality that our founding fathers so ardently rejected for American higher education but which, nevertheless, has seeped steadily back into the mindset of most of our country’s colleges and universities. Frankly, I suggest that all sectors of American life, *except* liberal arts higher education, revolted against the practices of royalist, privileged England. “Learning for learning’s sake,” instead of the objective of an ultimately useful study dominates still American liberal education. According to Dean Lewis, Harvard appears to set the example. Ladies and gentlemen, it is high time to complete the revolution.

Introducing a more comprehensive and generous approach to undergraduate education will require nothing short of a major cultural shift for many institutions. Developing the synergy between the academic program and student life that brings theory to practice will require that long-established habits be replaced with creative thinking and a willingness for change—a most formidable challenge in a profession notorious for maintaining stability and status quo in its basic organization and intent.

Perhaps most important will be the need to reassess purposes for which we reward our faculty—an exercise that will ask us to reexamine the most fundamental aspects of our mission. We must encourage our faculty to connect to the world beyond our campus boundaries through service learning and applied research. We must find or reallocate resources to help faculty establish networks with the broader community. We must help faculty make community connections. We must challenge faculty to evolve the definition and scope of substantive scholarship in a liberal arts setting and we must support them as they explore new pedagogies and introduce new methods of research in and out of the classroom.

We must recognize that these activities can and should be the foundation for legitimate, serious scholarship and service for faculty and integral for advancing a distinctively engaging residential life for students. We must give these activities appropriate weight and merit when evaluating faculty performance. In the final analysis, we will only be successful if we create a solid scholarly foundation of new knowledge, pedagogy and residential life out of this renewed synthesis that will define American higher education for the 21st century as was intended in the late 18th century.

To the casual observer, all of this talk about citizenship and engagement with community may seem superfluous and unnecessary. Look in virtually any college catalogue or on any Web site and you will find platitudes and promises touting the institution's commitment to these ideals. While I suppose that the fact that such pronouncements exist is a step in the right direction, those of us in this room know that the real work has yet to be done. To paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, "it is in our lives and not from our words, that [our value] must be read. . . . By the same test, the world must judge me." There you have it. By the same test, so must the world judge us in higher education. This is true accountability—devotion to and deliverance upon our original post-Revolution intention.

I applaud AAC&U and the Charles Englehard Foundation for initiating this national dialogue and call to action. The Bringing Theory To Practice project is the most vibrant and honest effort that has been developed to prod colleges and universities into examining their core purpose as originally intended. It is through efforts like this that we can, that we must, reclaim the distinctiveness of American higher education by providing our students with a useful, comprehensive undergraduate experience intended to prepare them to become engaged, informed and committed citizens intent on creating a more just and compassionate democratic society.

Thank you.