

The Value of Liberal Arts Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century
Convocation of the College of Arts and Sciences
September 12, 2012
David Powers, Dean

I want to spend some time talking about liberal arts education today. As we think about things like enrollment numbers, faculty FTE, the highlights of the year and the five year strategic plan, it is easy to lose sight of why we are here, what we are as a college, faculty and staff, and why what we do is invaluable, truly invaluable, for our students, our community, our state, and the world. The College of Arts and Sciences includes professional programs as well as liberal arts programs, they're both important parts of who we are, but our base is in the liberal arts, which support and inform our professional programs in fundamental ways. So, I want to talk now about our base, and really our existential foundation. I started thinking about this after a particular event last year, and have spent much of the summer reflecting on it, and on how to move forward.

I'll start with a few non-sequitirs. First: "A girl got a pet goat. She liked to go running with her pet goat. She played with her pet goat in her house. She played with her pet goat in her yard." That quote is from a book called *The Pet Goat*. President Bush was reading that book to second graders in Florida when he was informed of the attack on the World Trade Center. This year, those second graders are our freshmen. They began first grade in the year 2000. We are now providing a 21st century education to students who have only ever received a 21st century education.

Second quote: "Borneo is actually an island, not a country. However, the chief exports of the nation of Brunei, whose capitol is on Borneo, are crude oil and liquefied natural gas." Here is the context for that quote. Several years ago I sent out an email to some other members of the psychology department about committee work we were doing. At the end I noted that they should feel free to contact me if they have any questions. A dear friend and colleague emailed me back, "Okay, I have a question, what's the chief export of the country of Borneo?" My first reaction was "yeah, yeah, very funny..." and my second reaction was "...and very easy." So I quickly Googled it, and forwarded this information to the committee. There were no further questions.

Third quote, "Fozzi Bear cuddle party!" This last quote is from an information source of highest interest in the world right now, the information the world is asking to have sent to them. Seriously. To get this, I Googled "most commonly followed Twitter page", I signed up for Twitter, and joined 27 million people who all follow the most commonly followed Twitter feed, the tweets of Lady Gaga. That was one of them. "Fozzi Bear cuddle party!" I have no idea what it means, but 27 million people are loving it.

The point of these three quotes is that the current generation of students, for as long as they can remember, have been able to access virtually any information that exists, of any quality, at any moment. This is the result of the increasing pace of technological change, particularly in communication. Things move and change increasingly more quickly in a world where it is often more difficult to avoid information, more difficult to avoid communication, than it is to access it. In that context, liberal arts education is more important and more valuable than ever. We as the academy have the responsibility of communicating that value, a value that clearly includes but goes well beyond employability. So I thought I would talk today about why I think it is particularly important to reaffirm the value of liberal arts education now, talk about what I've been doing and plan to do around this issue, then look at what we can do together.

As I mentioned, we had the good fortune of receiving a \$100,000 grant from Wells Fargo Bank to support the Urban Farm in the Environmental Studies program. We celebrated this at a luncheon last November. There was one person at the luncheon who was particularly pleased to meet me. He was a history major in college, though not at Seattle U, and made a point of coming up to me and saying "I just want to tell you that the liberal arts are very important." He kept going, talking about how most of the best ideas they support with bank funding come from liberal arts majors. I presume he knew what he was talking about, because he is a Senior Vice President of Business Development. His job is to decide who gets loans for new businesses or new business ideas. He kept going, on and on, about the value of liberal arts education. He said "Most of the creative people with the great ideas, they're liberal arts majors. The lawyers, the accountants, they have important roles, we need them, they're the referees and the scorekeepers, but the liberal arts majors come up with the great business ideas, the ideas that change things." Now that's what he said, I'm not going to go that far, for two reasons. First, I know (and of course he knows) there are creative lawyers and accountants because we hire them, and many of them were Arts & Sciences majors as undergrads. Second, I still have to go to the Dean's Council meetings with the Dean of the Law School and the Dean of the Business School, but his passion struck me. It made me think about how easy it is to accept the assumption that changes in technology, or even the much proclaimed and clear need for more science education, somehow means that the other liberal arts are less valuable now, particularly because they make students less desirable as future employees.

So a banker was more enthusiastic than me about liberal arts education, and had more passion than I was able to muster in the hurly-burly of the fall quarter budget season. This got my attention, and he isn't the only business person who believes in, who understands, the value of a liberal arts education. The American Association of Colleges and Universities conducted a nationwide survey of many different stakeholders in American education, including a subsample of employers, and part of that survey specifically gauged employer interest in liberal education learning outcomes. Sure enough, 70% of employers wanted colleges to place more emphasis on Science and Technology, but there was more. Seventy-five percent of employers wanted more

emphasis on ethical decision making, 81% of employers wanted more emphasis on critical thinking and analytic reasoning, and 89% of employers wanted more emphasis on written and oral communication. Employers want colleges to emphasize these things; these responses were from employers, not faculty, not students. It is important to make this point right now, and make it loudly and publicly, because conventional wisdom can overwhelm facts and data. It is clear that employers do value what we provide, very much, to the point of wanting more of it, so we need to make sure students, prospective students, parents and all the members of our communities and constituencies understand that.

Now, these opinions of employers are good news, (though news that shouldn't be surprising), and parents and students alike receive comfort from hearing about employability. But we know it does more than that, we know that liberal arts education is a means to a richer, fuller life well beyond professional engagement. I think for our part, we're often too abstract in how we articulate that, and in tough economic times it becomes harder for people to hear and believe our sincere but sometimes vague message of the inchoate value of this \$170,000 experience. While we should mention employability advantages, I believe we also should maintain the high ground of the greater good of liberal arts education. Our message can be rightly positioned as "of course this will help you get a job, and of course it will help you succeed in job transitions across your career, and of course this will help you go farther professionally than you could otherwise, but that's the beginning, a part of a richer life, part of the broader picture of citizenship and service and wholeness and a full life in the 21st century."

We educate within a set of higher order values toward a communal greater good. We train the mind to be critical, flexible, and expansive beyond the constraints of the present. The liberal arts imbue richness and creativity into our inner and outer worlds. They allow those who are open to them to better see, understand, and generate the richness and possibility of things both within and beyond ourselves, our community, and our world.

I think it is time to be more active in proclaiming the value of what we offer to prospective students and our civilization, because it is of great value for self, other, and the world, and because conventional wisdom (perhaps better termed conventional opinion) seems to be turning away from or against the liberal arts, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, at the worst time for our future. With the persistence of economic troubles our value is being increasingly missed in an unreasoned contraction of fear. I believe that it falls to us as the keepers of this tradition to combat that.

So what do we do? Here are some things that are already happening and an idea for us to try together. Earlier this summer I was invited by the Provost of Evergreen College to a meeting of academic administrators from higher education institutions across the state of Washington. This included public and private institutions, community colleges, four year colleges, research universities, and other organizations associated with higher education. The attendees were deans, associate deans, provosts, associate provosts; a full gamut with roughly fifty people in attendance. The point of the meeting was to talk

about how to refresh the citizens of our state on the value of liberal arts education. I should mention the Provost of Evergreen, the convener, is a biologist. We organized an executive committee for the group, the first real mark of progress in any academic venture, to develop the way forward (and I'm on that committee) and we talked about some strategies and tactics for getting the message out.

The first strategy is to have examples from those who have benefitted from liberal arts education, and to have them speak about it. Our alumni, many of whom have risen to distinction in a variety of roles, are our best spokespeople. We can all think of two or three alumni who have truly distinguished themselves, and who could speak about the positive impact of a liberal arts education. I believe that together we could easily think of one hundred outstanding alumni who would be willing to stand as examples and write one or two paragraphs on the value of their liberal arts education in our college. I believe that such examples, from their own lives, best demonstrate the real and living impact of the liberal arts. I am working on a list right now of a wide variety of Seattle U liberal arts graduates from Arts & Sciences who feel they have benefitted concretely from their liberal arts education here. With 42 different programs in our college, if we can come up with five names from each and two or three of them agree to write about their experience, we'll have one hundred.

I'll start with two on a theme that's important to me professionally, mental health. Pete Chiarelli, a Seattle U Arts and Sciences political science major, is a recently retired four-star general. He used his position as Vice Chief of Staff of the Army to start a major initiative within the military, and after retirement a non-profit organization outside of it, that focuses on the "Invisible Wounds" of Post-traumatic stress and closed-head injury. His goal is tom improve treatment and care for veterans who come back from combat with these problems. Danielle Poole, photography major from the class of 2008, took a more winding road. As a junior she went to Africa as part of the IDIP program. After her experience teaching photography to children in Lesotho, she decided that she wanted to go into a pre-med program, and then shifted to earn an MPH at Brown University. She now works at the University of Washington in the Kenya Research Project, examining the benefits of photography training courses for children with mental health issues. I can't imagine such work could exist without a broad liberal arts education base. These are two examples or Arts & Sciences alumni who are making a significant, creative difference in our world today, I know there are many more, doing widely varying things, and I look forward to hearing them and sharing them to show what they do, and what we do.

The other thing we worked on at the Liberal Arts Washington conference was our own thoughts about the value of liberal arts education. The goal was to make the best case you could for liberal arts education in one minute, just 60 seconds. It was a Sixty second spiel, fitting nicely into a 21st century attention span. As I had been thinking about this for awhile, I had an idea of what I wanted to say, or more precisely, of the valid case that I thought would best resonate right now, in our time and place. So I went first. Now I've worked on it a little since then, for today, but here's the latest, time it:

Our students are in an age when information of any quality is accessible anywhere at any time. Accessing information is incredibly easy. What is much harder is to understand information, to determine the quality of it, to learn things deeply and think about them critically, and then to know how to then move forward creatively, ethically, for a greater good. Also, the ability to generate new knowledge and solid communication skills are more important than ever. Today's job market shifts dramatically even every six or seven years. A liberal arts education provides solid transferable skills across a career, but it also creates a lasting thirst for knowledge and a breadth and depth of mind and spirit that serve our graduates well in every facet of our lives.

That's it.

What we do as an intellectual community, as the academy, is critically important for our culture and people in our community and beyond, and increasingly important for the world beyond our own species. In the busyness of the school year and across our careers it can be difficult to stay in touch with the value of what we do, with the greater good I believe we truly serve. The first step in refreshing others on the critical value of what we do is to refresh ourselves. Make no mistake; we, faculty and staff alike, have a critical role not only in providing liberal arts education but in promoting and demonstrating the value of that education as a base pillar of our culture, and a base pillar for hope moving forward. This is not only for majors in our disciplines, but equally important, through the core curriculum for our young engineers, business majors, our future nurses. The benefits of liberal arts education are just as valuable for them. What we do for all our students is of value, of quality, noble and good.

So, I'm standing up here, with a paper copy of these remarks, no internet link or PowerPoint, no iPad, none of the technological tools (or supports, or crutches) that are now "fundamental" in 21st century education and that you know I love, right? Talking about the fundamentals of liberal arts education that gave me the ability to develop and put together these thoughts and the fundamentals of liberal arts education that allow you to think broadly and critically about what I'm communicating or at least trying to communicate. The quality liberal arts education we provide will allow our students not only to master the tools and milieu of the 21st century, but to lead the shaping of that milieu from a position of creativity and critical thought, toward a greater good for all.

So, there are two things I'd ask you to do. Later, in your departments, think about a list of the 5 or 6 alumni, a mix of recent and distinguished longer term graduates, who you believe could and would be great examples, who could write just a paragraph on the value of a liberal arts education in their lives. From those we'll develop a list, hopefully about one hundred alumni, to have one hundred alumni voices for liberal arts education. That will go on the website, maybe on Facebook, and who knows, maybe I'll tweet about it to Lady Gaga!

But for right now, I've given my sixty second spiel, I want to know yours, how would you make the case, and what the common themes are in what we'd say. Let's share what we see as most valuable, whether you are teaching in the undergrad programs or in grad programs. So, we'll take five minutes to develop your own, and then go around

the table taking turns giving your sixty second spiel. At the end, I'd ask each table to come up with a list of the most common themes or words at each table, and we'll gather those and share them with the group. Thanks for listening, and thanks for being a part of liberal arts education in our college in the 21st century