

Iona College Convocation Address
September 8, 2015
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Thank you Dr. Eodice for your gracious introduction. After conversations with your president, Dr. Nyre, and the Chair of the Academic Committee on the Board of Trustees, Dr. Robinson, I sense a strong commitment to the humanities at Iona College. I applaud this commitment, and I am honored to share in this important recognition and celebration of a new academic year. It is essential to celebrate the commencement of each new academic year. There is much worth celebrating. For one, we allies of the Academy—students, staff, faculty, and administrators—are here, alive and well, engaged in the life of the mind and the development of our human capacities. We celebrate our renewed ability to learn and teach and manage and lead. We also celebrate the assurance, however fleeting it sometimes feels, that the larger society still regards higher education as relevant and good. We celebrate new opportunities for growth and connection, opportunities for inspiration, insight, and collaboration. Thank you for taking time today to honor and embrace the opportunities for renewal and transformation Iona provides. Let me tell you a story that illustrates why I think our educational endeavors are worth celebrating.

Connecting the Core

Recently, Dr. Lee Nordt, Dean of Baylor’s College of Arts and Sciences, convened a meeting of his faculty to ask a difficult question. “Should we stay together as a college?” There it was. Out in the open. Posed as a genuine question to the entire Arts and Sciences faculty. Rumors had circulated for years about a possible division of Arts and Sciences. The Dean was asking quite seriously: should Arts & Sciences continue to operate as a single academic unit—the largest unit on campus comprised of 60 percent of the faculty—or end their existence as a

single unit and become two independent colleges: a college of arts and humanities and a college of natural and social sciences. He probed further. “*Why* should we stay together? On what grounds should we stay together? Don’t say historic precedent; don’t cite organizational ease. Tell me what we can do collectively that we cannot do independently.”

The science faculty responded first. What would they say? Would they assert the preeminence of science within the academy, the practical and commercial application of science to industry, or the enviable employment rates of their graduates? To the delight of the humanists, the science faculty argued that the humanities are essential to scientific literacy. For our work to have meaning, they asserted, it must be grounded in a narrative of human experience and understanding. We need our colleagues in history, languages, literature, theology, music, and yes, *even* philosophy—to situate within a broader context of the human and social condition discoveries in the lab, innovations in technology, and accounts of the natural world. Our humanities colleagues see and articulate human need and limitation—the need for clean water and affordable health care, for example, needs that are fundamental to human flourishing. And they see other needs too, needs I regard as equally essential: a yearning for beauty and community and the sacred and transcendent. The humanities faculty offered a parallel argument. The Grand Challenges we face as a society—urbanization, food security, climate change—cannot be resolved by narratives alone. These are all challenges which Pope Francis has written about forcefully in his recent Encyclical. Grand challenges demand new understandings and strategies for problem solving: trans-disciplinary dialogue, institutional innovation, and structural flexibility. Incidentally, Michael Crow, President of Arizona State University, argues that higher education has reached a fork in the road because of these Grand Challenges and the increasing socioeconomic diversity of students. He argues for a “New American University,” characterized

by adaptation, innovation, and evolution. Many of the programs he has implemented at ASU are meant to model the nimbleness he believes necessary for institutional livelihood. The humanities faculty continued. We must communicate and collaborate with colleagues in the sciences to construct narratives that make sense of the Grand Challenges we face in honest ways: evidence-based, data-informed narratives about freedom and ethics and citizenship. The meeting continued along this dialogical path, growing in energy and excitement. It was, by all accounts, electrifying. Faculty and administrators still speak about the meeting in exalted tones—as if they had finally reconciled Athens and Jerusalem.

Underlying the Dean’s question, “should we stay together,” is a larger question: what is the purpose of academic units? More specifically, what is the value of a college that carries forward the storied tradition of liberal arts education for undergraduate students? These questions dominate contemporary discussions about higher education. Are colleges and universities business enterprises, designed to exchange money for degrees that then enable one to make more money? Or is higher education formative by nature, established to shape students’ ethical and political character and prepare them not only for making a living but also for making a life; that is, for living meaningfully in every dimension of life. Surely it is both. Can the tensions that hold together and pull apart these disparate models of education generate fruitful paradigms of teaching and learning? However we resolve the tensions between profit and service, institutional status and student development, we do it together, as a community—students, staff, faculty, and administrators—because we are forever connected by the pedagogical project that defines the academy: the investment of oneself in a process of transformation.

The academy embeds us in conversations. Achilles’ negotiation with the embassy. Plato’s battle between philosophy and poetry. Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well. Galileo’s

fervent resolve before the Inquisition. Mary Wollstonecraft's daring appeal to women. Martin Luther King Jr's letter from a Birmingham jail. Debates between Rawlsians and Utilitarians over the nature of justice. These are the canonical conversations that drift up from every classroom. Other conversations in the academy are organizational, structural, or fiscal in nature. Some are deeply personal and painfully felt. Despite the different registers in which we speak as students, teachers, and administrators, we are all oriented toward institutional challenges. More specifically, we are oriented toward the challenges to which we are positioned or charged to respond. My point is that the sharing of a crisis is part and parcel to transformation.

The faculty in Baylor's College of Art and Sciences modeled the sharing of a crisis that momentous day, a model that is especially valuable for students. Remember that the term 'crisis' comes from the Greek word for decision. The conversation could have been conflict-ridden—a collision rather than union of ideas. And that would have been fruitful too. Though change introduces conflict into our lives, it also expands our capacity to learn and grow.

Arts & Sciences did stay together. That's significant. But of equal or greater significance is the host of collaborative initiatives born that day; to name one example, an annual STEM & Humanities symposium co-hosted by the department chairs of Modern Languages and Cultures and Chemistry and Biochemistry. Something else that grew out of the meeting was a commitment by the faculty to deepen the core curriculum within Arts & Sciences by making explicit connections among core courses: a commitment to connect the core. Connecting core courses requires administrative support, resources for development, ongoing instructional coordination, and a framework in which students can see how individual courses form a coherent whole. This careful coordination and collaboration is meant to generate a comprehensive body of knowledge upon which students can build, and grow and reflect.¹ My academic department, the

Baylor Interdisciplinary Core or BIC, was established in 1995 as an endeavor to create a meaningful core: an integrated, interdisciplinary, team-taught curriculum that satisfies general studies requirements for undergraduates. We will celebrate our twentieth anniversary this fall with our remarkable alumni who continue to see connections among seemingly disparate data sets and fields of experience. Among the goals of BIC was for faculty members to provide models of thinking intensely and clearly about issues outside their sphere of expertise. BIC also recognizes that when students graduate they will have to approach decision-making not departmentally, but holistically.

From my perspective as director of Baylor's Academy for Teaching and Learning, the Arts and Sciences faculty decided to resist the tendency in higher education to privilege disciplinary expertise, to over-value specialization, and to think narrowly about what constitutes education. Instead, they chose education in the deepest sense of the term: *the facilitation of meaningful change intellectually and attitudinally in the lives of students*. It was a bold decision. Award-winning Chemistry professor Brian Coppola rightly contends that education is more than disciplinary understanding. Education is more than competency with skill sets. At its most fundamental level, education connects understanding and competency with broad, learning-related attitudes, values, and beliefs—intellectual honesty, respect for other viewpoints, autonomy, and responsibility. Educational psychologists George Slavich and Philip Zimbardo characterize teaching that taps into the intellectual and affective dimensions of learning as nothing short of transformational. Core courses readily address, enact, and reinforce Slavich and Zimbardo's principles of transformational teaching: they identify what students should *know*, *be able to do*, and *be like* as a result of their courses. Such promotion of learning-related values, attitudes, and beliefs is radical in an age of competency-based assessment. But radical times call

for radical reform. We know that mere competency is not sufficient for the challenges we face. As Patrick Deneen asserts, “the point of education is not to admire the world, or suffer its limits, but to change it, to transform it.”²

Competency is an insufficient standard for education for other reasons too. There is very little correlation between one’s major in college and one’s occupation in life. For example, the best college preparation for law school is mathematics and, I am delighted to say, philosophy. That’s right; math and philosophy majors are among the best equipped students for law school. The way you learn to think in math and philosophy—the proving of theorems and logical propositions; the making of inferences—will take you a long way toward thinking like an attorney. To put it briefly, mathematical and philosophical habits of thought map nicely onto law. Moreover, there are many successful attorneys who studied art history, Spanish literature, business management, or accounting as undergraduates. All disciplines teach the art of reason, and students of various majors find themselves well prepared to reason within the paradigm of law. That is precisely what a broad and deep liberal arts education affords you: the ability to think across diverse paradigms of thought. To borrow a phrase from a fellow philosopher, “People fortunate and qualified enough to receive a college education will make their living by their wits.”

I agree with defenders of the liberal arts that democracy can be made more robust by a liberal arts education. Faith can be elevated. Technology mitigated. But I believe the greatest value of a liberal arts education is humility: a recognition of the limits of human knowledge. We must be willing to take a stand in the face of uncertainty, but we must also be willing to alter our stances as evidence emerges. Liberal arts colleges like Iona revive the academy and transform

the world by treating education as the formation (and transformation) of the whole person. We must, like Plato's students, share our wisdom with the world.

¹ Their commitment lives on at Baylor. The Academy for Teaching and Learning is working with Dean Nordt to create a summer workshop for Arts and Sciences faculty titled, "Connecting the Core."

² J. Scott Lee, "Enriching Liberal Education's Defense in Universities and Colleges," 17. Lee's essay inspired many of my reflections about the value of a liberal arts education.