



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

LEARNING FOR A LIVING AND A LIFE: THE ENDURING LESSONS OF A LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES EDUCATION

Presented by President Julio Frenk
at the Phi Beta Kappa Banquet at the University of Miami
on April 3, 2016

Good evening. As President of the University of Miami, it is a distinct pleasure to welcome you all to the Phi Beta Kappa Society banquet.

To our students who will be inducted into Phi Beta Kappa this evening, congratulations!

You are not only among the best and the brightest at the University of Miami, you carry within you the great promise of a cultivated mind and an impassioned spirit.

At 240 years, Phi Beta Kappa, the nation's most prestigious academic honor society, is a champion of liberal arts and sciences education, and we honor its enduring legacy which is as vital today as when it was founded in 1776.

As a physician and social scientist, I have lived a life filled with the intellectually rigorous and stimulating challenges of making connections across diverse disciplines, institutions, and countries.

It is my hope for you that your time at the University of Miami will prepare you for a life equally challenging and gratifying in the exciting and fruitful years that lie ahead of you.

When I first arrived at UM almost eight months ago, I was interviewed by the Hurricane student newspaper in a getting-to-know-you piece titled "Let's be Frenk." One of the questions they asked was which three books would I want with me if I were stranded on a desert island.

I own and cherish a great many books, but I narrowed my choice to these three:

My first choice would be a survival guide, since my survival skills are not that good.

My second choice would be a volume with the collected works of William Shakespeare that would include not only his theater productions but his poetry too.

And my third choice would be a recent book that collected all the writings, including the aphorisms, of my grandmother, who lived to 106 and published her last book when she was 103.

The survival guide is the practical stuff you need to know how to survive, but Shakespeare and my grandmother tell you why to survive. You not only want to survive—you need a reason to survive. That is what a liberal education provides.

Harvard president and historian Drew Faust, who was the guest speaker at my inauguration, gave a recent speech at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point on the value of a liberal education to develop leaders who have the capacity to serve their nation at the highest levels—whether on the battlefield or in the boardroom.

She commended West Point, especially at a time when many other institutions are dropping their liberal arts requirements, for transforming its curriculum and graduating, quote, “leaders with broad-based knowledge of both the sciences and the humanities, and the ability to apply that knowledge in a fluid and uncertain world.”¹

It is indeed that sobering context—our “fluid and uncertain world”—that shapes how higher education must steer both the perils and the potential of our future.

The core product of universities is knowledge. But how that knowledge is applied and disseminated by the leaders we educate is what makes the academy an integral part of and not apart from the larger society.

Liberal arts and sciences education originally emerged with the notion that higher education was meant to create an enlightened and cultured class and not necessarily to have an applied use. Universities still operate on this foundational idea that we want to develop individuals who are cultured and informed, who love knowledge for knowledge’s sake. But we have come full circle.

Today, in addition to—not instead of—this intrinsic value, there is an instrumental value to a liberal education that makes one an instrument for society.

Now that we are worried about employability and the development of concrete competencies so we can actually perform a job, we realize, more and more, that the most desirable competencies are not to master very specific skills but to have the plasticity that allows us to adapt to a rapidly changing labor market.

When you graduate, you will be going out into the labor market where many of the jobs that exist today will be automated over the next few decades. At the same time, new jobs, still unimagined today, will be created. A recent study estimates that 60% of children entering school this year will work in jobs that don’t exist today.

In a sense we are going back to the idea of crosscutting competencies that was at the heart of the original conception of a liberal education. In today’s changing world, we must educate what has been called

“T-shaped” individuals, who are certainly knowledgeable about a subject matter, typically whatever you major in, but who also have the crosscutting component, the horizontal part of the “T.”

These are specific competencies like critical thinking, ethical reasoning, quantitative analysis, teamwork, and good communication skills (oral, written, visual, and social media communication).

Critical thinking also includes having a historical perspective so you understand the root causes and possible outcomes of a problem. Studying history doesn't mean you have to be a historian.

Many of you have walked across the Foote University Green between the Ashe Building and the University Center, where the sidewalks are lined on both sides with signs showing famous history majors and where they ended up. There are several U.S. presidents, successful CEOs and entrepreneurs, political leaders, actors, and even comedians.

Developing a historical perspective is a key component of critical thinking because it gives you a dynamic view of the world as it changes through time. It allows you to understand the temporal context of whatever you see today, and it allows you to know the past so you don't repeat it.

That's why West Point is emphasizing a liberal education—if you are serving in the military, you will need to understand contextual factors and ethical dilemmas. If you are a lawyer or a physician, you also need these competencies.

A liberal education gives you an expanded outlook and cultivates the creativity of the mind that's essential to be flexible and adaptable for your first, second, third, or fourth job. So, parents, don't be too concerned when your student wants to triple major and double minor in seemingly disconnected disciplines—they are creating the intellectual and creative scaffolding for a successful and highly employable future.

You will be happy to know that the University of Miami is at the forefront of this movement. Our recent curriculum reform in undergraduate education introduced a system of cognates that allows exactly this kind of academic flexibility of mixing and matching to really respond to students' personalized interests.

This breadth of scope also empowers our graduates to be much more effective in the continuously evolving employment landscape. We do not educate people for their first job. We educate them for a full life of success and that includes the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and also to be productive citizens and to be knowledgeable and cultivated people who love and enjoy knowledge.

All of this is the definition of success. It's not how much money you're making in your first job, which is the short-sided and reductionist view that measures success by the starting salary of your first job.

But our commitment to promoting a liberal education goes beyond our undergraduate curriculum. When I launched my listening exercise at the beginning of my presidency, the importance of preserving and strengthening the liberal arts and sciences was brought up time and again and helped shape how I articulated our four institutional aspirations at my inauguration.

The first of these aspirations is to be the Hemispheric University by making the most of our geographic endowment with an intentional strategy to link to other parts of the hemisphere and beyond.

Closer ties with the Americas will provide our students, faculty, and researchers with a global view not found at any other university in the nation. And by creating these intellectual and cultural links, we are helping to spread

the notion of a liberal arts education in other parts of the hemisphere that don't have these traditions, but where they would be very valuable.

Our second aspiration is to be the Excellent University—this goes back to the notion of education innovation and the idea that we are not just educating students for their first job.

We must make sure that short-term definitions of value do not undermine our pursuit of excellence in all disciplines. The arts and humanities—which some may consider impractical—are crucial to our understanding of both who we are and what we hope to become.

The arts provide a universal language that expresses our creative capacity to reinvent and reinterpret reality: The semantics of a brush stroke...the vocabulary of a symphony...or the syntax of a dancer in motion—all of these give context and meaning to our choices and celebrate the diversity of our vibrant voices.

Author and academic Louis Menand notes in his book *The Marketplace of Ideas*, and I quote, “Sheer information is no longer a major piece of the value-added of higher education...The most important intellectual development in the academy in the twentyfirst century has to do with the relationship between the life sciences...to fields outside the natural sciences, such as philosophy, economics, and literary studies.”² Menand stresses that the higher education system is, quote, “helping people think better by helping them think together.”³

The Excellent University has the ability to make connections, to build bridges that combat fragmentation, one of the biggest threats to academic progress—artificial silos that divide people, ideas, and disciplines.

In the case of the University of Miami, our strength is that, while we have three campuses and 11 schools, we are a university with distributed strengths that we can connect across disciplinary lines to understand and transform our complex reality.

Our third aspiration is to be the Relevant University. Relevance is increasingly a central debate on the value of a liberal education. We must move away from the Cartesian dichotomy between the world of ideas and the world of action. A liberal education cultivates the spirit, but it also equips you to be relevant, to deal with the real life problems. It artfully bridges the divide between knowledge and practice.

Our fourth aspiration is to be the Exemplary University. We want to educate global citizens who, through the values they embrace and the behaviors they follow, set an example for their societies—values and behaviors such as integrity, respect for diversity, tolerance, empathy, resilience. A liberal education, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, helps develop a side of our creativity that is absolutely crucial if we are to become better citizens with the ability to understand other perspectives.

The great biologist and author E. O. Wilson said, quote, “We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely.”⁴

I would add that, in addition to being “synthesizers,” we need smart people to be “sympathizers,” to use their knowledge and understanding empathically, to put themselves in the shoes of others—other races, ethnicities, religions, genders and sexual orientations—and then to build bridges that provide a common ground.

The humanities equip us with what President Faust calls, quote, “a passport to different places, different times, and different ways of thinking.”⁵

In his book *In Defense of a Liberal Education*, Fareed Zakaria stresses that increasingly it is this kind of well-rounded understanding of the world and adaptability that is most valued.⁶

He points out that the Romans, who coined the term of a “liberal” education, were using the word liberal in its

original Latin sense of pertaining to free peoples. This idea of being free and informed citizens is at the core of our democracy, and each of us must serve as models to our greater society.

My fellow Hurricanes, tonight you join a community of scholars who uphold the love of learning for learning's sake. But we also place squarely on your shoulders the great responsibility of an educated mind and cultivated spirit to make our world better.

Once again congratulations on receiving the great distinction of being welcomed into the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Thank you for letting me share this special moment with you, your families and friends, and your instructors and mentors. I have full confidence in you and in the future you will enrich with your knowledge, your creativity, and your empathy.

References

¹ Faust, Drew Gilpin. "To Be "A Speaker of Words and a Doer of Deeds:" Literature and Leadership." Speech, Zengerle Family Lecture, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, March 24, 2016.

² Menand, Louis. *The Marketplace of Ideas*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Wilson, Edward O. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. New York: Knopf, 1998.

⁵ Faust.

⁶ Zakaria, Fareed. *In Defense of a Liberal Education*. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2015.