

The Importance of Liberal Education Today and the Case for St. John's College

**Address to Alumni and Friends in Washington, DC
Christopher B. Nelson, President, St. John's College
March 26, 2011**

Thank you for joining us this evening. It is most encouraging to see so many friends and alumni of St. John's College in this one place together.

I imagine that the changes we have all seen and experienced these past few years due to the economic downturn have left us with a world of uncertainty and perhaps even shaken a few of the verities we have lived by over the years. (Is my home a safe investment? Can I trust the banking system or the resiliency of the markets to provide the kind of security that once was familiar to me? Will I be able to retire as planned, and can I save enough to provide for the education of my children? Can I reasonably expect my children to make their way in the world with the same sense of confidence that I had when I entered the world of work?) I hear these questions daily and I suspect that they are having some effect on the public's confidence in higher education, particularly in liberal arts colleges that are most concerned with providing a liberal education.

I would like to address two questions this evening: (1) what is the importance of liberal education today, and (2) where does St. John's College stand in relation to the question?

Notwithstanding the current crisis in the world order, we have reason to believe that human beings are much the same today as they have been for quite some time. We still desire to understand what is important, to choose well, to seek what brings happiness. Thus, the best education to help one lead a good life cannot have changed all that much just because the conditions around us have changed. The best educated person today, just as yesterday, is one fully capable of adapting to or taking advantage of changing conditions, precisely because the well-educated adult has an integrity of character, a rootedness in essentials, and a self-understanding that makes it possible to live well and consistently in an unpredictable world.

A liberal education serves just that purpose: the cultivation of the individual's intellect and imagination so that the individual can thrive, can perceive and achieve his or her highest ends. The best education serves to help us come to understand the complexities of being human in order that we might make for ourselves lives worth living.

As important as the world of work is to us, we don't live to get a job, but we work because it contributes to living a good life. As important as it is to have a republic that will safeguard our liberties, we don't live to serve the state, but to help the state to serve its citizens. We deserve a liberal education -- literally an education in the arts of freedom -- so that we can learn to exercise the choices

we have to make with care and wise deliberation, without the shackles of popular opinion and fad, without fear of the unknown, without slavish adherence to the will of others, and without the tyranny of our own ignorance.

For these reasons, Robert Maynard Hutchins claimed that we are all liberal artists, whether or not we are formally educated. He put it this way:

The liberal arts are not merely indispensable; they are unavoidable.

Nobody can decide for himself whether he is going to be a human being.

The only question open to him is whether he will be an ignorant one or one who has sought to reach the highest point he is capable of attaining.

The question, in short, is whether he will be a poor liberal artist or a good one.

A proper course of instruction in the liberal arts should be designed to develop our powers to address the questions “What sort of being am I, what kind of world do I inhabit, and what is worth seeking?” These are not questions in the province of any one or two or even three of the academic disciplines in our colleges and universities; they pertain to them all. Am I merely a collection of molecules and a product of my genes, or am I not also a political animal, a rational being, and a person of spirit? Do I live in a world that operates according to certain physical laws or is everything subject to uncertainty and the application of probability functions? These are questions that will pursue us

for all of our lives. We thus need to acquire skills and shape our abilities into “arts” so that we may continue the search for answers after we have had a little experience with such pursuits in our formal education. We want for ourselves and our children lives that may be called worthy of our humanity, ones that will satisfy our aspirations and theirs.

The human mind, like the human being, is not naturally compartmentalized into humanities, arts, and sciences, or into specialties either. We may have left and right sides of the brain, but we think as persons with single minds. We should thus have concern for what belongs to us as human beings. The study of the humanities properly conceived is about what is human, and so crosses all those conventional disciplinary boundaries that separate off sciences and arts from one another. Our students ought to recognize the questions that connect disciplines and not just the methods that separate them before they pursue a necessary area of particular concern requiring special expertise.

These questions belong to us in our liberal arts colleges. We are or should be taking some responsibility for seeing that these deeply human questions have a place somewhere in our classrooms and on our campuses. If we do this well, our graduates will be better prepared to make their way in the world of work and in an ever-changing environment that will demand things of us tomorrow that we can hardly even imagine today. If we do this well, our graduates will have a better sense of their place in society and of the obligations and rewards

of citizenship in a nation that would make it possible for us to have such an education. If we do this well, our graduates will have participated in the most practical of all educations because they will have the resources to face the exigencies of life and to meet the challenges of a rapidly growing and evolving world.

What then would a plan of education look like that would attempt such a project? Colleges provide various answers to this question. Everyone in this room is familiar to some degree with the singular plan of instruction for all of our students at St. John's College, a plan that bears the simple name "The Program". I won't describe it here except to say that the Program expects all students to engage in the study of original, significant, beautiful works of literary and musical art. Every class and each work is required of everyone, and all of it is exacting. We don't pretend to teach anyone how to think, but we give our students many occasions for refining thought. The more it's done, the better it's done.

We defend the search for truth, or at least avoid foreclosing the possibility of truth. We don't have to know the truth to believe it is there, or to have some sense that one thing is better than another for a good reason. For learning to take hold, the student must find some way to make the lesson his or her own. To make it one's own requires that something be at stake for the student. The

student is driven then to ask not just what something means, but whether it makes any difference what something means (i.e., whether it is true or not).

We direct our students not to contemporary ills and the conflicting prescriptions for treating those ills, but to fundamental texts that help us consider the human condition at its best and at its worst. We read the best books for all ages rather than those now in vogue. We think our students should consider the excellent before they pass over to the largely imperfect. Thus, they ask what is good and beautiful in order to recognize which imperfect things may best approximate them.

We promote the desire to learn. Therefore, we construct an academic program that encourages the desire to learn for the intrinsic joy and good it brings and not simply for the sake of the grade. This requires that we give attention both to the quality of the materials we study and use and our ways of giving them life in the classroom. We assign to our students matter that will be worthy of their love. After all, it is love that moves us to the good in this world, including all the good that can be learned.

Our students must practice the intellectual virtues to succeed at St. John's: the pursuit of understanding, courage in the face of the unknown and the difficult, industry and persistence in preparing for class, and candor about their shortcomings.

This is a program suitable for today and well into the next millennium, with adjustments along the way to account for what we will learn from our experience with the Program and for the new and enduring discoveries, productions, ideas, and works that will help us better understand the world we live in, all for the purpose of preparing our students to live and flourish in the world they will be inheriting.

We have only to look at our alumni to see the fruit of this labor of love. They enter a broad array of careers and succeed in them remarkably well, proof that we are preparing students for all manner of vocations and avocations. St.

John's ranks among the top 30 institutions in the United States whose alumni are among the high-ranking civic, judicial and military officials listed in Who's Who. It is in the top 2% of colleges in the percent of alumni who go on to earn PhDs, and among the top 4% for earning them in science and engineering.

Nearly 70% of our graduates pursue post-baccalaureate education. They move freely into entrepreneurial endeavors and professional careers.

Last month, I received an email from a reporter for the Idaho Business Review.

He had just published an article entitled: "The Tyrannies of Unexamined

Opinions" about the failures of so many of our colleges and universities. He

cites a few alarming statistics published by the Social Science Research

Council that found that 45% of students showed no significant improvement in

learning in their first two years of college and that 36% had failed to make any gains after completing four years. Before raising our pitchforks, he asks us to consider the purpose of higher education. And here he says that “the most eloquent and compelling description of that purpose I’ve ever read comes from St. John’s College: ‘St. John’s College is a community dedicated to liberal education. Such education seeks to free men and women from the tyrannies of unexamined opinions and inherited prejudices. It also endeavors to enable them to make intelligent, free choices concerning the ends and means of both public and private life.’ ”

I can think of no finer testimonial from a writer of a business journal. It is in just such challenging times as we live in today that we recognize the need for liberally educated men and women.

Thank You.