

**PRESIDENTIAL
PERSPECTIVES**



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CHAPTER TEN

**ON THE
PERPETUATION OF OUR
LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES**

On the Perpetuation of Our Liberal Arts Colleges

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The question I wish to address here is shared by every president of a small liberal arts college (and probably by their governing boards and faculties too):

How do we perpetuate what is distinctly ours in a world that cares less and less about making thoughtful distinctions?

We are facing increasing pressure to reshape our campus communities and retool for a new age consumed with a singular focus on fitting ourselves into a global economic enterprise. In the face of this, how do we choose the path that is right for each of our schools?

Each of our country's liberal arts colleges has had a luminous founding, with expansive and optimistic founding documents and enlightened leadership. Many have had a refounding that was every bit as luminous as its original founding in terms of the radical changes it brought about. But most refoundings, those that must take place in the hearts of each generation of a school's defenders, are efforts to recapture the original spark.

The question for us is:

How do we keep our flame burning long past the founding days?

We ought to know enough about our past to understand how we have been shaped by it. But we also need to be free enough to ask whether and how that past ought to continue to shape our future.

We must keep alive to our purposes, promoting liberal learning in the ever-precarious present.

We are communities of learning, first and foremost. Our colleges exist to promote learning activity and protect the conditions of learning. We want classrooms teeming with energy and conversation that come from students who wish to learn because learning is desirable for its own sake. We desire to banish passivity from the classroom.

We must keep alive to our purposes, promoting liberal learning in the ever-precarious present, threatened by the Scylla of institutional atrophy and antiquarian tendency on the one side, and the Charybdis of consumerism on the other. On the one hand, we risk losing all desire to challenge the world, which is the spark to learning. On the other, we risk fueling the desire to sell only what is wanted at the expense of what is needed by the students who come to us for help in shaping their education. Our very virtues and strong foundation stories can lead us to defensiveness and stagnation; we can come to believe that we already have the answers that our founders set out to seek. Yet, if we keep ourselves too open to the intellectual fancies of our age, we may lose our identity.

Let me offer a few suggestions to avoid our crashing upon those rocky shoals—suggestions intended to help liberal arts colleges maintain their place of distinction in the world of higher education.

Recall Your Place and Maintain Your Ground

Stand for liberal education, but abandon the effort to find one, broad, bland, expansive way of speaking of it as if we must reach agreement with one another. We should hail our distinctive voices and let them all be heard. Our publics need to hear voices that are anchored in a real place and time, inhabited by real people. Truth-telling then becomes possible.

Distinguish liberal from utilitarian learning. Earning a living is about means; making a life worth living is about ends. Liberal education is concerned with ends; mechanical, utilitarian, professional, or vocational learning is about means. We don't live in order to work; we work in order to live a good life. It is, thus, a higher form of education that helps us understand just what a good life might look like in order that we might live it well.

Defend the search for truth, or at least avoid foreclosing the possibility of truth. We don't have to have the truth to believe it is there—to have some sense that one thing is better than another for a 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 (for example, whether it is true or not).

Acknowledge that liberal learning is about foundations and elements. Liberal education is elementary education in the highest sense. For this reason, what we teach is important. Have our students read books that are worthy of their study—and that will give them practice at thinking— rather than pretend we can teach them how to think.

Promote the desire to learn over the mania to test performance; success in passing tests will follow the former as night does the day. Therefore, we should construct academic programs that encourage the desire to learn for its own sake rather than for the sake of the grade. This requires that we give attention both to the quality of the materials we use to teach from and our ways of giving them life in the classroom. Let us give 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.

Abandon the language of the marketplace. We are not delivery systems; students are not consumers; and education is not a product that can be bartered, going to the highest bidder. Socrates had it right when he reminded us that the power of learning is in the soul of each of us and cannot be put into us, just as one cannot put sight into blind eyes.

Own up to our commitment to serving the interest of the individual soul. Our duty is to the health of the individual. Good citizenship and well-paying jobs should never be seen by us as more than useful byproducts of our central activity. But we can say more about those two good byproducts. The political freedom and the free enterprise economy we enjoy are both grounded in, and derivative of, our citizens' intellectual freedom. The healthier and more self-sufficient the individual, the healthier our society and our economy. Only a liberal education is sufficient for a democracy that champions the right of all of its citizens to pursue the happiness that belongs to them. In this way, we can reclaim the argument that our colleges also serve the public good.

Remain High-Minded but Practical

Fight only the fights worth fighting. There are a thousand chimeras in the world. Some are hideous but will never threaten; ignore them. Some can be fought collectively by our collegiate associations; support those groups. Others come in an endless stream of constituent complaints about issues peripheral to our central purposes. As most of those issues can be resolved by giving them some attention, attend to them; develop a plan with a timeline and a set of priorities. As to those that threaten the very identity of our schools, take them head on. This requires that we have some sense of who we are. Self-knowledge is the key to self-preservation. My experience here suggests that we will gain strength by defending what is truly of the essence, so long as we're flexible when our first principles are not at stake.

Embrace institutional self-examination but beware of external means of assessment. With our students, we accept the wisdom of Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth living. Let us apply it to ourselves. We have unlimited ways to come to know ourselves better and improve our campuses. We should admit this publicly and commit the resources we need to improve ourselves. On the other hand, we should not fear to fight those silly rankings that take no account of the liberal arts we are trying to help our students acquire.

Maintain balance in all things. To paraphrase a favorite expression of a former St. John's dean, the president and the board ought to be concerned with existence ("keeping us in being"), while the faculty ought to be concerned with essence ("keeping us being who we are meant to be"). Keep the two intertwined by every possible device.

Remember that we are perpetual institutions. This should not be an excuse for delay in attending to things, but rather a reminder that time is on our side. Therefore, careful planning is required, and all good things may be redeemed in time. Ideally, we should want to give to the next generation at least as much as we have had to work with in this one.

Maintain Institutional Practices that Preserve Institutional Ideals

Champion and fund the cause of broad and affordable access to our colleges, and provide the means to complete the course of study with us. A liberal education does not recognize class or economic distinction.

Encourage in our students the freedom to be at leisure. Freedom requires that students have some time to look at, contemplate, and talk about fundamental questions. This requires that they get some break from the practical pressures, if possible. The same may be said of our faculties.

Be Flexible

If we anchor ourselves to unshakeable principles, we may find it difficult to consider changes that might be healthy for our colleges. We should concern ourselves less with the principles behind our actions and instead satisfy ourselves that we have adequate reasons for everything we do.

The essential issue I have tried to address here is how to organize ourselves best for the freedom we wish to encourage in our lively colleges. The flexibility I've advocated is a call for simplifying our ways, and simplicity is more likely to come from an attitude that encourages freedom than one that is so rigid that a rule is required for every action.

The path we must take to address the questions we face has to be rediscovered with each generation. We should not look back to our founders for anything but the big picture because we have to live with our present condition. Above all, we must retain our most radical characteristic: that we value the question more than the answer, the search more than its end. Questions alone make learning possible.

To rediscover our origins is to refound our institutions and remake our foundation stories. If we are alive to learning, it is impossible that we will not remake those stories over and over again. That is what liberal learning should be: a continual rediscovery and deeper understanding of our reason for being.

The trick seems to be that we must find ways to stay young as we grow old. This will allow us the wisdom, will, and delight to continue the search for happiness that is at the heart of liberal education.



About the Author

Dr. Christopher B. Nelson has been President of St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland since June 1991. He is an alumnus of St. John's (B.A. 1970) and a graduate of the University of Utah College of Law (J.D. 1973), where he founded and directed the University's student legal services program. He practiced law in Chicago for 18 years and was chairman of his law firm when he left the practice to take his current position at St. John's College.

A member of the Maryland Independent College and University Association (MICUA) since 1991, Dr. Nelson has served as Chairman of the Board of Directors. He is a Past Chair and a founding member of the Annapolis Group, a consortium of more than 120 of the nation's leading liberal arts colleges. He chairs the Board of Trustees of Shimer College. He also is a member of the Board of the Historic Annapolis Foundation and serves as its Treasurer and Chair of the Finance Committee. Dr. Nelson has also served on the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) Board of Directors and its Executive Committee, the NAICU Task Force on Accountability and Public Information, and the NAICU Task Force on Appropriate Accountability, Regulation, and Assessment.

Dr. Nelson has been a panelist and speaker on state, regional, and national programs concerning liberal education, great books, issues of institutional autonomy in the face of government regulatory intrusion, and changes proposed in the accrediting system. He is a published author on issues facing higher education.

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