The Liberal Arts

I. Introduction

The most effective way of being reliably modern is to avoid being excessively contemporary. The imperatives of the present moment may have a very limited future.

Being modern may also require a relationship with the past. William Faulkner reminds us that the past is not over; it is not even past.

We avoid, then, the contemporary as a measure of the modern and move forward from the past by taking it with us. Less than this condemns us to superficial and short-term progress.

Let us together discuss the liberal arts within this context.

My remarks are organized around six topics and this introduction is the first of them. If this reflection lacks substance, it is, at least, organized. D.H. Lawrence, the British writer, found an apt metaphor for American culture in *Moby Dick.* The ship in search of the whale was on an absurd voyage under the command of an insane captain. Not much substance there. The Americans, however, were not troubled by the liabilities because the ship was well-organized.

We do know this: We are New Jersey's Liberal Arts College. Liberal Arts majors nationwide have dropped precipitously during the time Ramapo College has been in existence, from 25% of all graduates to 3%. Further erosion of this percentage is inevitable as recession and escalating college costs take their toll. Parents and students question whether the liberal arts are a bit too precious in a rough and cruel environment marked by severe unemployment and tenuous job security. From these anxieties, a definition of education as workforce training has emerged.

We know this story. The fear this narrative generates is understandable and not without merit. It is the contemporary state of affairs. Granted its validity, we may become reluctant to proclaim that Ramapo is a Liberal Arts College and we may be inclined to structure the curriculum so that the liberal arts are given little more than polite and ceremonial attention. We may, in effect, become New Jersey's Marginal Arts College.

It may seem astute, in market terms, to sideline liberal arts. Student needs would be better served when we offer them workplace development. This may not be the time to educate students but to train them. A good deal of this thinking is attractive because it makes sense. The last thing any one of us wants to do is to injure students, to harm them in their careers, to set them on a path where employment is perilous, income diminished, career satisfaction remote and lifetime frustration guaranteed.

The stakes are high; the issue is serious; the answers are elusive. We must challenge one another in dialogue so that students are not disadvantaged because of our ideology, defensiveness, and misperceptions.

My task today is not to offer solutions, even if I could, or to pretend to have a wisdom I do not possess. I hope to serve as a catalyst for us to reflect together on a problem that troubles us all. Collegial dialogue has more substance to it than singular solutions or those fashioned in small groups functioning with preordained unanimity.

II. **What We Have in Common**

As we begin a college-wide dialogue, we have already reached agreement in many areas. We all:

- want the College to succeed academically and financially
- intend the enrichment of the lives of students
- possess as a faculty not only impressive intelligence, learning and talent, but also enormous good will and decency; I am not naïve in this assertion; we tend to be pessimistic, perhaps cynical, about this but such, I believe, is an unsustainable negative evaluation of our worth
- are proud in this fifth decade of our existence with what we have done here; in 1969 none of us envisioned a residential college with, by my count, some fifty buildings, 6000 undergraduates and six graduate programs, a comprehensive college with impressive accolades from the Carnegie Foundation, the Princeton Review and a host of other positive evaluations; in the early years we were thought to be a community college with a future unstable enough for the State to have begun formally the process to close us down; in those years

predictions in the direction of the developments I just cited would have been dismissed as naivete and feckless optimism
- want the College to intensify its sense of community
- want better communication and transparency between faculty and administration and across the schools
- want to prepare students to be responsible citizens in this remarkable democracy and we want them to be financially well off and to live meaningful lives
- endorse Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen's observation that human development is inseparable from values and imagination and that human creativity depends on how broadly we have been educated
- resonate with the 2010 Middle States Report on Ramapo College that, in its words, "there is a tension between the college's stated commitment to a liberal arts-based curriculum and the recent development of professional programs. The College needs to understand and then articulate how the professional programs are 'based' in the liberal arts. …the college community should…define its commitment to the liberal arts and 'assess all programs in the light of this vision.' " We have not yet discerned how to bring this tension to resolution or else this talk and this meeting would not be taking place.

The evolution of this College from undergraduate to comprehensive, from a commuter college to a residential community, from the founders to the future, from tradition to innovation, this evolution has not undermined the astonishing aggregate of what we have in common. Indeed this evolution always depended on that.

III. A Tentative Agenda

As we move into areas where our common understanding is less clearly defined, we go there not only by choice but by the irrevocable demands of reality.

The dynamics of the market did not influence us in the early years of the College as they do presently. Accountability did not rely on the assessment philosophy we have now.

The dynamics of the market bring practicality sharply into focus, but may also give undue importance to the contemporary moment. Correlatively,

assessment helps us to achieve and measure outcomes but, out of balance, can undermine shared governance and creative thinking.

The new drive toward professionalism can be more productive if it finds a connection with abstraction, theory and cultural depth. We do not want students so trained in abstraction that their careers are undermined. Nor do we want technicians so specifically focused that they have little resiliency.

A tentative agenda to support our discussion might center around two issues: one, a model; the other, a program.

The model might be a redefinition of interdisciplinarity. As originally intended, it was a reach across the disciplines. We may require now that it connect professional studies and the liberal arts in a new way, that, in effect, brings two academic cultures together.

Such interdisciplinarity would offer students the stabilities and certitudes they desire as they begin their careers. Professional studies and the market count here. This more utilitarian approach would be complemented by the expansiveness and creativity the liberal arts intend. This model can work only if both sides of the equation regard the alternative as equally necessary for resolution of the dilemma. Humanitarian professionals and practical philosophers are always an asset.

This first item on the agenda is, then, a redefinition of interdisciplinarity and a new model for it.

The second item focuses on a program, namely, General Education. This is the vehicle that can carry the weight of assuring that we are indeed a liberal arts college whose professional studies have cultural depth. General Education has the potential of being the commons where we meet academically from the vantage point of our respective diversities. It is not the only influence the liberal arts should have on our curriculum, but it is an important first step.

In any case, we do not want to expand the ranks of the literate unemployed or misemployed.

Henry David Thoreau went to Walden to address the deepest dimension of himself. He told us he did not want to reach the end of his life only to realize he had missed it.

IV. A Note From History

The discussion about what education is supposed to accomplish reaches through the millennia. The past, indeed, is not past.
Aristotle writes in the *Politics:*

> …what is the proper way to be educated… [it is not clear]whether…studies should be regulated more with regard to character [or] whether pupils should practice pursuits that are practically useful…

Given the longevity of the question, I doubt that it will be settled here at Ramapo this year. We are able, however, to do two things with this question:

- address it, even if it has no final answer; questions impervious to being decisively settled often spark creativity and they do resist arrogance
- construct a tentative, helpful, temporary solution for our time and for this College

A number of centuries after Aristotle, education centered around the medieval design of the Trivium and the Quadrivium, a total of seven areas of study. These seven sisters gave the academy a liberal arts number to go along with the seven deadly sins, the seven cardinal and theological virtues, and the seven sacraments.

The Trivium, of course, exposed students to three liberal arts: grammar (writing), rhetoric (articulation), dialectic (reason). Writing well, speaking persuasively, critical thinking.

The Quadrivium integrated the liberal arts with aspects of professional studies, if you will: geometry, arithmetic, music and astronomy. The

Quadrivium moved more easily in the world of measurement and the shape of the cosmos.

The United States built its educational system around the oldest and deepest stratum of the liberal arts, giving the liberal arts a place in higher education that European universities had not emphasized for centuries. A reference for this observation is the American Council of Learned Societies report on "Liberal Arts in American Higher Education."

I would suggest that the founding of this nation gave us the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence, developed in the Trivium, and the practicalities of the Constitution, developed through dialectics and measurement in the Quadrivium. These documents defined not the shape of the cosmos but the shape of a new political reality, the shape of government and the shape of a national democracy.

The philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, of the University of Chicago, writes: "Unlike virtually every nation in the world, we have a liberal arts model of university education."

In this line, the three major United States military academies have defined liberal education as "essential to ethical responsibility." The Air Force Academy has ninety hours of general education. West Point is essentially a liberal arts college. My reference here is the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Spring 2010 publication).

This brief historical sketch gives us a sense of the magnitude and gravity of the question, its longevity and its potential for profound creative dialogue.

It is no mean task we undertake but an engagement with the best minds and compelling imaginations of generations of scholars.

V. The Benefits of the Liberal Arts

The benefits are worth the effort and the risk. We are a liberal arts and professional studies institution on the undergraduate and graduate levels. The benefits the liberal arts offer are worth reviewing.

- the liberal arts resist the notion of education as workplace development and focus on the profound cultural context in which humanity develops
- liberal arts graduates get Ph.Ds and excel in research at a rate two times greater than baccalaureates in general; my reference here is president emeritus Francis Oakley of Williams College
- Harvard's president, Drew Faust, observes: "Human beings need meaning, understanding and perspective, as well as jobs. The question should not be whether we can afford to believe [this]…but whether we can afford not to" (New York Times Book Review, September 6, 2009)
- John Dewey notes that education can make us effective machines but miss giving us "a life of rich significance"
- Albert Einstein, reflecting on his own work, claims that intuition and imagination count far more than knowledge ("What Life Means to Einstein": interview, 1929)
- liberal arts remind us that the main product of a university is nothing less than humanity; indeed, the most valuable asset that comes from the workplace is the worker
- employers in the majority report that they prefer employees who have a "broad-based education…a wide range of subjects…a diverse knowledge base"; reference is a survey from the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Universities
- liberal education shows us the angels and demons in our psyche, the nobility and the shadows
- the liberal arts help us evaluate not only the wealth our work generates, and the satisfaction, but the cost it requires from us in human terms and what it makes of our lives in the long run
- the best way to deal with the shock of change in our era, to navigate through the eleven different jobs many of us will have, is to be educated broadly and resiliently
- David Kearns, CEO of Xerox, notes that the "only education that prepares us for change is a liberal education. In periods of change, narrow specialization condemns us to inflexibility."

We could cite other sources, make other points, but, it seems to me, the case has been made.

VI. Conclusion

There are subtexts in our agenda. We cannot deal with interdisciplinarity, professional studies, liberal arts, general education, our mission and identity without encountering larger, unstated questions.

- what is the point of higher education?
- what does it mean to be a professor?
- do we accept the formula that professional studies, focused on doing and liberal arts focused on reflection are both important for education and career?
- to what extent are we able to enter into dialogue without excessive defensiveness as issues of identity, comfort, and leveraged authority emerge?
- are we able to trust the process of discussion to surface the truths and strategies that best serve our students and even the values and visions that brought us to his profession and keep us here?

Let us conclude these remarks with a reminder that the quest for meaning is not a nicety but a necessity. It is not a Victorian doily made effete and irrelevant by industrial, technological, and financial revolutions, but a duty we all have to address the deep dimensions of our students' lives. The quest for meaning is amorphous and difficult to define but we all know what it means and we find it in our discussions and friendships with one another and in the solitude of our silent reflection.

We began this College with intrepid visions and persistent dreams, caught in the cross-fire of promise and programs, of potential and productivity. We crafted a College with an impressive beginning that is, of course, over and yet somehow still with us. To repeat that past is to lose it; that past is best preserved by advancing it in directions it could not foresee.
One of the most encouraging comments in the 2010 Middle States Report on Ramapo College is this:

> Though issues surrounding the liberal arts and professional programs are in contention, there seems to be no great gulf between senior faculty and more recently hired faculty. Though there are reservations about some of the new directions, …the team encountered strong manifestations of loyalty and pride in the distinctive institution of higher education

that has evolved from its founding to the present day

We have, my friends, crafted a rich legacy together. A tradition is never something to keep but always something to give away. The Latin root of the word is "to hand down."

It is time to take this inheritance, this brave vision we once had to new levels. A half century later, we have endured and evolved and done so with grace and decency and admirable accomplishment. We stayed the course by changing it. Despite the mistakes and misdeeds, the pettiness to which we are all liable, the paranoia we manage on occasion and the provincialism that makes us tone deaf to one another, we did not substantially betray what we came here to realize.

The greatest monument we shall leave is not carved in stone but found in the tens of thousands of students and hundreds of faculty who came here.

I am moved by the epitaph in St. Paul's London which reads:

Si monumentum requiris, circumspice
(If you are looking for a monument, look around you)

Circumspice. Look around and you will see it was worth all your efforts. Circumspice. The students, the faculty, the whole community, the campus, the entire enterprise.

It is time to conclude these remarks. We find our value most of all in our relationships with one another. William Butler Yeats asks us to think where

…glory most begins and ends
And say my glory was I had such friends

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