

Looking Back while Looking Forward

Remarks by

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OPENING

President Knapp, Deans of the Schools, Faculty Colleagues, and Students, I want to express my appreciation to all of you for the opportunity to address the Faculty Assembly in this my last year as the University's Chief Academic Officer. It is with nostalgia that I look back to 28 August 1996, when I addressed those present at the University's Opening Convocation in the University Yard behind Lisner Hall as the University's new Vice President for Academic Affairs. It was the beginning of the 176th year of the University – the year after we had celebrated the 175th anniversary of the University's founding. The years since that day in August 1996 have flown by.

DETAILS OF LOOKING BACK

Over those years, I have had the privilege of addressing the Faculty Assembly about a number of topics ranging from the responsibilities of being a member of the faculty to academic challenge and student engagement; and this past year, the outcome of the Middle States decennial accreditation process. In thinking about what I wanted to convey to you today, I reviewed several of these talks, including the one from the Opening Convocation in 1996. In rereading my remarks from that Convocation, I was struck by how the topics I spoke about resemble the concerns we still have today. They include:

- Tuition costs
- The demographics of enrollment
- K-12 preparation for university coursework
- Master's education as a commodity
- The importance of doctoral program quality
- The knowledge explosion and what it means for learning
- Interdisciplinary endeavors.

These topics are not outdated today! Things change, but in the world of higher education, somewhat slowly.

I recall at the time that I was thrilled to report that the quality of the freshman class, the class of 2000, had improved compared to earlier classes. Forty three percent of the class had graduated from their respective high schools in the top 10% of their classes. I also was proud to report that our FY 1995 federal research expenditures were \$28M, that our total research expenditures were \$45M, and that GW was solidly ranked as a Research II institution according to the Carnegie classification. Compare those statistics with those of today: 67% of the fall 2009 entering

class, the class of 2013, ranked in the top 10% of their high-school class. In a similarly positive progression, our FY 08 federal research expenditures were \$119.1M and our total research expenditures were \$172.2M. These statistics indicate the significant progress we have made working together to move GW towards being a selective, research university. Though we have much more to accomplish, we are moving in the right direction with significant momentum.

In thinking about what has transpired over the more than 13 years since August 1996, I am really pleased that we worked together to achieve two successful Middle States reaccreditations (ten years apart), a complete review and revamping of our doctoral-program offerings, the creation of a College of Professional Studies based on rethinking the delivery of master's and graduate-certificate education, the formation of the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration to bring recognition to one of our niche strengths, the development of a University Strategic Plan for Academic Excellence to bring focus to our efforts and investments through well-tracked metrics, the implementation of a recognized University writing program, and a better integration of our research and education efforts nicely personified by our two undergraduate research opportunities, the Gamow and the Rice. These are a few examples of what the faculties of our schools working with our deans and others have accomplished over these years. None of this would have occurred without many of our faculty members taking time to re-order their personal career agendas to focus on the good of the University. For their dedication towards these aims, I extend my most hearty thanks.

BACKGROUND FOR LOOKING FORWARD

I have now looked back, but as the title of my remarks indicates, I also want to look forward. As a number of you know, I enjoy reading about higher-education issues. I share what I read with others in order to provoke their thinking and to stimulate discussion. An example of this occurred two years ago when Lilien Robinson and I appointed the University Steering Committee on the 2008 Undergraduate Curriculum Review. At that time, I provided each member of the committee with two books that I thought were worthy of reading in preparation for the work of the committee. One of those was *Our Underachieving Colleges: A candid look at how much students learn and why they should be learning more*, written by Derek Bok. (Ref. 1) This particular book continues to play a significant role in my thinking about GW's future. In addition, three other books have stimulated my thoughts about where we are headed. They are

- *A University for the 21st Century* by James J. Duderstadt (Ref. 2)
- *Remaking the American University – Market-Smart and Mission-Centered* by Robert Zemsky, Gregory Wegner, and William F. Massy (Ref. 3)
- *Making Reform Work – The Case for Transforming American Higher Education* by Robert Zemsky. (Ref. 4).

In contemplating the future of this university, there are many higher-education topics to consider – the nitty-gritty of curriculum reform; investing in research and scholarship and its associated infrastructure, creating a culture of development that is focused on academic investment priorities, and so on. All these and others that I will not discuss today should be part of our collegial discussions on a regular basis. What I will talk about today are two of what I consider to be the profound concerns of higher education today:

- Remembering our mission while being cognizant of the marketplace; and
- Understanding how individuals learn in order to engage and challenge our students academically.

The four books I just mentioned have brought depth and coherence to my thinking about these issues.

MISSION AND THE MARKETPLACE

Within the world of a research university like that of GW, no one seems to mind having conversations about mission, whether at the level of the university as a whole or at the level of a department or institute. When these conversations take place at the university level, the talk is about scholarship and discovery along with the creation and dissemination of knowledge. The George Washington University academic mission is no exception as our Strategic Plan states: “The academic mission is to provide students and faculty members with the optimal environment for the creation, acquisition, and dissemination of knowledge and the pursuit of creative endeavors to meet the needs and enrich the experiences of the global society.” This statement lays out the values that define GW’s character.

Discussions of the “marketplace” in higher education often precipitate strong reactions. Those faculty members who focus on the “traditions” of the academy can become quite vociferous about “selling out” to commercial interests. At the same time, there are faculty members who are truly entrepreneurial in their quests, whether they pertain to the delivery of educational programs or to carrying out major applied research projects. Those faculty members whose work is entrepreneurial will argue strongly that, in today’s environment, we all must be aware of the need to address the markets in order to generate the resources required to evolve, as well as to determine what we do

well. Naturally, reality resides somewhere in between these two extremes.

The contrast between the not-for-profit world and the for-profit world drives my purpose for discussing this aspect of university functioning. In the for-profit world, from a budgetary perspective, the essence of functioning is that discretionary funds are used to pay shareholders. Product lines that cannot generate a profit are not subsidized over the long run. On the other hand, in the not-for-profit world of colleges and universities, the payment of cross-subsidies is common; not all academic departments can cover their full overhead. This latter approach is driven by the essence of our mission statements.

As Remaking the American University vividly points out (Ref. 3, p. 51), the key is the appropriate balance between mission and marketplace. In some sense, the optimal balance occurs when the marketplace actually helps the college or university attain its mission, when "... the margins ... earned in one activity (are used) to enhance other worthy activities." (Ref. 3, p. 62) Obviously, this must be done with transparency with respect to calculating contribution margins. (Ref. 3, p. 63) We at GW have been doing this and I argue must continue to do this as we look to the future and what we intend to achieve in order to become recognized as a top-tier, research institution. The generation of new revenues for investment is essential for GW's future.

Such new revenue is being produced most recently through the work of the College of Professional Studies (CPS). Faculty members in the College are developing new undergraduate and graduate offerings that address marketplace needs in the greater metropolitan area of Washington, DC. This activity is a must if we wish to develop the resources needed to achieve our aspirations. Moreover, in some ways, such sensitivity to the

marketplace provides incentives to improve our productivity and demonstrates that reduced costs through increased productivity can lead to more funds available for cross-subsidies. In the words of *Remaking the American University*, "(t)he goal ought to be (to) remain... mission-centered by spending wisely and productively the margins generated by being market-smart." (Ref. 3, p. 68) I hope that GW can maintain this balance in the future as it continues to be sensitive to and successful in the higher-education marketplace.

UNDERSTANDING AND APPLYING HOW PEOPLE LEARN IN ORDER TO ACADEMICALLY ENGAGE AND CHALLENGE OUR STUDENTS

Nothing discourages me more than when I read a paper like that recently circulated by Mark Bauerlein, a professor of English from Emory University. (Ref. 5) The paper is entitled "Professors on the Production Line, Students on Their Own." Its content is focused mainly on professors in the humanities but most likely, in some aspects, can be generalized to other disciplinary areas as well. The core issue is the pressure on faculty members in the humanities to publish (in order to attain a job and then tenure) at the expense of the engagement and performance of undergraduates. The latter is measured through "academic engagement" data obtained through several well-respected surveys which indicate that "first-year students expect to do more during their first year of college than they actually do." It turns out, the studies show, that undergraduates "study two to six hours *less* per week on average than they thought they would when starting college." (Ref. 5, p. 4) and find that their institutions emphasize academics less than they had expected. (Ref. 5, pp. 4, 5) These conclusions are based not only on assignments but also on interactions of the students with their professors after and outside of class.

Meanwhile, from all directions come the cries for the assessment of learning outcomes. Whether it is the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, as I reported to the Assembly last year, or individual accrediting agencies in the professional fields – AACSB in business, ABET in engineering, LCME in medicine, and so on – the message is clear: We are being told by many that students are not learning what they should. Perhaps the best summary is Derek Bok's book, *Our Underachieving Colleges*. (Ref. 1) Bok focuses on "... what an undergraduate ought to be prepared to do as opposed to being able to recite." (Ref. 1, pp. 1-10; Ref. 4, p. 161) Assessing what students are prepared to do after their undergraduate education is completed is not a simple task. First, we must know what we seek to have students prepared to do. A logical next question is whether this has ever been examined at GW.

I am pleased to report that when the University's strategic planning committee on academic excellence was carrying out its work, it took time to draft a four-paragraph "Model for Academic Excellence at GW." The second paragraph is focused on undergraduate education and closes with the following sentence: "GW baccalaureate graduates will be well prepared for entry into the 21st century global society through an education that has its foundations in substantial writing linked to development of oral communication and advocacy, critical thinking, analytical problem solving, computational literacy, and depth of study in their chosen academic major." It is such a statement that sets the stage for assessment of learning outcomes at GW. I expect that Derek Bok would be pleased to see such an explicit statement provided it is combined with the necessary action that assesses whether it is being achieved. Developing the necessary measures to discover whether we are achieving what we seek for our undergraduates is what we are about now in CCAS, ESIA, and CPS, and using

similar guidelines from AACSB for Business Schools and from ABET for engineering programs.

Achieving what we seek in learning outcomes is a challenging task. It will require the faculties of GW's colleges and schools to take the responsibility and commit the time to rethink how we teach. Achieving the outcomes sought requires a culture shift from thinking about what we plan to cover in the course to what students will be expected to do and know by the end of the course. This is achieved by having students actively engaged in the learning process through professors who are academically challenging the students inside and outside the classroom. To quote Bok, "... instructors need to create a process of active learning by posing problems, challenging student answers, and encouraging members of the class to apply the information and concepts in assigned readings to a variety of new situations." (Ref. 1, p117) Such an approach applies across all disciplines. Success in fully implementing such a model of instruction will distinguish GW as an institution that values deep student learning that is assessed through defined learning outcomes.

Where do we start? First, I would argue that we as educators all need to begin the process of understanding what neuropsychologists and others in the neurosciences have discovered about how people learn. (Ref. 4, p. 167) This is the emphasis of Robert Zemsky in *Making Reform Work* and of Carl Wieman (Nobel prize winner in physics), in his paper entitled "A new model for post-secondary education, the Optimized University." (Ref. 6) The core aspect of what both these authors argue is that people don't develop true understanding of complex subjects by listening passively to explanations. As Wieman puts it, "True understanding only comes through the student actively constructing their own understanding through a process of mentally building on their prior thinking and knowledge through

'effortful study'." (Ref. 6, p. 4) Wieman further points out, "The most effective teaching ... (comes with) having the student fully mentally engaged with suitably challenging intellectual tasks, determining their thinking, and providing specific and targeted feedback of all these relevant facets of their thinking to support the student's ongoing mental construction process." This is a very brief synopsis of the key aspects of what we as educators need to comprehend and practice in depth. I encourage everyone here today to read these works as a starting point to a larger dialogue. I have a list of these works here and I encourage you to pick one up today.

I am sure that by now you have noticed that I have said nothing about using technology in the classroom. I certainly am not against using technology provided we can demonstrate that the use of technology enhances the learning process in the sense I described in my previous point. From my current understanding, there is little well-established evidence as to how best to use technology to enhance actual learning. As a consequence, much work remains to be done in this arena, especially in offering courses in an on-line-learning format that takes into account how people learn.

Looking forward, how are we addressing these matters at GW? This year we have appointed two task forces to begin work on positioning GW to address these two issues: enhancing learning and how to use technology as a learning tool. The first endeavor, the GW Teaching Consortium Task Force, is a direct outgrowth of President Knapp's brainstorming group on learning. This group proposed a 21st Century Teaching and Learning Collaborative that would bring together faculty interested in transforming how we teach and learn at GW. The core purpose is to create a GW teaching consortium that can serve as a catalyst for innovation and excellence in education through application of what is known

about how people learn. We envision this entity working closely with the existing Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, which focuses on the incorporation of academic technologies into teaching and on the design and support of on-line courses. Simultaneously, we have appointed a Distance Learning Task Force for the purpose of developing a strategic plan for distance education that encompasses all components of the University. The work of these two task forces is interrelated. Each can inform the other by working with the Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning team to understand our base starting points. I look forward to receiving the reports of both task forces this coming spring and seeing us evolve as a university that measurably achieves its sought-after learning goals through the application in teaching of what we know about how people learn coupled with the strategic use of appropriate technological tools.

CLOSING

Thank you very much for your attention.

REFERENCES

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