

Liberal Education in the Land of Enchantment

Albuquerque Rotary Club

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Dr Shomaker, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. Thanks especially to Linda Parker for arranging for me to be here. While not a Rotarian myself, I know a bit about the good work that you do through my Dad who is a member of the Rotary Club of Lancaster, PA. Thank you for your service to the community, our country and the world.

My remarks are entitled Liberal Education in the Land of Enchantment. I want to be clear at the outset that this is not a political statement. This is not about liberal or conservative, left or right. I am speaking of liberal in its original meaning of liberating or freeing. A liberal education seeks to empower individuals through an approach that emphasizes broad knowledge. The liberal arts refer to the disciplines that have traditionally supported a liberal education. Broadly speaking a liberal education is the end and the study of the liberal arts is the means to that end. The seven liberal arts originated with the ancient Greeks and included grammar, rhetoric, logic, geometry, arithmetic, music and astronomy. This is the foundation of undergraduate and graduate programs at St. John's College in Santa Fe. In my remarks today I would like to tell you a little about St. John's, its commitment to liberal education, its unique role in higher education in New Mexico and its broader contribution to the state.

Let me begin with a little history and some facts and figures about St. John's College. First, St. John's College has no religious affiliation. We consider ourselves one college with two campuses, Santa Fe and Annapolis, Maryland. The Santa Fe campus opened its doors in the fall of 1964. St. John's came to New Mexico because of the desire on the part of the college to offer its program to students beyond the original campus in Annapolis. The Annapolis campus is the third oldest in the United States dating from the late 17th century. The two campuses are overseen by

one board of directors and work closely together on curriculum, admissions policies and finances.

St. John's also came to New Mexico through the vision and commitment of a number of leading figures in the Santa Fe community, among them the renowned architect, John Gaw Meem, who donated much of the land on which the college stands. For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the location of the campus, St. John's sits on some 250 acres southeast of the Santa Fe Plaza at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

The college is deliberately small with a little over 400 undergraduates and fewer than 100 graduate students on each campus. Our students come from all over the United States and the world. On the Santa Fe campus, just over 5% of our undergraduates are from New Mexico and about the same number are international students. Over 1/3rd of our graduate students are New Mexico residents and many of them are teachers. We especially structure our Masters of Liberal Arts program so that it can be completed over the course of several summers in order to be available to classroom teachers. I am pleased to say that your president, John Shomaker, is an alumnus of our Masters of Liberal Arts program.

There no majors. The college offers only one comprehensive undergraduate program based on reading and discussing the ideas contained in the so-called Great Books in Western thought. I will say a bit more about this shortly. In addition, we offer two masters programs. One, as I mentioned, in liberal arts modeled on our undergraduate curriculum and a second in Eastern Classics that studies the classic literature in the East and South Asian traditions. Eastern Classics students are required to study either Sanskrit or Chinese.

Today, St. John's is one of only two private, non-profit, four year colleges in New Mexico. With the transition of the College of Santa Fe to a for-profit art school, St. John's remains the only liberal arts college in the state.

With this as general background, let me turn to how St. John's approaches liberal education and why I believe this is so important.

In the Business Section of the New York Times a few months ago there was a front page article about the dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, Roger Martin. The article described Dean Martin's unusual approach to business education that emphasizes critical thinking rather than a typical skills-based curriculum. The article went on to state that learning how to "imaginatively frame questions and consider multiple perspectives" have historically been associated with a liberal arts education and not a business education.

Some may question whether the description in the article accurately captures the essence of a liberal arts education, but, nonetheless, it is a refreshing public recognition of the fundamental value of a liberal arts education. It is particularly refreshing to read this in the business section of a national newspaper given the current difficulties in our economy and society and a prevailing attitude that seems to extol efficiency and tangibility above all and often misunderstands and undervalues the immeasurable and intangible benefits of a liberal education both to the individual and to the society. This attitude manifests itself in an increasing demand from governmental and other leaders for colleges and college students to focus their education simply on acquiring the tools necessary to get a job. And the implication that today a liberal education – a St. John's education -- is an unaffordable luxury; that a college's most important goal must be to prepare students for the workplace. I imagine this thought may have occurred to some of you, but I believe this is an erroneous, unfortunate and ultimately harmful conclusion for our society.

On the contrary, I believe that in today's world a liberal education like St. John's is, perhaps even more important and even more timely than ever. The St. John's commitment to liberal education is focused on ends not means. It is not intended to

limit horizons, but to broaden them. It is an education that seeks to prepare students, as Newsweek editor Jon Mecham puts it, “for *a* good life, not *the* good life.” I do not deny that a vocation, earning a living, is an important part of life. Indeed, St. John’s has a substantial college-funded internship program that allows students to explore vocational opportunities during their time at the college. But we believe strongly that there is more to life and an education than a job.

Further, I would assert that much of what has contributed to our current country’s economic turmoil and political malaise is not the lack of technical preparation or competence on the part of businessmen, politicians, academicians and average citizens, but a lack of perspective, judgment and in some cases just plain ethics. The health care debate, if you can honor it with that title, where shouting has often substituted for dialogue and dogma seemingly replaced reason, is a glaring example of why truly free, open-minded men and women are essential to the welfare of our country and our world. And, therefore, the value of and the need for a liberal arts education – a St. John’s education.

The answer for our nation’s challenges, therefore, cannot only be more expertise that comes from training for the job market masquerading as education or the accumulation of facts posing as knowledge, but must include the opportunity for more reflection, balance and fresh, critical thinking. Attributes that are the essence of a liberal arts education. As Alan Brinkley, former provost of Columbia University, has said, “liberal education is a crucial element in the creation of . . . one hopes, a fairer and just nation.” An education for freedom, an education that is the basis for a life-time of learning, contribution and meaning. An education that is even more of a necessity in these trying times.

How does St. John’s develop and nurture these attributes?

First, the St. John’s program, for both the undergraduate and graduate students, encourages intellectual freedom – the freedom to explore the ideas that have

informed and shaped the past, inform and shape the present and will surely inform and shape the future. The freedom to question these ideas and grow in all dimensions – mind, body and spirit. The freedom to think for oneself. The freedom not just to answer questions, but to question answers. The opportunity to experience the liberating quality of education that promotes a healthy skepticism grounded in knowledge, but that rejects mindless cynicism and nihilism. As the founding dean of the St. John’s program, Scott Buchanan, put it, the aim of a St. John’s education is “. . . liberty, the internal freedom from passion and dogma.” The freedom from slavery to popular opinion or fad or fashion. To make informed choices for oneself. Freedom but not license. Freedom that also demands responsibility.

Second, the St. John’s program nurtures intellectual maturity and curiosity. Maturity is not merely a matter of chronological age. Some people remain children in many ways for their entire lives. They never think for themselves, never develop a respect for others, never learn responsibility nor contribute to anything beyond themselves. Often they are pawns for the ideas and passions of others. They may be grown, but they are not adults. The opportunity to become free adults is what St. John’s and its program aspires to provide.

The program nurtures curiosity and intellectual courage through a broad interdisciplinary approach that encourages students both to push beyond their preconceived intellectual limits to take on subjects they might naturally avoid but also to explore ideas that they find most intriguing.

If the objective of a St. John’s education is freedom, or free men and women, how does St. John’s claim to help its students attain this freedom? The answer, perhaps ironically, is through an all-required liberal arts curriculum. An updated version of the Greek concept of the liberal arts. A curriculum that requires the undergraduates to study four years of mathematics; four years of language, two of ancient Greek and two of French; three years of laboratory science; two years of

music; four years of seminar; and allows for only two electives, what we call preceptorials. And a graduate curriculum that is similarly structured. A curriculum, for both the graduates and undergraduates, which is based on reading and discussing original texts, many of which were written hundreds even thousands of years ago, some in now dead languages. Texts that are sometimes referred to as the Great Books and that are studied in relatively chronological order as they build on and speak to one another.

Why original texts; why the Great Books? How do they contribute to making free men and women?

They do so by raising the most fundamental, important and eternal questions. Questions which are as alive today as they were centuries ago. Questions that we see reflected in the headlines every day. Questions of character and virtue, questions of human relations, questions of power and politics, questions of war and peace, questions of life and death, questions of who we are and where we are going, questions of the divine and more. St. John's College students grapple with these questions precisely because they provide insights that may guide them in their personal lives today and in their lives as citizens and members of a global society. Questions that are the foundation of freedom.

The all-required curriculum may, on the surface, not only seem the antithesis of freedom, but even anti-democratic, as choice is the essence of democracy. While the curriculum is determined, the education that emerges from this curriculum is anything but. Choice is abundant in the questions that are raised and the manner in which they are addressed. In fact, we believe that we have the most democratic classrooms possible. Nothing is predetermined. Every question is open for discussion. The texts themselves are the teachers.

There are no lecture classes. Each class is very small. Classes are led by faculty members whom we call tutors, not professors. The tutors come to St. John's

precisely because they want to learn along with the students, not lecture or profess. There are no more than 15 students per tutor in any class, and we have an overall student-teacher ratio of eight to one. Everyone is equal in the classroom and has a voice before the texts and the ideas they contain. The conversation begins with a question from the tutor, but the class responds to the questions of all. Learning is the goal and questions are the means.

But learning at St. John's consists of more than reading and discussing the ideas in Great Books. The St. John's program is very much a hands-on enterprise. Active participation is the norm whether it is conducting an experiment in the laboratory, demonstrating a proof at the board in math, translating a portion of a Greek or French text in language or composing a chant in music. While conversation is at the heart of learning at St. John's, it is not the only element. Experimentation, demonstration, translation, musical composition and performance and writing are also integral to learning at the college.

Learning at St. John's is a cooperative endeavor, but it is based on individual responsibility. Each member of the class whether student or tutor is expected to come prepared and to participate actively. Each student shares a responsibility for the success of the class. What a student gains from the class and the entire program depends first on his or her own preparation and participation, but it also depends on the preparation and participation of his or her classmates. Part of learning at St. John's is listening carefully, absorbing and reflecting upon what others say and resisting the temptation to always have the last word. The process is cumulative and becomes more and more liberating over the course of the student's studies.

Of course student life at St. John's is more than just classes. It is as varied and vibrant as any college, but differs from many because it is based primarily on student initiative. Although we have no intercollegiate athletics, we do have an active intramurals program. Our students also compete outside the college in a

number of individual sports such as martial arts and fencing. We have a wonderful pottery studio and a dynamic student theater which just last week produced the play “Blood Wedding” by Federico Garcia Lorca translated by a student. We also offer a myriad of outdoor activities including whitewater rafting, hiking and wilderness survival. If students don’t find an organization or an opportunity that responds to their passion, we encourage and help them to start one. Being a small college makes this possible.

We also encourage our students to find ways to give back to the community often as tutors for elementary and high school students. There is a very active student organization, Project *Politae*, which links students with needs in the Santa Fe community.

While a St. John’s education is not intended to train students for their first job, it certainly helps prepare them for the future, for both a living and a life. It is not unusual for St. John’s alumni to claim that the college “changed their life.” Not by offering what is often considered relevant; courses designed to prepare for a specific vocation, but by providing the opportunity to acquire the attributes that we know the future will demand -- the ability to learn and to adapt. This ability is why St. John’s alumni are research scientists when we do no research, creative artists when we have no art department, internet entrepreneurs when we have no computer science classes, business executives when we teach no business, doctors when we offer no pre-med courses, or food editors and chefs when we have no culinary majors. In fact, among its graduates St. John’s has one of the highest percentages of PhDs per capita in the country.

Moreover, a St. John’s education is meant for a lifetime. It is the beginning not the end of a student’s learning. This fervor for learning is the hallmark of our alumni and what binds them to one another and to the college. This is so whether an editor in New York City, an educator on the Navajo Reservation, an international lawyer in Miami, a restaurateur in Paris, a diplomat in Japan or a farmer in New Mexico.

Indeed, just this past January alumni from across the globe met in seminar with two of our tutors in Santa Fe to discuss a play that our undergraduates read, *Aeschylus Orestia*. Similar alumni seminars take place throughout the country.

There is simply no other college in New Mexico and only a handful around the country that offer a program like St. John's. This is not to denigrate what other institutions in New Mexico and the country offer. All contribute to the diversity of US higher education which is indeed one of our country's great strengths. And a St. John's education certainly is not for everyone, but I hope you have the sense that it is a valuable and integral part of the higher education landscape and plays an important role both in New Mexico and the country.

Before concluding, I think it is important also to mention the contribution St. John's makes to New Mexico beyond the campus in spite of its very small size. First, in purely financial terms, St. John's contributes just under \$30 million to the economy of the state of New Mexico every year. This does not include two ongoing campus construction projects that total almost \$20 million. Of this construction budget over \$1 million goes directly to gross receipts tax. But beyond these dollars and cents, St. John's contributes considerably more to the human capital and overall welfare of New Mexico. Our 60 plus tutors come from all over the country and the world. They exemplify Renaissance men and women, not only because of their varied backgrounds, but also because we ask them to teach any course we offer regardless of their specific academic expertise. Faculty members bring their families, knowledge, energy and experience to the state. But we also have native New Mexicans on the faculty. The most outstanding example is our Dean, Victoria Mora. Dean Mora graduated from West Mesa High School and went on to get her undergraduate degree from UNM and PhD from Yale University before coming to St. John's.

In addition, a substantial percentage of our graduates even though they come from elsewhere remain in the state after leaving the college and contribute to the state's

well being. Approximately 1,000 of our 12,000 living alumni from the two campuses, Santa Fe and Annapolis, live in New Mexico and over 30% of these alumni in the state are engaged in education in some way.

Notwithstanding this, we would like to increase our undergraduate student body from New Mexico. Unfortunately, many New Mexico students who are interested in attending a small, private liberal arts college go out of state. Statistics show that over 60% of undergraduate students who go to college out of state do not return. This is a potentially tremendous loss to the state. If New Mexico students attending St. John's could receive Lottery Scholarship funds, this might help encourage more of them to stay at home and attend St. John's. Unfortunately, the legislature has consistently rejected extending the Lottery Scholarships to students attending private, non-profit colleges. I believe this is incredibly shortsighted and ultimately harmful to the welfare of the state.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to tell you about St. John's College, its commitment to liberal education, its role in New Mexico higher education and its broader contribution to New Mexico. In closing, I hope you will visit our campus and participate in some of our activities. Some of you might be interested in one of our graduate programs. There is some material available for you to take with you. Thank you again and I look forward to your questions.