“The Liberal Arts Can Set You Free”

Thank you, Dean Conrad. Good morning everyone, and welcome, Class of 2015. A talk like this is a grand opportunity to think about the education in which we are all engaged, but I do remember what Professor Steve Erickson said when he spoke at convocation five years ago: “Beware of anyone who appears as a sage on the stage.” What he meant, I think, is that you, our students, are entering the period when you begin to take responsibility for your own education, to produce knowledge rather than absorb it as if you were a sponge or a potted plant. So...think of me not as a sage. Pretend my words are not pearls of wisdom. This will be hard, probably impossible, but I trust you to try.

Liberal Arts as Freedom

First, though, congratulations to the Class of 2015. Acceptance to Pomona College is a great honor. There were 7,200 applicants for 400 places in your class. Only 14% of applicants were admitted. This is a very high bar indeed. Admission to Pomona is also a tremendous privilege, because you join the small number of American students--150,000 or so--who attend a selective liberal arts college. That’s less than one percent of the population of college and university students in the United States. Even among this rarified one percent, few students attend need-blind colleges like Pomona, where students and their families pay what they can afford, without student loans. If you come from a family that does not need financial aid, you too are on scholarship, because Pomona shoulders a third of the cost of your education. In the language of our time, Pomona College has invested in each of you. The investment goes far beyond the dollars and cents pulled out of our endowment on your behalf. It includes time, attention, and a commitment to stretch your talents as far as they will go--and not just on the part of faculty. You might be surprised to know how much the staff and administration of this college care about and contribute to the quality of your experience here.

At this point I have a question for you. It’s great that you got into Pomona, but...why are you here? Keep in mind that most students go to different kinds of schools: roughly 22 percent of all BA degrees are awarded in business, eight percent in health professions like nursing or physical therapy. Majors such as parks, recreations and leisure or security and protective services are on the rise. Pomona doesn’t teach any of these things. So you’re pursuing a liberal arts education at a time when our country is obsessed with the practical and the measurable, when cost cutting makes distance learning and for-profit universities more popular than ever. In this educational climate, the idea of going to a residential liberal arts college to study Chinese literature or linguistics or Greek philosophy might seem very strange indeed: like going to Hogwarts to study potions or the dark arts.
What might make a liberal arts education—rare as it is, expensive as it is—worth your time in our 21st century world? You will of course learn many things from a broad range of disciplines, but if your education comprises merely a checklist of courses in Areas 1 through 5, it won’t amount to much. Our goal is far more ambitious. We offer you a liberal education. The ideal of a liberal education is to pull you out of the narrow rut of your own immediate experience into a larger field of awareness. Liberal education will sharpen your ability to reflect critically on what you, and we, assume to be true: on what you, and we, take for granted.

Here’s an example: Most people assume that the division of human beings into two genders, male and female, is “natural”. What, then, do we make of the Berdache, a third gender among the Zuni people of New Mexico. Zuni Berdache were men who dressed as women, took men as their partners, and yet held positions of honor in their own community—that is, until the U.S. government outlawed Berdache late in the 19th century. What does this history imply for our assumptions about gender? I leave that for you to ponder but here’s the message of liberal education: As novelist David Foster Wallace put it, many of us live on “default settings,” where we are “lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation.” A liberal education changes the setting by plunging us into new worlds, into the unfamiliar, the uncertain. This is the path of self reflection, a path that can set you free.

But what kind of freedom are we talking about here? In the few days you have been on campus, you may have experienced more personal freedom than at any time in your life. Nobody tells you when to go to bed, when to get up, what to do on the weekend. This is negative freedom, or freedom from control by other people or by authorities of any kind, including governments. This negative understanding of freedom has deep roots in American culture and accounts, in part, for the distrust of government many in our country feel. Liberal education has a different ideal of freedom. It assumes, as the ancient Romans did, that freedom is rooted in the quest for knowledge. Liber in Latin means both “free” and “book.” Medieval scholars followed this classical notion when they coined the term “liberal arts” to describe a course of study worthy of a free person.

This is why a smattering of liberal arts courses will not alone teach you to think for yourself. The courses have to be taught in a manner that encourages reflection and critique and, especially, that challenges conclusions you take for granted. For this reason, many of your courses will be seminars, few of your tests will be multiple choice, and if you ask a professor “what do you want?” on this assignment, she may give you the evil eye. Your courses will teach you not just the facts and methods of science or math or literature, but how a scientist or a mathematician or a writer of fiction thinks. You will design your own scientific experiments and mathematical proofs, choreograph a dance or paint a painting, do original research in sociology or politics. That is to say that fundamental to a liberal education is the following truth: in order to think critically about anything, including the latest discoveries in any field, you have to understand the process of coming up with those answers. Even more important than what a political scientist or a mathematician or a French literature scholar knows is how she knows. This is the question that really matters. If you can ask and, more important, think about and write about that question, then you become less a recipient of information and more a participant in intellectual inquiry. You also learn to distrust dogmatism and prejudice as twin enemies of an inquiring, open mind. Such a mind is the prime element of your freedom.

A second freedom promised to you by liberal education is attention to knowledge for its own sake: a belief that education and inquiry have intrinsic value, a value apart from their practical
utility. For Aristotle and his philosophical offspring, including the founders of our American republic, a person mired in everyday pressures to keep body and soul together is not free to devote herself to the really important question of existence: What is the good or best life? Liberal education in the 21st century is less tied to this implied ideal of leisure and privilege. What remains of the classical ideal, though, is a determination not to embrace vocationalism, that is: not to educate students for specific careers. This is not to say that your professors want you to be unemployed after you graduate or that Pomona College won’t continue to invest in a strong Career Development Office. It is not to say that you shouldn’t take courses in accounting or film editing. It is to say that majoring in accounting or film editing will not set you free.

Escaping the Parochial

There’s still more to the freedom promised by the liberal arts. The breadth and depth of study offered by a place like Pomona aims not just to make you a more reflective person but to give you a deeper awareness of possible options, a broader sense of how to explore and justify alternatives, and an expanded appreciation of the range of human experience. This is why we want you to understand something of the historical changes that have occurred in our own and other societies. As well, we want you to understand something of what it means to live in a different country where cultural assumptions and language and economy and politics differ from our own.

For these reasons, Pomona emphasizes the importance of a diverse faculty and student body, promotes the study of languages other than English and offers you a serious experience of living “abroad.” This is also why Pomona added a Dynamics of Difference component to the General Education curriculum five years ago. DDP encourages you to understand how human sorting systems like race, sexuality, class, gender and nation shape human lives and why these systems are not “natural” but “constructed.” Genes don’t make race, for example: humans do. Understanding this fact can be liberating, but it is also terrifying because it robs us of the cushion of certainty.

If the way we live now is not the only way a life can or should be lived, if the way we run our economy or understand the universe or interpret the Bible or the Koran is not the only way forward, where does that leave us? I like the philosopher Robert Pippin’s answer to this question. If we are open to multiple possibilities, he writes, then “the path ahead might look broader and more various, surrounded by less darkness and uncertainty. (We might see that what seems) “necessary and fated….could have been otherwise, and might be otherwise in the future, and all that is certainly ‘liberating’.”

Escaping the Tyranny of Busyness

I have said that a liberal arts education encourages reflection, including self-reflection. It also expands the range of options we are able to imagine. And it does these things in part by freeing us from the tyranny of the here and now, especially the tyranny of vocationalism. This is all to say that reflection requires down time: time to sit with yourself, to turn off your cell phone and put Facebook aside. It also requires the leisure for conversation, in seminars, in a professor’s office, over lunch or dinner with your friends. Yet finding this kind of time is very difficult….not just for you but for your professors. All of you lived very busy lives in high school and we have evidence that college is just as busy. Many college students, in fact, are so
engaged with extracurricular commitments that they study less than my generation did and have less down time as well. I ask you to think about the possibility that busyness can be taken too far, can in fact make your life less, not more, free. Extreme busyness can be a form of tyranny, can render a life more driven than self reflective. The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, took this thought even further, interpreting extreme busyness as a form of violence because (he said) it “kills the root of inner wisdom.” I believe Merton’s message is that the tyranny of over-commitment will never set you free.

Conclusion

So there it is: an argument for liberal education, your education. I want to persuade you that if you work hard, the intellectual power you develop in the next four years might enable you to lead a freer life, a life more your own. There is something liberating, perhaps even subversive, about such intellectual power. This is one reason why intellectuals frighten some people and why Neil Postman called good teaching “a subversive activity.”

And here I leave you with a surprising fact. Although liberal education strikes some as impractical, unfashionable, not vocational enough, possibly subversive, it seems to prepare students rather well for the postgraduate world. In fact liberal arts colleges contribute a disproportionate share of our national leaders in business, in the arts, in science, and yes even in politics (Did you know that 19 percent of US presidents are liberal arts graduates?).

So….Class of 2015, I hope you embrace the promise of your four years at Pomona.

Bon voyage!