

***CULTIVATING OUR ROOTS:
THE ENDURING PURPOSE OF EDUCATION***

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Good morning. I am happy to be here, and could almost stay, at your beautiful campus by the sea. After spending six years in Michigan - as delightful as those years were - I am particularly enjoying my return to a coastal region. I have spent a great deal of time on the road in the past two months and am quickly becoming fond of the wonderful geographic diversity we have in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

The Commonwealth offers its citizens diversity in many aspects of our lives: geography and climate; culture; urban and rural communities; and employment opportunities, to name just a few. One of the most impressive and varied of Virginia's offerings is the array of distinctive choices of colleges and universities, both public and private, found within our boundaries. As I visit these campuses, I am struck not only by their uniqueness but also by the rich history and tradition in which they are grounded. Being rooted in such fertile soil enables an institution to nurture an organizational culture that regularly draws upon its past in developing its future aspirations and in living its present.

Hampton University is such an institution. I came of age recognizing Hampton Institute as a Center of Excellence. As a boy I dreamed of coming to Hampton Institute, but the vicissitudes of life carried me elsewhere. At last I have come. Your founding as "an oasis of opportunity for ... newly freed people" must surely instill within the university community an unbridled passion for the freedom and democracy that are at the heart of the educational enterprise in these United States. The very designation of the Emancipation Oak and its place of honor on the campus tell me that this is so. This magnificent oak is a living reminder of the stunning rate at which ex-slaves, so soon after slavery, launched themselves into paths of education. It reminds us, too, how closely intertwined within our human hearts are the passions for liberty and for learning. In 1858, Abraham Lincoln warned Americans not to "blow out the moral lights around us." By 1868 Hampton had become a moral light held high, and it is still nurturing the "better angels of our nature."

It is clear that you hold fast to the vision of those who founded Hampton in for the purpose of training young people to "go out to teach and lead," building on the "strength of self-sufficiency, intelligent labor, and solid moral character." That original aim resounds in your current dedication to the "promotion of learning, building of character and preparation of promising students for positions of leadership and service," as described in your mission. Your success in filling that mission is manifest. To cite but one example,

the fact that you have provided the training and experience for four college presidents within the past eight years shows your commitment to both leadership and education. My own experience ratifies the strength of your mission. For more than two decades I taught at Harvey Mudd College, where I urged insistently that the best of liberal education would build on the best of scientific and technical preparation.

My message centers on the importance of holding fast to enduring purposes - at Hampton University and throughout the academy - while also forging ahead in new areas such as technology and globalization, two of the themes of this Institute. In contemplating your third theme, the curriculum, we should recognize that "A curriculum is far more than a set of courses; most fundamentally it is a statement of an institution's philosophy of education" - as Jerry Graf accurately declared in his publication on general education. Seen in this light, the curriculum can only remain vital if we cultivate its roots at the same time that we graft new stock onto it.

Gatherings such as this Institute, no less than the Emancipation Oak, afford the university community a valuable opportunity to nourish our roots. Through such symbols, rituals, and conversation, we instill in newcomers and rekindle for all the understanding of and commitment to the ethos of the academy that must be the guiding light for our work. I commend you for setting aside time for this valuable purpose. The fact that this is the 53rd year that you have done so is exceptional.

In his book, *Curricular Landscapes, Democratic Vistas*, William Tierney claims that "post-secondary institutions stand for a freedom of inquiry that supports the unhindered assertion, discussion, and development of ideas." He further suggests that "the unique role of colleges and universities is to empower students so that they may become centrally involved in the struggle for democracy as we approach the twenty-first century."

Writing in 1989, Tierney could only glimpse the extent to which that struggle for democracy would become a global one. Your focus today on globalization aptly reflects the responsibility of the academy to prepare students to live and work in a time when all points on the globe are so connected that we can follow instantaneously events as terrible as the bombings earlier this month in Kenya, Tanzania, and Ireland and as wonderful as the discovery of life near thermal jets on the ocean floor beyond the reach of photosynthesis. As we track the progress of the Asian economic flu into Russia and wait for it to strike the U.S., we know that we live in a global economy.

As you talk today, and perhaps throughout the year, about the implications of globalization for the curriculum at Hampton, I beg attention to the importance of foreign language study. It seems odd that during the past decade or so, when many colleges and universities have emphasized global dimensions in disciplines such as history, literature, economics, music, and art, they have simultaneously lessened foreign language requirements in the curriculum. We should listen to Carolyn Reid-Wallace's admonition in her essay on the "The Promise of American Life." She writes that "It is not enough to learn the grammar and syntax of a foreign language; one must learn to speak the language fluently, and one must read great literature written in that language." I encourage the students who are here today to seize the opportunity to learn a new language not only for its practical uses but also to experience the pride of mastering what is for some a difficult

subject and for the joy of reading great literature in its original tongue. Know, too, that it is through language study that multiculturalism gains its tongue.

To faculty and administrators, I would urge putting your principles to the tests of organizations such as the American Academy for Liberal Education. Future definitions inevitably emerge from the contentions of contemporary disputations and dialogues. To show leadership in American higher education and for all of American higher education, Hampton needs to take its place at the table of this wider conversation. I am confident that it has much to offer at that table and want to invoke your presence for the good of others even more than for your own good. Similarly, the Council of Higher Education's study of general education in the commonwealth will benefit much from your thoughtful response, taking care to articulate the argument for scientific education as an essential component of liberal education.

In large measure, the global immediacy I mentioned is spawned by the computer and telecommunications technologies that are revamping so much of our lives. As Don Tapscott reminds us, ours is not only a global economy but also a "digital economy." Your focus on technology accurately points out our responsibility to prepare students not only to use technology but to use it wisely - to understand its transformative capacity and to mold it to our purposes rather than allowing it to shape us unawares.

The dangerous opportunities of technology must be exploited within as well as outside the academy. These opportunities include accessing voluminous information in library databases and on the World Wide Web, harnessing the power of the computer for research and analysis, modeling laboratory experiments online, and connecting students and scholars world-wide. As a report from Virginia Tech stated, advanced technology, if used correctly, can "free faculty for students, not from them." Similarly, technology should enable us to intensify rather than to replace the traditional strengths of academic capital. Our library collections, for example, can become more rather than less significant learning opportunities, freed by on-line methodologies to operate almost entirely as special collections centers. Such centers would reinforce the importance of the bookish arts - where the study of books, their contents and their production, can take center stage - beyond the superficial search for supportive references (a task easily relegated to on-line resources).

Through avenues such as Hampton's Academic Technology Mall, faculty and students put technology to use in support of teaching and learning. I underscore the words "in support of." As I am sure many here today would agree, technology is a means, not an end. For all the exciting opportunities that these new technologies offer to enhance learning, we do well to remember Parker Palmer's admonition in a recent book (*Radical Presence: Teaching as a Contemplative Practice*) that "Tips, tricks, techniques are not the heart of education - fire is."

That fire is to be found in the dialog between text and reader, between teacher and student, between student and student, and - especially when faculty come together to debate and forge the curriculum - between teacher and teacher. That fire can be found in the dialog between past and present, when-in the best tradition of a liberal arts education-we introduce students to the voices of the past as well as the present. That fire leaps forth when we kindle in ourselves and in our students the appetite for discovery and reflection,

the desire to seek the truth, and the determination to know ourselves in the context of a conversation that spans ages no less than communities.

James Baldwin wrote in *A Talk to Teachers*:

The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity.

Our souls must be ignited by the fire of knowledge and heated by the passion for liberty and truth it inspires, and our characters must be forged by industry, discipline, and the desire to learn if we are to be full participants in a democratic society. The best way we know to light these fires is through the liberal arts.

For this reason, I am glad to learn that the scientific and professional curriculum emphasis at Hampton University is undergirded by a strong focus on the liberal arts. People who will increasingly find themselves surfing the crests of job skills with shorter and shorter half lives must still rely on sound fundamentals as the heart of their education. Otherwise they will be buried by waves of change.

A strong focus on the liberal arts in the curriculum offers students the chance to develop their intellects and characters in ways that will serve them through a lifetime of employment. We must remember, too, that the purpose of education goes beyond the development of job-related skills. W. E. B. duBois put it well when he said:

The function of a university education is not simply to teach bread-winning, or to furnish teachers for the public schools or to be a centre of polite society; it is, above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization.

This “growing knowledge of life,” together with a growing knowledge of self is one of the timeless goals of education, especially of higher education. It is the sure path to empowering our students to govern themselves and to live in and help to shape our self-governing democratic society. The best education provides a power that enables us to see with clarity our own circumstances, our own understanding - if we mean by education liberation from all prejudice.

If we look to the foundational purpose of higher education when fashioning the curriculum, we understand that the development of character, as well as intellect, is fundamental. The cultivation of good habits of decision on sound moral and religious grounds is the single most important gift that education conveys. Insofar as we are able to offer such a gift, we have a moral duty to do so. The best schools, the best education, provide exactly such a gift. And our goal at the Council of Higher Education - and in the Commonwealth of Virginia - is to assure a higher education that meets the challenge to be best in class. Good enough can never be good enough for us.

With your emphasis on the “development of character which values integrity, respect, decency, dignity and responsibility,” the Hampton University community obviously offers this gift to students. The John Templeton Foundation recognized the excellence of the gift you offer when it recently named Hampton to the Honor Roll for

Character Building Colleges for two consecutive years. It is recognized no less in the lives of your alumni.

You offer this gift not only through your academic and student affairs programs but also by the leadership of your president, your faculty, and your administrators. Teaching by example, by the way that we as educators lead our own lives, is one of the most powerful ways we have to offer the gift of education. Dr. Harvey's establishment of the Job Education Training Corps and Project H.O.P.E. are but two of the many gifts he personally has offered to our collective future.

But the gift of education cannot be received passively. This gift that the past gives to the future is one that the future receives best when it grasps it most avidly. I urge the students here today to extend your reach and grasp this gift. Make it yours so that you, in turn, can offer this gift to your posterity.

One heartening development in the recent, renewed focus on undergraduate learning is the recognition that students are not empty vessels into which faculty pour this gift of education. We know now that students learn best when they take active responsibility for their own learning. But we know, too, that we cannot simply leave students *à la* Jean Jacques Rousseau to follow their own natures. We as teachers have a responsibility to offer guidance and direction, to urge students to perform at high levels, and to evaluate fairly whether or not those high levels have been met. I have learned over time that the young almost invariably respond to direct requests to perform at high levels. But I have also found that they must be asked, directly. One must put before them the large ambition, if one wants the joy of seeing their souls expand and the passion for learning ignited in their hearts.

Hampton University's self-imposed requirement that everything that you do be of the "highest quality" - best in class - tells me that you share this knowledge and that you put it into practice. Even so, I include in my message to you today an exhortation to cling to those high standards, realizing that even the virtuous benefit from the occasional sermon.

We must set the large ambition not only for our students, but also for ourselves and for our academic purpose. By understanding our larger purpose, by cultivating our roots, and by aiming high, we can sow the seeds for a lifelong education that can grow to be as resplendent as the Emancipation Oak.

Taking my inspiration from that great oak, I say that we must aim to radiate the influence of an education that is best in class through ever widening circles of understanding and learning. While age will attest our degree of success, only exertion will accomplish the staying power that extends through ages. I celebrate Hampton University not because I have come here today but because I can count on Hampton standing still as a beacon of liberal learning long after I have gone.

Thank you.