

# **Re-liberalizing the Liberal Arts**

**By Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr.**

*Remarks accepting*

## **The Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education**

October 12, 2018

Washington, DC

Surely I'm not the only person here thinking about Bob Meusel. For the few to whom the obvious comparison has not occurred, I'll remind you that Bob Meusel was the New York Yankee third baseman who, though a creditable player in his own right, followed Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig in the Yankee batting order, and is therefore largely forgotten. Following Dr. Robert Zimmer and the Niall Ferguson-Ayaan Hirsi Ali tandem to this podium leaves me in a similar position.

Given the Hall of Fame level impacts of their intellects and sheer courage, anything I've contributed to the cause we honor this evening is minor league. That fact leaves me all the more appreciative for your selection.

I may be almost as miscast tonight as Andrew Jackson was when honored at Harvard. Challenged by a mischievous dean to respond in Latin, President Jackson declaimed, "E pluribus unum, my friends. Sine qua non!", and sat down. I regret to inform this audience that you won't be quite that fortunate. I was already deeply indebted to each of those gracious souls who risked their credibility by seconding the choice. There is no one from whom I have learned more, or whom I have quoted more frequently, than Charles Murray. That a person so wise, caring, and intellectually honest should ever have been abused in places of alleged "higher" education is a travesty of the first order.

Erskine Bowles ranks among one the great citizens of our time. To cite just one of his contributions, Erskine did more for his university in five years than I could hope to do for mine if I stayed for twenty. He has introduced me to more fascinating people and learning opportunities than anyone I can name. Nadine Strossen is an icon of single purpose in an age of double standards, fidelity to principle in an environment awash in hypocrisy. I value our friendship especially because it coexists so amicably with our many disagreements.

During my last job, I chose Jeb Bush as my role model in all matters, but particularly education. I often consulted my imaginary "WWJD" bracelet when a difficult call presented itself. My deepest thanks go to each of these wonderful individuals, and my apologies at having imposed on their time and good will. Relative merit aside, the brevity of my time in academic life makes me a highly unlikely choice for tonight's recognition, or for any involving higher education. I have served only one institution, and that for less than six years, hardly enough time to make a serious dent in affairs. Moreover, I work not at a university known principally for the liberal arts the award celebrates, but at one from the other end of the spectrum.

At Purdue, by our land-grant heritage and by our current conscious strategy, the so-called STEM disciplines predominate; more than 60% of our undergraduates and an even higher share of our graduate students pursue engineering, chemistry, physics, agricultural and biological science, and the like. We are by that measure the third most STEM-centric school in the country. Not where “outstanding contributions to liberal arts education” seem likely to come from, unless one recalls that the medieval quadrivium was the STEM curriculum of its time. Whatever the logic of your choice, I am deeply grateful for it, and will work to live up to it in the remainder of my working days.

But reflecting ahead to this evening, and to the critical objective of redeeming, restoring, reviving, recovering, rejuvenating . . . pick your favorite “re” word . . . the liberal arts as we know them today, I began to think that it is a struggle for which newcomers and outsiders are not so poorly suited. Said differently, if we wait for reform from within the ranks of today’s liberal arts fields, we may wait forever, or at least a fatally long time. The concerns most often voiced about the current university scene—conformity of thought, intolerance of dissent and sometimes an authoritarian tendency to quash it, a rejection of the finest of the Western and Enlightenment traditions in favor of unscholarly revisionism and pseudo-disciplines—these and other problems are not unique to the liberal arts departments, but a host of surveys document that they are most common and most pronounced there.

A monotonously one-sided view of the world deprives students of the chance to hear and consider alternatives, and to weigh them for themselves in the process we call “critical thinking.” But, as this audience knows so well, something even larger is at stake. The entire enterprise of knowledge advancement depends on the clash of competing ideas.

It’s encouraging to see John Stuart Mill enjoying a modest revival. It was Mill who taught, “Both teachers and learners go to sleep at their posts as soon as there is no enemy in the field.” Former Stanford Provost John Etchemendy has written, “Intellectual homogeneity weakens the academy”; he labeled the ad hominem attacks that homogenous tribes often direct at dissenters “the death knell of inquiry.” Perhaps Princeton’s Keith Whittington has stated the point most concisely: “Ignorance flourishes where free inquiry is impeded.”

Incidentally, the widely criticized policy of lifelong tenure was created to protect diverse viewpoints from discrimination; where is its rationale in schools where everyone thinks so exactly alike? Still, one hears the suggestion that it’s not really a problem in an ever more technological world. If some of our English departments and sociologists want to render themselves irrelevant, let them. I couldn’t feel more differently. The worn-out joke about the stakes being so low in higher ed debates does not apply to this one. In the struggle to define what a genuine liberal education should be, the stakes could hardly be greater.

Because it can be argued that we have never needed effective teaching in the liberal tradition more than today. Even the most gifted young people often emerge from today’s K-12 systems appallingly ignorant of either the history or the workings of their own nation’s free institutions. Authoritarians of both Left and Right are eager to take advantage of their ignorance. There was a reason that the last sultans of the Ottoman Empire banned the teaching of literature and history throughout their realms.

The most vexing issues generated by the social media and biotechnology revolutions already have shifted from the technical to the philosophical, psychological, economic, and political. Next month, at Purdue’s

fifth annual “Dawn or Doom?” conference, scholars will examine the societal implications of these innovations, with philosophers and anthropologists and psychologists in leading roles.

The conference is part of our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which we are celebrating with a year-long, homecoming-to-homecoming ideas festival. As we discuss what a world of 9 or 10 billion people, migration beyond our planet, or an end to human mortality might mean, the scientific questions are mere prelude. For the big matters, we’ll be calling in the humanists, from the disciplines that gave “humanism” its name. The long drift—perhaps “slide” is a more accurate description—from the finest that has been thought and said to the denigration of obvious greatness and the celebration of mediocrity has led to some natural confusion.

Few words I can think of generate more such confusion these days than the word “liberal.” Its use in politics morphed over the years, from describing policies aimed at liberating individuals into a complex of ideas designed to herd them into groups and limit their personal freedom. The dissonance became so apparent that its advocates have recently abandoned the term altogether for the label “progressive.” Fans of irony can savor the fact that self-styled campus “progressives” tend to be the most reactionary voices whenever something novel is proposed, pedagogically or administratively.

In the university context, the “liberal” arts have in many places become centers of the most illiberal viewpoints. Speech codes, forbidden words, compulsory “thought crime” reeducation, and other repressive policies have replaced the lively clash of ideas.

Conformity of thought, enforced by heavy-handed peer pressure and reinforced by generations of self-perpetuating personnel practices, has by now achieved comi-tragic proportions. At one prestigious eastern university, a friend recounts that, when he asked the history department chairman if he had any Republicans in his faculty, the answer was “Have any? We don’t *know* any.”

Evidence of shoddy scholarship is another dilemma. Hopelessly abstruse, jargon-laden papers from so-called “studies” programs read like self-parodies. The recent findings that fewer than half the published studies across the social sciences can be replicated threaten to impugn entire disciplines.

Worst of all, too many practitioners have achieved the difficult feat of making the liberal arts boring. History has been rewritten without the heroes, the drama, the glory, the human elements. When the most captivating and thrilling literature the past has given us is not being “deconstructed” by inferior talents, it is being displaced by trendy treacle by eminently forgettable authors.

The group think and deep ideological loyalties that now prevail so monolithically across the liberal arts probably make widespread reform from within impossible. But, to twist a phrase, despair is not a strategy. There are some reasons for optimism.

Appreciation for the best of the liberal tradition is growing in other quarters, specifically in the categories of study sometimes disparaged as pedestrian or “vocational.” Businesses constantly tell us that, while technological understanding is essential in today’s workplaces, so too are the “soft” skills of communication and empathy. Here and there, one sees evidence that supply is rising to meet this demand.

At Purdue, our College of Liberal Arts has responded to this interest by crafting a two-year bundle of courses specifically chosen to equip a STEM graduate with the essentials of a liberal education. Enrollees

in the “Cornerstone” program will read Locke, Hobbes, and Jefferson as well as other works in the Great Books tradition. Our Engineering College is strongly encouraging its students to sign up, and our Polytechnic Institute has made it mandatory.

And our Liberal Arts colleagues were also the first to respond to our appeal for the creation of three-year degrees. By devising academic maps, through which a student adds a course in certain semesters and takes others during the summer, the department now enables participants to complete the same number of credits in the three years that are conventional in many other countries, launching their careers a year sooner and saving substantial money in the process. Due perhaps in part to this new option, we were delighted to see enrollment in that college grow this fall for the first time in years.

I am happy to report that many of our liberal arts faculty have been active in shaping and promoting a free speech environment at our school. I am even happier to note that both our undergraduate and graduate student governments petitioned us to promulgate strong free speech policies which, with Bob Zimmer’s permission, our board did by adopting verbatim the statement I always refer to as “the Chicago Principles.” Entering freshmen are walked through that policy, and then view a series of talks and skits illustrating the value of free inquiry, and the appropriate reaction to speech one finds wrong or, in the current vernacular, “offensive.” With the memorable Chancellor of the California system Clark Kerr, we believe that a proper university “is not engaged in making ideas safe for students. It is engaged in making students safe for ideas.”

We have not been without our arguments on these topics. Like many campuses, we experienced a small-scale replica of the eruptions at the University of Missouri. On a campus of some 42,000 students, maybe one or two percent took advantage of our anytime, anywhere protest protection policy and expressed their discontent. I invited about a dozen of the event’s chosen leaders into my office, and listened to a list of their “demands.”

Although I’d been instructed by one young woman, obviously well-rehearsed by one of our faculty members, not to interrupt with questions, at one point I did so, in order to point out an example of the common ground I had told them I knew we shared. When she announced that “This demand is non-negotiable,” I did interject, “Yes, you see there’s something we agree on. Because there aren’t going to be any negotiations.” We believe it is the duty of university leadership to show great respect, but not deference, for the opinions of the young people who, after all, are paying us a lot of money, because there is so much they *don’t* know.

The first line of adult supervision must be occupied by people in roles like mine, and many have failed that assignment. But of the various actors who have weakened the performance and reputation of American universities, none has more to answer for than the trustees who over the years have abdicated their legal and fiduciary responsibilities. ACTA’s central mission of recalling these officers to their duty is ideally chosen, and absolutely essential.

I am frequently in front of audiences packed with business, civic, and political figures. No topic more interests such people today than higher education. I always implore them to use the influence they undoubtedly have at one or more institutions to press for the kind of reforms ACTA advocates with such clarity and tenacity.

I relate to them my observation that some of the toughest-minded businesspersons and professionals I know become strangely compliant when they get near dear old Alma Mater. I suggest they use their positions to ask questions like: “What is our free speech policy? If we haven’t adopted the Chicago Principles or something closely akin, why not?” “I know about our commitment to racial and social diversity. How diverse are we intellectually?” “What is our ratio of administrative to teaching positions?” “Why are we charging students so much, and what are we doing to hold those costs down?” And, “Can you prove to me that they’re learning anything for all that money?”

ACTA has courageously been posing these and other important questions now for decades. There must have been times when the dominance of the reactionaries has left you discouraged. Please press on. Signs of better days are visible.

Incidents of disinvitations and speaker abuse were down last year. Maybe shame still has its effect. As faculty have learned that the student harassment that seemed so amusing when aimed at conservative speakers can next haul them in front of campus tribunals for saying something “offensive” in class, an obvious shift away from coddling such behavior has begun.

So do press on. Your work is important far beyond the academies you seek to redeem. A nation at risk of losing sight of its true greatness, and its unfinished mission to the world, needs you. A world in search of answers to the new challenges presented by our scientific genius, needs you. Young minds, in danger of missing what Alan Bloom called “civilization’s last chance to get hold of a person,” need you most of all. In so many ways, yours is the essential cause, and organization. In so many ways, I am profoundly honored to be your guest, and your ally.

[Click here to watch the full speech](#)