Character and Community

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Robert Erburu:
Thank you, Pen Tudor, President Winter, distinguished conferees, and ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure for us to be with you this evening. Tonight we are going to do something we have not tried before. What follows are remarks that both of us have agreed upon and so we are going to take turns presenting these thoughts.

We were asked to speak about the liberal arts from a communicator's perspective. Times Mirror, in its day, was certainly a communications company—a remarkable collection of newspapers, magazines, book publishers, broadcast and cable television, and a host of related businesses. My predecessor as CEO of Times Mirror, Dr. Franklin Murphy, was previously the chancellor of UCLA. Franklin always believed that there were profound similarities between a great institution of higher education and a great media company. In my 34 years with the company, I found those similarities to be remarkable. To be at the center of Times Mirror was to be reminded of the centrality of the liberal arts every day, from reading the dispatches of our foreign correspondents and our Washington bureaus, to perusing the newest art book from Harry N. Abrams, to meeting the remarkable group of national and international leaders who often came to call.

One of our board members was the late Roger Heyns, who had served as the chancellor of UC Berkeley. Roger once confessed that, when he joined the Times Mirror board, he was afraid he didn't know enough about media companies. "However," he said, "it didn't take me long to figure out that I was trading a bunch of people who were paranoid about academic freedom for a bunch of people who were paranoid about freedom of the press." Similarities indeed.

Let me recount some personal background that may explain how I came to this point in my life. When I was a child growing up in Ojai, I was asthmatic and couldn't be outside playing with children my age. As a result, I did a lot of reading about many things. As World War II began, I read the Times and listened on the radio to CBS News from Europe. I heard Edward R. Murrow describe the London Blitz. On December 7, 1941, I was in the sixth grade in Ojai. The next day we listened on a radio the teacher had brought to class to President Roosevelt speak to Congress about "A day that, will live in infamy."

By the time I graduated from high school I wanted to be a journalist so I went to USC, which had a school of journalism. After I graduated, I wanted to spend a year in the East studying a variety of subjects I thought would be helpful to a reporter. I had in mind history and the social sciences but one of my professors urged me to spend that year in law school; I did, and my future changed.

I tell you this because I believe it illustrates why a general education in college is often a
prelude to a career one never expected. In my case, it has been a career which has made it possible for me to work in a business I found fascinating as well as participate in community activities to this moment.

My long-time colleague, Steve Meier, came to Times Mirror in 1977 after the president of his alma mater, Occidental College, suggested I meet him. Steve's own background in the liberal arts was used by Times Mirror in a wide variety of ways, but he always stayed involved in our community affairs and corporate philanthropy. I’ll let him speak about his early background.

I would like to begin this evening with a few comments on both the importance of the liberal arts and on challenges to liberal arts education. Then Steve and I will touch on three specific topics we believe are important to the future both of liberal arts colleges and our national culture. Those topics, in short form, are context, content, and character.

In the early 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States and began writing Democracy in America, in which he recognized the essential tension, the essential conflict inherent in American life. It is the conflict between our religious and republican values on the one hand, and our desire for individual freedom on the other. It is the conflict between public good and private interest.

Guided by common values and traditions, Americans did well for a remarkably long time in balancing these two interests. We collectively built and defended a nation, even as prosperity and freedom and mobility allowed individuals greater personal fulfillment and autonomy. But even Alexis de Tocqueville wondered what would happen if the scales ever tipped against the community and in favor of the individual.

He was on to something. Not very many years separated what Tom Brokaw called “The Greatest Generation” from what many of us remember as the “Me Generation.” The situation has only grown more complex since. In so many ways, ours has become a culture preoccupied and absorbed with the self. Who still speaks for the community?

A central part of our thesis this evening is that American higher education is caught squarely in the middle of this classically American predicament. At the beginning of the 21st century, the momentum is mostly behind individualism and communities of all kinds are fragmenting. In academe, students want to study the practical, the vocational, the profitable; and that also happens to be what their parents want to pay for. They resent required core courses almost as much as the part-time faculty often engaged to teach them. Career advancement and academic specialization argue that faculty members should follow their individual lights, emphasizing research and teaching increasingly specialized upper division courses.

Is it still possible to achieve a consensus on a core curriculum, on what common expectations an institution should have of its graduates, and, of all things, what role the institution should play in the formation of its students' character? These are challenges that make many in the academy cringe. But how can we have a noble national character if
we will not remain committed to educating young men and women of character? How can we restrike the balance between the public good and private interest?

The other part of our thesis is that the liberal arts, and especially residential liberal arts colleges, hold some of the best answers to the challenges facing both higher education and our nation. The integrative nature of the liberal arts may provide some of the answers to dealing with the fragmentation of our national life.

**The Liberal Arts**

Tomorrow our nation will inaugurate its 43rd President. Few of the millions who observe this occasion will forget the five-week long drama that unfolded after the last ballot was cast, and which only concluded in December with an acrimonious split decision from the Supreme Court. A nation divided over the election found itself even more divided in the weeks that followed.

It was a time rightly seen as historic. To really assess what was happening, and indeed to make any informed judgments, a citizen needed information, background, and the ability to synthesize. Here was a national crisis that could only be understood in an interdisciplinary way. It combined elements of history, political science, economics, sociology, constitutional law, and other disciplines. The informed citizen needed to think critically, utilizing the broadest possible perspective, with the intellectual flexibility to evaluate independently and grapple with new ideas. We all needed, in short, the very skills that are effectively developed through liberal learning.

So—on the eve of the Inauguration—we would like this evening to thank Mr. Bush, Mr. Gore, and their supporters for providing this conference, and our nation as a whole, with so compelling an example of the need for the liberal arts!

The term liberal arts, or the phrase “liberal education,” is derived from the Athenians; it meant what a free person ought to know as opposed to what a slave ought to know. Slaves—who predominated in Athens—could be trusted with many vocational duties, conducting trade and even whole commercial enterprises. But the minds of free men were to range farther and higher—indeed, the survival of Athens depended on it. Several years ago Robert Connor, the director of the National Humanities Center, suggested that it was not going too far to translate the term “liberal arts” as “the skills of freedom.”

So by the liberal arts we mean those courses of study that are not primarily vocational, and that are taught in a liberal, humane way to educate the whole person. Institutions dedicated to the liberal arts should provide their students with an introduction to history, art, literature, languages, the social and natural sciences, in a way that makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts. They are, in a real way, imparting “the skills of freedom.”

At Times Mirror many of our finest journalists and editors never spent a day in journalism school. They were products of a liberal education, and reflected their training
in the context, breadth, and intelligence they brought to their work. Across our company were many talented people whose foundations were in the liberal arts, and who had then obtained advanced training on the job or in professional schools. I heartily agree with the University of Chicago's Philip Kurland, who said, “I submit that no better pre-law, pre-medicine, pre-business, pre-journalism, pre-what-have-you education can be had than the broadest exposure to the greatest number of academic disciplines.” Times Mirror was for many years the leading corporate supporter of the Independent Colleges of Southern California. We believed in their work, and we were never disappointed.

**Liberal Arts Colleges**
Yet fewer and fewer students are choosing the liberal arts today. This poses the deepest threat to those institutions that teach them so superbly—America’s small, residential liberal arts colleges. A century ago, 70 percent of American college students attended what we would call liberal arts colleges—today, fewer than five percent do. Of the nation's 3500 colleges and universities, something between 125 and 200 are small residential liberal arts colleges, and the number is declining.

There is one encouraging development in higher education, despite the declining percentage of students attending small colleges. In unintentional tribute to these colleges, the larger universities across the country are starting to devote more attention to their own undergraduate colleges of letters, arts and sciences. There are new resources, a new focus, and often, new requirements that faculty members teach at the undergraduate as well as the graduate level. Some of these larger institutions have developed quite interesting programs that are truly interdisciplinary. But, even with all these changes, will students choose to study the liberal arts?

In 1997, the president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Richard Hersh, reported on a major or study of attitudes about higher education. Among its findings: parents and students have little or no idea of what a liberal arts education is, and think that a liberal arts education can be acquired anywhere. Students and parents overwhelmingly believe the reason to go to college is to prepare for a prosperous career, and that liberal arts colleges should therefore teach practical skills for the workplace.

In such studies, and numerous others, the Athenian concept of the skills of freedom seldom surfaces. There is a discomforting whisper that intelligence is only useful when it produces wealth. For many people today, the benefits of a liberal arts education—critical thinking, problem solving, and effective communicating—seem less tangible than the big bucks offered business and technology graduates.

So this evening, although we celebrate the liberal arts, we take nothing for granted about America's liberal arts colleges. Many are doing well economically at the moment, but the long-term signs are disturbing. It seems that our best residential liberal arts colleges have failed to communicate their distinctiveness to great sections of American society. Their special and indeed extraordinary brand of higher education claims but a shrinking piece of an expanding pie.
All of this brings us to a simple prescription for America's liberal arts colleges: differentiate or die. Liberal arts colleges must, individually and as a group, do a much better job of conveying their distinctiveness and the advantages they offer to the individual student and to society as a whole. To do that, they must understand and articulate those distinctions differently than they have done until now.

**Stephen Meier:**

So, this evening, as informed outsiders, we would like to share our outside perspective on the opportunities facing liberal arts colleges today. My perspective has been shaped less by my own experience as a liberal arts undergraduate and more by the many years I spent working with colleges and universities on behalf of Times Mirror and the Times Mirror Foundation. There was perhaps never a Los Angeles company so enthusiastically engaged with the higher education community as Times Mirror. Meeting so many university chancellors, college presidents, provosts, deans and department chairs—and not a few students—and listening to their aspirations and, sometimes, their frustrations, was an education in itself.

My perspective has also been shaped as the parent of two liberal arts undergraduates currently at Wheaton College in Illinois. Having been afforded the opportunity of helping to invest a measurable portion of Times Mirror's assets in support of higher education, I now have the privilege of investing a measurable portion of my own. And it is a privilege.

What is it that truly distinguishes America's residential liberal arts colleges? We begin with context.

Let's think for a moment about that annual survey of college freshmen designed to measure their attitudes and values. It has been conducted now for decades, long enough for some important trends to emerge. In the mid 1960s more than 80 percent of students listed, as a major goal of their college careers, “to develop a meaningful philosophy of life.” By the early 1990s, that percentage had fallen to less than 50 percent. Today students put greater emphasis on their own personal prosperity, as part of the focus on individual interests of which Bob spoke.

As it happens, Bob and I have a meaningful philosophy of life, and, although it differs in the particulars, it has a common thread we would like to share with you. In fact, we would go so far as to suggest that this is not just a meaningful philosophy of life, but rather it is the meaning of life itself.

So, we interrupt this speech for . . . the meaning of life.

I hasten to add that, if we were faculty members at any of the institutions represented here this evening, we might be reluctant to present the meaning of life. At least we would be reluctant to face the rolling sea of ridicule we would encounter the next time we
walked into the faculty dining room! Nevertheless, I think when you hear the meaning of life—which isn't original with us—you'll agree that it has its merits. The meaning of life is: relationships.

Our relationships with our families and loved ones, with our closest friends, with our communities, including scholarly communities, with all those others who people our lives, and, if you will, with God, are what give our lives purpose and meaning.

This is a different approach to the issue raised by Tocqueville. The first step toward restoring a balance between the individual and the community in American life is, on what might be called the micro-level, to restore, rebuild, and enrich human relationships. Today our society is not good at encouraging, modeling, or sustaining deep and lasting human relationships.

Yet this is the special context of liberal arts colleges. One of the distinguishing features of liberal arts colleges is the quality of relationships they engender. The often-repeated list of the great strengths of residential liberal arts colleges is actually a list of relationships:

* First, the special relationships between students and faculty that so often distinguish small liberal arts colleges.
  * Second, the student's opportunity to interact with other students in the splendid environment of a small residential liberal arts college.
  * Third, supportive relationships with the college community as a whole, at a place oriented toward providing excellent student services to undergraduates.
  * Fourth, opportunities to build relationships in community service and other enrichment activities with the kind of faculty mentoring and counsel not possible at the big places.

A few weeks ago my favorite newsmagazine, The Economist, ran a full-page ad from the University of London for its external programs. The headline read, “If you can't come to London, then London can come to you.” But isn't precisely the opposite true? If you can't come to London, it's London you miss. No form of distance learning, self-study, or external education will make up for a springtime conversation or walking across Regent's Park. Similarly, no other academic environment can provide the very special context of an undergraduate education at a residential liberal arts college.

Yet the learning context of the small liberal arts college isn't enough to differentiate it successfully unless the content of that institution is similarly distinctive. Often context and content will blend together to produce the best educational result. For example, one hopes that students will deepen their appreciation for the visual and performing arts during their undergraduate years. This comes in part from academic classes, but it also develops in the lively college environment and through relationships that students build with their peers who have an interest or background in the arts. For many, this time will be foundational in the building of arts appreciation and even connoisseurship that will last a lifetime.
Most liberal arts colleges still believe that their courses of study, with important common elements, make possible a search for truth and provide students with the opportunity of inquiring into the meaning of life. This all comes together in the decisions each institution makes about its curriculum.

**Erburu:**
We believe the curriculum of the liberal arts college is one of the key tools for building a true college community, building shared experiences and shared skills among undergraduates, and emphasizing the high-quality relationships that make these institutions distinctive. But from our outside perspective, it often seems that college curricula today—even at many smaller liberal arts colleges—are designed to divide people rather than bring them together. The college curriculum can be a general studies smorgasbord or a political football.

If liberal arts colleges must differentiate or die, there is little point in their attempts to copy the vast curricular offerings of large universities. Once the smaller college begins playing the same game as the universities, it is playing by a set of rules under which it cannot possibly flourish in the long term.

We have used a marketing term, “differentiation,” in describing what liberal arts colleges need to do. That does not mean, however, that we believe the marketing paradigm should define the ways colleges think about their futures. If it all comes down to marketing, then the student and her parents are “consumers,” and the college is an “educational services delivery system.” The consumer makes her selections from the largest possible menu, pays her bills, and everyone is happy. But is it an education?

Let’s look briefly at two parts to the curriculum question: what that curriculum can do to foster relationships and community, and how it ought to be presented.

Even from our outside perspective, it is evident that there are powerful forces seeking to make the academy, and the lives of individual faculty members, more and more specialized. Academic disciplines themselves are more highly segmented today, research is ever more important, and course offerings themselves grow more specialized. There is an inherent tension between academic specialization and the liberal arts college's desire to provide an excellent general education. But to what extent is the academic program just about subject matter proficiency, and to what extent does it need to have broader goals? There is certainly less consensus today about what ought to be part of a common or core curriculum.

A number of smaller colleges, including some represented here, are re-evaluating their curricula. They are attempting to define a core curriculum that has meaning in the 21st century. It is a struggle, but a struggle very much worth the effort. Today’s core curriculum includes more diversity, more cultures, more perspectives. This is to the good. But it essential that students have this shared experience, and that the institution have the
confident to require it of them. The experiences students share will determine much of
their sense of community.

If an institution has real confidence, enthusiasm, and commitment about the core courses
all its students should be exposed to, if it puts its principles into action, I think potential
students will respond positively. This is also one of the principal ways that liberal arts
colleges can differentiate themselves from one another—by offering a choice of curricula
based on their separate visions of what it means to be an educated man or woman.

A few years ago Jacques Barzun said this: “A liberal arts curriculum—assuming to begin
with that it is coherent and sustained through four years of college—will develop
intelligence . . . only if the component subjects are all taught in a ‘liberal’ way, that is, as
humanities.” Barzun went on to say that this meant that courses should not be designed to
make students into academic professionals—professional historians, political scientists,
mathematicians or whatever. He said, “Subjects must be presented (and mastered) both
for their substance and for what they tell about the ways in which the human mind has
faced difficulties, practical, intellectual, and emotional.” Faculty members are under
enormous pressures to become more specialized. But if Barzun is right, their teaching
needs to take a broader, not a narrower view, particularly at liberal arts colleges. But how
is a faculty member to gain this perspective?

At the Skirball Institute, we have an annual daylong program entitled “An Intentional
Conversation,” in which academics and non-academics gather for an eight-hour
roundtable discussion of a particular topic. It's a stimulating experience for those of us
not part of higher education, but in a way I think it may be more useful for those
participants from university faculties. They have the opportunity of communicating with
intelligent people whose minds tend to draw more on experience than academic study.
The academics are stretched, I think, to communicate their own knowledge and
understanding in a more interdisciplinary, non-specialized way.

I would propose that greater involvement with the community would significantly enrich
the teaching of many faculty members. Colleges and universities have long recognized
the value of community involvement for their students. I actually believe that community
involvements would pay equal benefits for academic professionals.

Such involvements could include increased service on community boards of directors,
blue ribbon panels, community commissions and related appointments. Service in the
federal government or in the administrations of presidents has long been viewed as an
acceptable diversion in an academic career. But a variety of volunteer involvements for
many faculty members could prove a valuable adjunct to their academic work. There is
an obvious objection that faculty members do not have time for major community
involvements. I would only suggest that many important volunteer positions today are
held by business people whose time demands are different, but no less substantial, than
those faced by faculty members.

The obvious problem is that the system does not reward this type of activity as it rewards
research and teaching, and, yes, college professors have the same 24-hour day as the rest of us. So the question for small liberal arts colleges is this—in the interest of teaching the liberal arts in a liberal way, how will you encourage your faculty members to develop more experience outside their specialties?

Meier:
So we have spoken of context, the importance of relationships in the small liberal arts college, and of content, the curriculum and its connection with the community. Now we turn to the third and in some ways the most difficult issue we propose to treat this evening: the small liberal arts college and the formation of character.

One of the most interesting experiments in higher education in the 20th century was the remaking of St. John's College in the late 1930s. Its brilliant leaders, Barr and Buchanan, transformed the curriculum into a tutorial-based program with required liberal arts courses for the entire four years. As they developed that curriculum, there was one item they left out: moral education, or the formation of character. The reason, as I understand it, was simple. Looking at America at the time, it was obvious to them that the family and the society did a highly effective job of inculcating moral values. It could be assumed that a student entering college had a functioning moral compass.

It was in the 1960s that most institutions of higher education abandoned the old in loco parentis position of supervising the activities and moral character of their students. That change will never be reversed, and we are not suggesting that it could or should be. But some awkward ironies have begun to appear in recent years.

As Eva Brann wrote in Daedalus, "Our culture has produced a generation of quite fragile students who come to college unsure of who they are, fearful in their lack of identity, and without confidence in the future. Many are ashamed of themselves and afraid of relationships. . . ." In the last generation, academic administrators have had to deal with an unexpected number of cases of date rape, alcohol toxicity, drug abuse, assault, property damage, stalking, cheating scandals, sexually transmitted diseases, and a host of psychological disorders of all kinds. It seems ironic that generations of students who perhaps didn't need such strong supervision got it, while a generation of students in greater need of direction and support has been left almost entirely on its own.

A few years ago, a popular book asked the question, “What Do Seventeen-Year-Olds Know?” The answer in a nutshell, was “not very much.” Yet a few months after their 18th birthdays, students are released into a college environment where their self-management skills are put to extreme tests.

Aside from dealing with these problems on a case-by-case basis, a number of colleges and universities have been stumped by the character question. This lack of a vibrant ethical center has not gone unnoticed. NYU's Herbert London put it this way: “I am persuaded that many people outside the academy believe that the university has failed to address the common concern for meaning, the humane and the ethical.”
As business people who have hired their graduates, we think liberal arts colleges should have a position—and should even have expectations—about the moral character of their students. Here again the human scale of liberal arts colleges, and the relative cohesion of their communities, puts liberal arts colleges among the few places where such might be possible.

Not long ago, Leroy Rouner made a thought-provoking address to the triennial Council of Phi Beta Kappa. He said, “There are probably more genuinely brilliant people in American higher education today than there have ever been in the past. At the same time, there is probably less genuine human wisdom available than there was a generation or two ago.”

He concluded, “Phi Beta Kappa was never just about being smart. It was also about being good; and that is the combination that produces the wisdom we so sorely need.”

America's liberal arts colleges, as well, are not just about being smart—they are also about being good. But I think many have been baffled as to how to address this need in an era where there is a lack of moral consensus. So they have abstained, by choosing to create what Peter Gomes has called “a value-free arboretum for private individual development.” This, in a very real way, represents the triumph of individualism over the community.

If the liberal arts college must differentiate or die, I can think of no better, or more challenging, point than a focus on character. Students will be free, in their own time to ignore or reject what their institution stands for, but most, I think, will benefit.

Walter Lippman used to speak of “our great traditions of civility.” A college with the courage to define its aspirations for the character and civility of its graduates, and to build those aspirations into its teaching and indeed into the fabric of college life, would be criticized as throwback to an earlier era. It would therefore need to go about its task with fresh eyes and fresh resolve, and prove its critics wrong.

**Erburu:**

We have suggested this evening that American higher education is caught in the historic American struggle between the public good and private interest. We believe the study of the liberal arts, and liberal arts colleges themselves, have important roles to play in striking a better balance between individualism and the needs of the community, between private interest and public good. There has always been a link between the teaching of the liberal arts—the skills of freedom—and the public good. Can anyone look at American culture and say we do not need a much deeper commitment to community?

Liberal arts colleges are unique because of their size, their focus, their cohesiveness, their quality—but that uniqueness is not well understood. We have suggested that these colleges must differentiate or die—they must demonstrate their uniqueness through context, content, and character. They must foster valuable relationships and a sense of
community in every part of the institution, most especially in the curriculum. We have suggested that teaching at liberal arts colleges would be enriched if faculty members had further experiences outside their academic specialties. Finally, we believe that the question of character is overdue for reexamination at liberal arts colleges and throughout American higher education.

We end as we began—by affirming our deep belief in the liberal arts as a most useful and important course of study. A liberal arts education is important because it is an education that lasts. The programming languages that information technology students learned a decade ago are totally obsolete. Liberal arts education provides not only a flexible framework and important skills that can be used for a lifetime, but—at its best—it instills in the student a desire to keep learning for a lifetime. Taking the long view, it is the most practical course of study on which a promising student can embark.