PROF. FRANCA BARRICELLI'S FALL '05 CONVOCATION PRESENTATION

"Forgetting Your Career: Making the Most of the University Honors Program"

UW Oshkosh Honors Convocation
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I'm delighted to be here at the annual Honors convocation and I thank Roberta Maguire and Paul Klemp, Director and Acting Director of the Program, respectively, for inviting me to speak. To new students, I extend a hearty welcome to UW Oshkosh and to the Honors Program in particular. I hope the semester is off to a healthy start and that you've already begun to discover the wealth of opportunity your position as an Honors student affords you.

Since we're in the middle of a nomination season for the United States Supreme Court, I wanted to take this opportunity today to recall an earlier justice, Felix Frankfurter, who in 1954 received a letter from a 12-year-old boy. The child wrote that he was interested in going into law as a career and requested advice as to some ways he might begin preparing himself "while still in junior high school." Justice Frankfurter sent him the following reply:

No one can be a truly competent lawyer unless he is a cultivated person. If I were you, I would forget all about any technical preparation for the law. The best way to prepare for any profession is to come to it as a well-read person. Thus alone can one acquire the capacity to use the English language on paper and in speech and with the habits of clear thinking which only a truly liberal education can give.

No less important is the cultivation of the imaginative faculties by reading poetry, seeing great paintings . . . and listening to great music. Stock your mind with the deposit of much good reading, and widen and deepen your feelings by experiencing vicariously as much as possible the wonderful mysteries of the physical universe – and forget all about your future career.

It may seem unlikely to welcome you to college by telling you to forget all about your future career, but that's exactly what I intend to do – or at least tell you to think about career preparation differently. I hope you've heard your professors in these first two weeks of class tell you the same thing – to think of your university years as the time to prepare for any future endeavor you might choose to undertake by developing yourself as an educated person. Of course, that was the essence of Frankfurter's advice to the 12-year-old boy. He articulated the spirit of the best kind of education, one based on immersion in different branches of knowledge and one, since you're all members of the Honors Program and you're sitting here today, you've clearly all promised yourselves here at this university.

I'd like to propose three ways to make the most of that promise: to have you embrace the broad possibilities of the liberal arts on campus; to have you explore

interdiscipinary learning; and have you stretch your horizons both figuratively and literally by considering studying internationally.

LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

I am by training and research an historian, so I look for the origins of things and the way they continue and/or change over time. The kind of education that Justice Frankfurter referred to actually had its origin in ancient Greece, where any self-respecting student had to study grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and finally, astronomy. A student had to study these things before he or she could even begin to think of entering the professional world.

You see, the Greeks made an important distinction that many of us still ascribe to today on this campus – the distinction between education (or learning how to become an active and engaged learner) and training (or mastering a specific task): the first teaches a mind how to think; the other tweaks it into knowing how to do a particular thing – the one, by definition broad; the other, by necessity, narrow.
The classical world left a long legacy for later cultures to draw on. At the very beginning of the 1400s, humanists in Renaissance Italy looked back to Rome and Greece (in that order because they were normally better at Latin than they were at Greek) in an effort to recapture the wisdom and values of those ancient civilizations. The education system was no exception. It was adapted to the contemporary interests of the Italian city states, where the cultivation of mind and active engagement in one's community were seen as twin requirements for a useful life.

One very famous educator, Pier Paolo Vergerio was just one of many who identified what was to become "the Humanities" in the Western educational tradition. The Studia humanitatis resembled the curriculum of ancient Greece, but it shifted some of the disciplines to ones that focused on human society and the way to behave "virtuously" in it. To the ancient disciplines of grammar and rhetoric, Renaissance humanists added history (which taught by example, both the admirable and the deplorable), moral philosophy (really ethics), and poetry (as a model of sound morality and eloquence). Vergerio famously defined these studies as the artes liberales – or, the liberal arts:

We define those studies liberal, he said, which are worthy of a free person; those studies by which we attain and practice virtue and wisdom; that education which calls forth, trains and develops those highest gifts of body and of mind which ennoble human beings, and which are rightly judged to rank next in dignity to virtue only.

. . . those arts, in other words, that hone a person's mental – and moral – skills, and develop what contemporary educators – and most of your professors here! – call "critical thinking." Going to college today means that you have the benefits of technology, which puts at your fingertips more information, more disconnected pieces of data, than anyone could possibly know what to do with. But be careful: the accumulation of facts does not constitute knowledge, as mastering the navigation of

the web does not constitute learning. Only the ability to assess and make meaning of the facts you find out there – and the fictions! – does. And that takes the ability to organize, synthesize and integrate them into some sensible purpose, and then to communicate them clearly and, when necessary, persuasively. Vergerio would have defined someone able to do all that a "liberally" educated person – one freed from his or her preconceived notions enough to exercise independence of thought and form his or her own judgment.

Lofty as all of this sounds, it's also much more practical than you might think. The Humanities – or the Liberal Arts – embodied an educational yes, but also a civic, or even political, ideal. They were meant to develop human virtue, in all its forms, and to its fullest extent. So the term implied not only the qualities that are associated with the modern word humanity – understanding, benevolence, compassion – but also the more aggressive characteristics of judgment and persuasion – qualities that would help prepare learners for active engagement in any professional arena after their school years.

This requirement meant that the possessor of humanitas by definition couldn't be an arm-chair philosopher or isolated learner. He or she had to be a participant in an active civic life. The idea was that action without insight (thinking) was seen as aimless, just as insight without action was considered to be imperfect. Humanitas implied a balance of both, so the goal of the humanistic education was practical in the strictest sense of the term – it implied active engagement in the world beyond the ivory tower.

I should stress that the other requirement of humanists – that they possess eloquence, or the art of using language with fluency and precision – was far more than just an aesthetic quality (or, as the humorist David Sidaris has said, more than the ability to "talk pretty"). It was understood as an effective way of moving other people toward one political course or another. Likewise rhetoric, the ability to persuade through words, was seen as essential for moving people toward a particular point of view. Both attributes of the liberal arts education, in other words, equaled power. It wasn't merely appreciating learning for the sake of learning, but using it to useful ends!

Vergerio went so far as to claim that engagement was the purpose of a liberal arts education:

the true merit of virtue lies in effective action, he wrote, and effective action is impossible without the faculties that are necessary for it. He who has nothing to give cannot be generous. And he who loves solitude can be neither just, nor strong, nor experienced in those things that are important in government and in the affairs of the majority.

So you see, while professors like me will often express the hope – over and over again – that what you'll appreciate about the Honors Program is an education aimed at making you a "cultivated" (to use Frankfurter's word) person and not at training you

for a particular job (in fact, we know that if you're doing the first, you're also doing the second) if your "job" as adults is to become engaged and active participants in the world in which you live and help shape.

So, as you proceed through the Honors Program in the next few years, keep in mind the extent to which it draws from this Renaissance past and shares the goal I'm sure you've all heard, of your becoming well-rounded individuals as you enter your future. It's another figure of the Renaissance, in fact, that gives us the iconic example of this ideal. Before his reincarnation as a Ninja Turtle, Leonardo da Vinci was the ultimate "Renaissance man" – and thus by definition well-rounded – because he dazzled just about everyone who came into contact with his varied achievements in architecture, music, anatomy, invention, engineering, sculpting, geometry, and painting.

Years ago (though he's considered dated now), Kenneth Clark urged us to think of each of Leonardo's sketches – of a fetus in a womb, of a rudimentary helicopter, of sea urchins under water – as questions about the physical world. Each drawing, he pointed out, was really a picture asking the question "how?" How does a baby grow in the body of a woman? How can humans fly? How does the tide shift and move the flora and fauna of the ocean? So that art and science overlap and Leonardo's drawings make black and white the interrelations of the two disciplines.

What connects them is the habit (it's too bad the National Inquirer stole this as its motto) of the enquiring mind – asking questions, as Dr. Perlman admonished Honors students to do in his Convocation two years ago; maintaining interest and curiosity, as Dr. Susan McFadden urged last year at this event. This is how you get the most of what these years hold for you. Leonardo the scientist did just that when he communicated his answers artistically. And his straddling of different fields brings me to the next issue I want to talk about today – the issue of interdisciplinary learning, or emphasizing the meaningful connections that exist among the disciplines.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY

The University Honors Program is interdisciplinary by design. That doesn't just mean that you'll take classes in a variety of disciplines. Rather, the Honors Program structures its curriculum around interdisciplinary seminars that are meant to use the perspectives or methods of more than one discipline to examine a central problem or theme – like Leonardo using art and science to explore the question of fetal development.

These seminars are where you begin to stretch beyond the boundaries of a particular class and draw connections between classes. In the Honors seminars I've taught with my colleagues, we asked ourselves how the concept of individuality – of the "self," public or private – developed and was expressed in literature and the arts in the West from the Middle Ages to the Second World War. Was it inherent when Renaissance painters started painting individuals in portraits by artists who signed their names (as opposed to medieval icons painted by anonymous artisans)? Did it accompany the

protection of individual rights by constitutions and laws in the eighteenth century? What about Freud's identification of the id, the ego and the super-ego? We drew on poetry, painting, theatre, literature, and philosophy and came up with a wildly divergent set of answers – and, though we considered Freud, had we had Dr. McFadden or Dr. Perlman in our group, we would have been able to add other fascinating psychological perspectives, as well!

What's exciting about this kind of learning is that it works on multiple levels: you're given the opportunity to see what you're studying in each of your classes not as distinguishable, self-enclosed entities but as parts of an inseparable set of representations, each one conveying meaning to the other. Hopefully, you'll range as widely as possible in your sampling of topics to consider. Take your Honors seminars as invitations to question your certainties. Challenge the view of the world you're entering college with – sometimes what you learn here will reinforce what you think; at other times, it may profoundly challenge, even shake loose, what you think you think – and that is good. (Remember the "individual" aspect of the Liberal Arts? You're "free" to think what you will, based on the accumulation of knowledge!)

And speaking of breadth of learning, the last aspect of your Honors education that I want to mention today is the invitation to think beyond the borders of UW Oshkosh and the experiences you'll have on this campus.

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

I hope that in your years at this university you'll consider adding an international component to your learning. At UW Oshkosh, we offer approximately 33 different programs to study overseas, from two-week study tours to entire semesters abroad in places as far afield as Costa Rica, Brazil, Peru, Belize, Mexico, Ecuador, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, India, Greece, Italy, Spain, Germany, England, Scotland, Ireland, France, and Uganda. Last year alone, 40 different UW Oshkosh faculty members sent over 300 students – including my class in Rome, where three of your classmates climbed up Mt. Vesuvius and, from the smouldering crater (it has wisps), looked down on the catastrophic destruction of its eruption in 79 AD, the archaeological ruins of Pompeii below. That was a moment for interdisciplinary thinking if there ever was one!

But more than that, spending time overseas makes you see your own life and the lives of others in a whole new light. Our culture shapes the way we view the world. It encourages certain assumptions that, if not prodded to, we often let go unchallenged. By the same token, cultural differences reflect the deeply ingrained perceptions about the world and the way of life of others. There is nothing like removing yourself from your usual surroundings, putting yourself in a context completely different from your own, to broaden your perspective and understanding. At the same time, you'll recognize strengths in yourself you never knew you had before – your courage, daring, independence, adventurousness.

Studying abroad may be that defining moment in your education that will change your life. Nothing will be quite the same after you return, because you'll question the things you always assumed were true – about everything from the way food is prepared to the way language and society work. And there really is nothing that contributes more to your developing a sense of yourself not just as an individual, but as a citizen of the world. . . . Just as there's no better time in your life to go away. Believe me, it becomes much more difficult to do later, when you have all sorts of other responsibilities and demands on your time.

Let me conclude by reiterating that you're in a prime position to make the most of these years. You've demonstrated your seriousness and ability by your very membership in the Honors Program. You're uniquely qualified to embrace all that this University has to offer.

Now, on the threshold of your college experience, all you have to do is THINK BIG. Think broadly and widely, just as Justice Frankfurter told the 12-year-old boy to do five decades ago. And fifty years from now, when you reflect on all your education has afforded you, I know you will have made a distinctive mark on whatever career you may have pursued – even those you might not even have considered yet.