Dwight B. Waldo on Liberal Education

Recorded By David Isaacson, Humanities Librarian

"I am grateful for this second opportunity, during WMU's centennial year, to say a few words about the mission of the University. It has been a pleasure for me to step out of my portrait in Waldo Library, and talk a bit with David Isaacson. (If I understand current student slang, he really should 'get a life' but I'm happy for his company at night after the library closes.)

"I want to focus today on the liberal arts tradition of interdisciplinary learning we tried to instill in our students even when we were "merely" a teacher training school. I address these observations not only to the faculty and students at WMU, but also to all of those involved in academic administration and especially to its new President Judith I. Bailey, who comes, as I did, from the snowy slopes of Northern Michigan.

"Right from its formative years, Western tried to give its students something more than training in effective methods of teaching. In 1924, I asked the faculty to tell me three things that, in their judgment, were essential to our academic enterprise as a normal school. Some of the responses were the kind of pious platitudes you might expect teachers to say to their President. But I valued most the independent thinkers, the ones truly dedicated to our common goal of encouraging students to think for themselves. I was especially pleased with the forthright opinions set forth by Dr. William McCracken. (I note, with pleasure, that the building next to the one named after me has been named after McCracken. No one is probably alive now who remembers that William was acting President during the college year of 1922-23, as well as a thoughtful leader of the faculty).

"Here, for instance, is part of what McCracken described as the 'sine qua non' for a first class 'teacher training institution: A conscious effort to turn out brave men and ladies fair who know folks as well as books, who can play as well as pray, who can walk sedately when this seems advisable, or shake a mean ankle under propitious circumstances. Emphasis on moral and spiritual values as opposed to mere scholastic or financial or social. The inculcation of the idea that man does not live by bread alone.'

"I couldn't agree with William more. No teacher worth his salt taught only a subject. And I like the forthright way McCracken writes. He spoke to his students in the same way. Teachers always teach an attitude toward life as well as their subject. In my day we were not afraid of the word 'character.' Moral education was just as important as intellectual training. We tried to build leaders who wanted to improve society by the force of their actions as well as their ideas. We didn't always succeed, of course, but we knew a liberal education was meant to liberate young men and women from hidebound thinking. I hope I am not alone in recognizing that this liberal cause is also profoundly conservative - that a solid liberal education conserves the best that has been thought and said. (As a matter of fact, a conservative liberal education should also be radical - from the Latin, radix, meaning to get at the root of what really matters. But I digress...)

"I was especially pleased to see the tradition of the liberal arts continued when the college became a university and established the General Studies curriculum as well as the Honors College. Our first mission when we were a teachers college was to educate young men and women to think critically and to make informed moral decisions. Teaching students how to create lesson plans or plan 'learning outcomes' are important, but distinctly less important goals of a well-founded curriculum.

"Again, although I was not physically present to give it my blessing, this community should know that I was an enthusiastic supporter of the famous report by Professor Emeritus Ernst Breisach's All-University Committee on Liberal Education that deliberated during 1977 and 1978. (I have wanted to converse with Dr. Breisach about this—he frequents the library—but he has been too preoccupied finishing another book to take a few moments to leave his library carrel on the third floor, stop at my portrait on the first floor, and have a chat. I could then give Isaacson a night off.)

"But, above all, it is not too late, in 2003, to continue to try to implement the recommendations of Breisach's famous report. I am especially fond of this document because it used clear, honest language. Note this description of the value of a liberal education: 'Open societies encourage their members not only to work productively at a chosen vocation, but also to imagine that things might be otherwise. Such societies need Liberal Education and we must concern ourselves with Liberal Education because, if genuine, it:

awakens the mind to hitherto unthought possibilities;

adds to the individual human life the insights of generations past, and by expanding our own limited experience enables us to lead an examined life;"
Waldo on Liberal Education...
Continued from page 5

nurtures creative potentials and capacities for understanding as well as inducing respect for the rights of others and a sense of responsibility for the world we inhabit;

provides the necessary basis for all intellectual discourse and thus for the enhancement of knowledge; and

highlights the fact that at the heart of human decisions and actions stand moral choices.

"It gladdens my spirit to read such words. But let them not be mere rhetoric. Pay as much attention to these words as you do to the new athletic facility and you will have a true university, one that honors scholars as much as athletes.

"I look around me in amazement at the giant university that has grown out of our modest little teacher’s college that opened its doors 100 years ago. But size does not guarantee quality. And while money is always necessary to erect buildings and pay professors, we also need dedication. You cannot buy dedication; you have to inspire it. I hope you continue to have many professors, like William McCracken, with the courage and conviction to talk back to their President. I hope you really mean not merely to expose students to the ‘finer things in life’ but that you liberate their minds and spirits with a true liberal education.

"I wish you well in your next 100 years."

Dwight B. Waldo

[Special thanks to John Winchell, in the University Archives, for retrieving documents from which the quotations are taken. They certainly helped Dr. Waldo refresh his memory of years past.]

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Dwight B. Waldo Library
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008-5353

Archives...
Continued from page 4

universities began providing on-campus housing for students. This researcher found detailed information about Walwood, Spindler, and Vandercook Halls in President Paul Sangren’s papers.

Some may argue that the need for an Archive will diminish as we become a paperless society and information is retained on the Internet. Anybody pondering that may want to consider the presidential papers as a case study. President Dwight B. Waldo’s (1904-1936) papers encompass 6 document boxes or about 3 cubic feet. His successor, Paul V. Sangren (1936-1960), left about 42 boxes. President James W. Miller (1961-1974) accumulated 110 boxes during his presidency. President John T. Bernhard (1974-1985) followed and routed 204 boxes to the Archives over the course of his presidency. President Haenicke and President Floyd averaged about 15 to 20 boxes annually. The presidential papers illustrate the changing role of the presidency and the increasing complexity and growth of the institution as well as the justification for a University Archives program. The Archives are open to public researchers Tuesday through Friday, 8-5, and Saturdays, 12-4, in the Fall and Spring semesters. Inquiries about University history are always welcome.