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Phi Beta Kappa Initiation

John M. Dunn

Western Michigan University, john.dunn@wmich.edu

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Phi Beta Kappa Initiation
President John M. Dunn
April 9, 2015

Opening

Good evening.

Thank you for the wonderful introduction, and thank you for inviting me to be part of this very special celebration of your success. To the students being honored this evening, let me add my congratulations to those you have already received from your professors and academic units.

You are being honored by a very special organization. The Phi Beta Kappa Society is the oldest and most prestigious academic honor society in the nation. Very few colleges and universities are authorized to have a chapter, and that authorization comes only after the national organization knows without a shadow of a doubt that its chapter will be housed at a school of the highest caliber. Western Michigan University is such a school. We are one of only 100 public universities in the nation and four in Michigan to have been so recognized.

Tonight, we celebrate the induction of our 18th class of undergraduates--63 students, 30 of whom could be with us this evening.

For the family members here this evening to help celebrate a loved one's success, I have a special note of congratulations. You've done well in supporting your student over the years, and you will be entirely justified in taking enormous pride as you watch your student move forward and do great things.

Students, my first important message to you this evening is to ask that you take some time in the coming hours, days and weeks to acknowledge the people who make your

success possible. You know who they are. Make sure they know how you feel. Give them a hug and say, "thank you."

The purpose behind Phi Beta Kappa and the liberal arts and sciences

You've been invited to join Phi Beta Kappa because you excel academically in one of the disciplines that make up the liberal arts and sciences. Phi Beta Kappa membership is limited to about 10 percent of the arts and sciences students at just 10 percent of the colleges and universities in this nation. With your induction this evening, you share the Phi Beta Kappa designation with 17 U.S. presidents, 38 Supreme Court justices and 136 Nobel laureates.

Phi Beta Kappa was not always strictly about academics. It's first five members gathered nearly 239 years ago near William and Mary College in Virginia. Rather than academics, they were more about establishing a group of well-educated young citizens who were willing to meet regularly at Old Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg to discuss the issues of the day. Freedom of inquiry was the hallmark of that first group and remains Phi Beta Kappa's hallmark today.

It was likely that those first meetings of this secret society were not about academics. The year was 1776, and there was no shortage of topics to discuss. A revolution was unfolding around the first chapter. Indeed, by the time a new member was initiated in 1779, the new member was informed, "here then you may for a while disengage yourself from scholastic cares and communicate without reserve whatever reflections you have made upon various objects."

The original intent of the society was to bring together people with a classical education--critical thinkers--whose abilities had been honed by studying language, history, philosophy and the sciences--and to engage them as thoughtful citizens in the issues of the day. They saw classical education as a tool that readied individuals for

active citizenship. Those who excelled in that classical education were seen also to have acquired the ability to think, speak and write clearly. Such people were, in short, prepared to be valuable citizens.

In 1781, the British siege of Virginia shut down the College of William and Mary and that very small secret society. But the seed had already been planted. A Yale alumnus had passed through Williamsburg and took the idea to his alma mater and then to Harvard. The rest is history.

Fast Forward 239 years

In 2015, you enter this proud organization that celebrates the liberal arts and sciences at a difficult time. The value of this kind of education is under attack. Those attacks are triggering strong counterattacks, as proponents remind us of the value a liberal arts education delivers to both individuals and our nation.

If you doubt the traction of this topic, let me point out that a quick news search of the words "liberal education" this morning turned up more than 80 news stories--stories filed this week, alone. Writers from such publications as the Atlantic and the New Republic have been weighing in.

Many of those writers point to the fact that the governors of Texas, Florida, North Carolina and Wisconsin support reductions in expenditures for the liberal arts in state-funded colleges and universities. The governor of Florida explained his position by saying, "Is it a vital interest of the state to have more anthropologists? I don't think so."

It's not that these folks oppose education. They simply misunderstand it and want the focus to be only on technical degrees. The idea that STEM degrees are this country's only path forward has attracted a following across the political spectrum. Newsman and commentator Fareed Zakaria (fahREED zuhCAReeuh) has emerged as the most

recent voice, raising the alarm and defending the value of a liberal education. He calls the denigration of a liberal arts education, "America's last bipartisan cause."

Here are the concerns he voices so eloquently:

"If Americans are united in any conviction these days, it is that we urgently need to shift the country's education toward the teaching of specific, technical skills... This dismissal of broad-based learning, however, comes from a fundamental misreading of the facts — and puts America on a dangerously narrow path for the future. The United States has led the world in economic dynamism, innovation and entrepreneurship thanks to exactly the kind of teaching we are now told to defenestrate. A broad general education helps foster critical thinking and creativity. Exposure to a variety of fields produces synergy and cross-fertilization. Yes, science and technology are crucial components of this education, but so are English and philosophy."

What you can do

You can play a role in this debate. My first request of you this evening was that you thank those who have helped you to this point in your lives. My second call to action is to ask you to arm yourself appropriately and become strong advocates in the marketplace of ideas for the preservation of the liberal arts as a foundational element of a college education. This is not about people studying liberal arts OR STEM disciplines. It's about blending these two sides of learning so that our nation continues to lead in the generation of new knowledge. Your new organization is clear about its need for proponents like you and even offers a few statistics with which to arm yourselves.

The arts and sciences, according to Phi Beta Kappa, prepare students for **a lifetime of success** by developing inventive employees and thoughtful citizens. They are also **vital to a vibrant culture and democracy.**

Here are some strong supporting statistics.

- When defined for them, 74 percent of employers would recommend a liberal education to young people they know.
- 90 percent of Nobel Laureates in the sciences say the arts should be part of every technologist's education. In fact, 80 percent can point to specific ways the arts boosted their innovative ability.
- One third of Fortune 1000 CEOs have an arts and sciences undergraduate degree.
- Countries like China, Singapore, and India are integrating the arts and sciences into their higher education models to foster more innovation.

I'm preaching to the choir here, I know, but I want to give you some tools to use as you advocate for others to have the same advantages you have had. You are prepared for a lifetime of professional accomplishment AND engaged citizenship.

In closing let me leave you with a quote from the late Steve Jobs, who by any measure could serve as a role model for both STEM achievements and the importance of a liberal arts education. He said this in 2011 as he was introducing the iPad.

“It is in Apple’s DNA that technology alone is not enough—it’s technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our heart sing.”

My wish for you is that you find ways throughout your lives to continue to make your hearts sing. You're off to a wonderful start.

Thank you.

