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## Convocation Address to Metropolitan College of New York

Richard M. Freeland (1941-)  
*Northeastern University*

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## Speeches of Richard M. Freeland

### Convocation Address

Nov. 30, 2004

I

I am pleased to be here this afternoon to participate in the convocation and contribute to your discussions of curriculum development, with particular reference to the role of liberal education in your programs.

I come to this event as a passionate believer in the value of experiential education, where you have built a very impressive record, and also in the broader goal of linking academic study to effective action in the world—what you call purpose-driven education. I also come as someone who believes with great intensity in the value of liberal education. Indeed, my most important goal during thirty-five years of administrative work in higher education has been to find ways to link the great tradition of liberal learning to the equally important tradition of professional studies.

I am mindful that you are discussing the idea of a core curriculum in the liberal arts that would support your professionally oriented majors and also that you have recently won approval for your first liberal arts major. These facts tell me that you are at a critical juncture for the simple but profoundly important reason that liberal education and professional (or applied or purpose-driven) education are not easily combined. Indeed it is possible to argue that the spirit of the liberal arts—which is about observation, reflection, understanding and openness to change—is in some ways opposed to the spirit of professional education, which is all about the instrumental use of knowledge. And in fact, the relationship between professors of the liberal arts and of applied fields over the course of the last few centuries has been more notable for conflict and mutual suspicion than for collaboration and understanding.

Indeed, if this were 1970 or even 1980, the context for discussing the relationship of the liberal arts to professional fields or to experiential education would be substantially different than it is today. But—as I am sure many of you know from your own

work on curriculum development—there is fundamental change afoot in this arena. Liberal and professional education and their champions are coming together in new and exciting combinations, while experiential education has gained wide acceptance among both the liberal and professional disciplines.

These trends are the focus of my recent article in the Atlantic Monthly called “The Third Way,” and in my comments today I shall review the major themes of that article and attempt to relate them to the questions you are trying to answer at Metropolitan College. I should be clear that I have not come here to suggest answers to any of these questions. That is something only you can do. What I can provide is some context for your discussions and some general reflections that I hope you will find helpful. I plan to speak for about 35 minutes and then leave time for discussion in the hope that we can wrestle together in more specific terms with the questions you are attempting to resolve.

## II

Let me begin by describing the situation of two young people thinking about college. The first is a high school junior, the son of working class parents who did not attend college. But their son, our student, is academically gifted and does particularly well in history and English. This student has talked to older friends about their collegiate experiences and has become excited about the adventure of liberal education. But his parents, who can barely afford his tuition, even with scholarships, want him to prepare himself for the practical challenges of life and are urging him to study business. What is this young man to do?

Here is a very different case, a less traditional one: a woman in her mid-twenties like many of those attending Metropolitan College. This prospective student married right after high school and went to work in a city agency to help support her new family. After a few years, however, she has realized that she is just as talented as the college-educated supervisors who are running her department but she has also understood that her lack of a college degree will prevent her from attaining top positions. She longs now for the college education she didn’t pursue after high school so she can develop her managerial skills and advance in her work. But she wants a chance to study other things, such as music, which she has always loved, and she wants to understand the larger social and political context of her agency’s work. When she looks at programs for older, returning students, however, she finds that most of them focus on practical career skills and don’t pay much attention to the traditional liberal arts. She feels disappointed that she may not have the full experience of college that she has heard about from her colleagues at work.

The truth, of course, is that the two cases I have just described are hardly unusual. Most young people—whether traditional aged or somewhat older—are attracted to college for two basic

reasons: to get the best possible education for understanding the world and themselves and to prepare for the workplace. Some are more attuned to the first consideration, some to the second, but most think both are important. And yet, like the two prospective students in our examples, young people have typically been asked to choose between a traditional liberal education and the pursuit of a professional field like business or human services. It is true, of course, that most universities and many colleges offer courses in both liberal and professional disciplines, but the historic antagonism between these two forms of study has led faculties to erect high walls between them, and college curricula don't often make it easy for students to move back and forth across this boundary, let alone explore the relationship between both kinds of knowledge.

Why should this be? After all, the basic reason that higher education has become such a huge industry in this country is that a college degree is understood to be a prerequisite of economic opportunity, so it makes little sense for liberal arts faculties to look with disdain on career preparation. Yet, as we all know, they often do. Similarly, most thoughtful people understand that studies in the liberal arts are helpful in career advancement in many important ways, so why should professional faculties view these subjects as irrelevant? Yet, as we also know, this is often the case. More fundamentally, of course, most applied disciplines derive from basic academic ideas and insights, so the liberal and professional disciplines would seem to be natural partners. Yet in practice their practitioners often behave like enemies. Finally, the traditional four years of college offers ample room for students to both explore the traditional liberal arts and gain some practical knowledge of a professional field.

So, to repeat the question, why has academia historically discouraged programs of study that bridge the gap between the liberal arts and professional disciplines? The answer is complex but the essential reality is this: traditional ideas of liberal learning, derived from seventeenth century British notions of a proper education for the sons of privilege, became established as the core of undergraduate study in our country's leading colleges at a very early time and, despite many modifications over the years, such as the rise of science or the decline of the classics, they have maintained that position ever since. Although the more distinctively American idea that undergraduate education should prepare young people for the practical challenges of life gained acceptance at the university level as early as the mid 19th century, occupationally or professionally oriented programs for undergraduates have never really been embraced at the top of the academic pecking order and thus have suffered from a kind of second class citizenship in the academy, which has made it difficult for professionals on either side of the traditional divide to collaborate with each other.

Happily, however, the historic patterns and time-honored attitudes are changing. In recent years, faculties at many colleges and universities including some of our leading institutions have begun to break down the walls that have separated liberal and professional learning. I call this trend "practice-oriented education" because its central impulse is to connect the world of academia, with its emphasis on concept and theory, with the worlds of action and practice. Practice-oriented education has developed along two main lines: first, curricular models that build bridges between the liberal arts and professional subjects; second, the incorporation of off-campus experience into undergraduate education.

Evidence of the growth of both themes of practice-oriented education is all around us. Today, nearly all freestanding liberal arts colleges offer at least some majors in one or more professional fields, either on their own campuses or by teaming up with other schools through 3/2 programs. This pattern can be found not only at experimental colleges like Alverno or at places in the middle ranges of the academic pecking order like Eckerd and Hendrix but at top ranked schools like Smith and Claremont McKenna. Similarly, many universities, including some of the top schools in the country like Penn, USC, Tulane and Lehigh actively encourage students to build programs of study that combine elements of both liberal and professional fields through double majors or major/minor sequences. Some schools, like Babson College in Massachusetts, have taken this trend a step further and constructed majors that include coursework from both liberal and professional disciplines, a pattern that may have particular relevance here at Metropolitan College.

The trend toward incorporating off-campus experience into undergraduate programs is even more widespread. Indeed, it is difficult today to find a college or university that does not offer some form of off-campus learning to at least some of its students, whether it is internships, or clinics, or service learning programs, or study abroad, or cooperative education. Here, again, the pattern can be found up and down academia's prestige hierarchy with schools at the very top, like Wellesley and Brown, placing significant emphasis on experiential education. Some recent surveys report that as many as three fourths of all students have at least one internship or similar off-campus experience during their college years.

My own university is making a major effort to build both major themes of practice-oriented education into our undergraduate programming. In these efforts, I believe Northeastern and Metropolitan College have much in common, and we share therefore an opportunity to provide leadership to what I regard as one of the most important educational movements of our era. Practice-oriented education is also, I should say, an immensely popular movement among students. Northeastern has experienced dramatic increases in applications as we have pursued this path, and other institutions that have developed

practice-oriented curricula have reported similar experiences.

#### IV

Despite the growth and popularity of practice-oriented education, however, this trend has struggled to achieve full acceptance within the mainstream of American higher education. In 1985, for example, only twenty years ago, the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the leading association of liberal arts colleges, expressed great concern about this trend, noting with alarm that "the very distinction between the 'liberal' and the 'vocational' that runs through two millennia of educational theory is no longer universal." More recently, however, as practice-oriented education has gained ground, more and more academic leaders and institutions have seen its value and adopted its perspective. I was particularly pleased to see, in 2002, that the very same AAC&U that two decades ago deplored erosion of the line between liberal and professional education, issued a report, called the Greater Expectations report, urging academia to "erase the artificial distinction between studies deemed liberal... and those called practical." Indeed, as I am sure you know, the Greater Expectations report specifically cited Metropolitan College as a model of the effort to connect undergraduate education more closely with real world realities, something the AAC&U would never have done twenty or thirty years ago.

So there has been tremendous progress. But, given the troubled history between the liberal arts and professional fields, the forces of resistance remain strong and the difficulties are not to be underestimated. You don't have to spend much time reading the academic literature, or indeed the op-ed pages of our major newspapers, to encounter voices urging a return to the traditional liberal arts and decrying the interest of young people in using their college years to prepare for the workplace.

#### V

So even as we celebrate your 40th anniversary we need to acknowledge that there remains much work still to be done to fully persuade our academic colleagues as well as the broad public of something that I deeply believe: that a practice-oriented approach to college studies can provide as powerful an experience of learning and intellectual growth as do more traditional approaches. In furtherance of that cause, I'd like to spend a few moments, before concluding my remarks and opening up this session for discussion, to a comparison of the benefits of a practice-oriented approach to undergraduate study with more traditional models.

Historically in this country undergraduate study has served four broad purposes. First, promoting intellectual capacity, such as analytic thinking and the mastery of complex material; second, developing professional competencies; third, fostering breadth of

understanding, traditionally of cultural history but more recently of the academic disciplines; and, finally, nurturing values to guide adult behavior.

These four goals can be distinguished from one another conceptually but in practice they are hard to separate. For example, champions of the liberal arts argue that their disciplines not only promote intellectual development but, precisely by doing so, offer a sounder preparation for work than applied subjects. In my view, this claim rests on stereotypes rather than realities. The truth is that both the liberal arts and professional subjects can be presented either superficially or with conceptual depth and rigor and I have yet to see any real evidence that exploration of the liberal disciplines does more to develop intellectual power than the study of professional subjects.

Educators in professional disciplines, on their side, often argue that applied studies offer students the best career preparation because a mastery of specific skills helps them gain traction in the workplace. There can be no doubt, of course, that in fields involving formal licensure, such as engineering or nursing, this is true, and that in other fields, like business, some study of practical material helps graduates get a foot in the door. Since most students go straight from college into the workplace, the logical conclusion is that some explicitly professional coursework is valuable in most cases. But professional educators do their students a great disservice when they fail to take liberal learning seriously. Most professional knowledge rests on theoretical and empirical work in the basic disciplines, and grasping the link between theory and practice is indispensable. Equally importantly, undergraduates preparing for the workplace deserve to know more about the world than the skill set associated with their craft.

But what about students headed for graduate school in fields like law and medicine? As many famous cases attest, a traditional liberal arts curriculum can serve such students well. Nonetheless, their understanding of their undergraduate majors would most likely be enriched by seeing how theories and concepts play out in the real world. Moreover, there is something deeply irrational about expecting a student to choose a career without having any actual experience of his or her anticipated professional environment. It is hard to see why prospective graduate students—even those headed for scholarly careers—would not benefit from some professional coursework or off-campus experience.

For two of our historical purposes, then—developing intellectual capacities and preparing for careers—the advantages of integrating liberal education, professional studies, and off-campus experience are clear.

To consider the third purpose—fostering breadth of understanding—we need to recognize that contemporary approaches to general education bear little resemblance to classic liberal education.

Today, "general education" often means little more than loosely structured distribution requirements intended to expose students to different "ways of knowing," as represented by the various academic disciplines. Often these requirements are also supposed to enable students to grasp in some practical way the impact of technology, or the significance of the environment, or the pervasiveness of ethnic diversity. Since all these goals involve helping students understand the physical and social world they will experience as adults, they are more likely to be advanced by a practice-oriented combination of academic and applied coursework than by a completely theoretical approach.

The fourth historic goal of undergraduate education is to develop students' character—in particular, their moral and social values. Champions of the liberal arts have long asserted the superiority of the traditional disciplines in this realm. But moral and ethical constructs deserve serious attention primarily to the extent that they affect behavior. It is only when we consider such ideas in the context of actual choices and decisions—the standard fare of applied subjects—or, better, try to enact them outside the classroom, that we begin to truly understand how to apply moral knowledge to our lives. This is the essential insight of contemporary service-learning programs, in which students who want to serve society develop their capacities by actually doing so.

In summary, then, when we consider the four primary purposes of undergraduate education, I would argue that a practice-oriented curriculum that integrates liberal, professional, and workplace learning stands up quite well against established educational models. I realize, of course, that I have structured this discussion in terms of traditional-aged students, but I would argue that older students such as those attending Metropolitan College are deserving of the very best and most powerful learning experiences that we educators can devise and that your students, with their greater fund of life experience and their heightened ability to connect academic ideas with real world challenges, can reap the benefits of a practice-oriented approach even more richly than their younger counterparts. So I would urge you, as you think about how best to incorporate the liberal arts into your programs, to have it as your intention to offer your students as full and complete and rich a learning experience as that available for traditional undergraduates in the leading institutions of this country. I see no reason why that is not possible and every reason why it should be your goal.

## VI

The challenge, at this moment in history, for educators who believe in practice-oriented education is to develop and refine this model and demonstrate its value in different educational contexts so that it can become more widely available. Let me then conclude my remarks with a brief review of the principles that should underlie the construction of a practice-oriented

curriculum.

The essential elements can be easily summarized: All undergraduates should have access to coursework that bridges the divide between liberal and professional education or even systematically integrates the two. Similarly, all students should have opportunities to deepen their understanding of classroom subjects through off-campus experience. Campus policies and culture should actively encourage both aims, through formal requirements or electives and through faculty advising and attitudes.

Within this basic framework, there is much room for variation depending on a college's purposes and a student's interests. Liberal arts majors should have the option of taking courses, minors, and double majors in the professional disciplines, as appropriate to their plans. Students in professional majors, meanwhile, should take liberal arts courses taught by regular faculty members and designed cooperatively by the professional and liberal arts departments. These students should also have access to a rich array of minors and double majors that allow them either to explore their professional interests more deeply or to pursue a vocational interest. To make room for this kind of program, professional faculties should rid their curricula of excessive technical content that can be learned on the job by well-educated graduates.

Such combinations of liberal and professional coursework represent the simplest approach to practice-oriented education. A step beyond are approaches in which the boundary between liberal arts and professional programs is dissolved altogether, and educators from both sides collaborate on interdisciplinary curricula. Such collaboration can also result in exciting general-education courses taught by teams of liberal arts and professional faculty members.

Off-campus experience and classroom work can also be integrated in various ways, but whatever the format—internships, co-ops, or service learning—all students should have opportunities to reflect systematically on their off-campus experiences and to relate them to their classroom studies.

The question, of course, is how these principles, and particularly those involving the role of the liberal arts, can best be applied at Metropolitan College. The answer to that question depends, in my view, on your answers to the larger question of the kind of institution you seek to become. If your plan is to remain relatively small and focused on serving older students in full time jobs with programs in which their academic studies and their work lives are fully integrated, that framework will determine and in some ways limit the manner in which you can integrate the liberal arts into your curriculum. If, on the other hand, you intend to grow as a more diversified campus of larger scale, possibly even as a full university, with full time students and a

range of majors in both the liberal arts and the professions, you will have a different array of options to consider. Either way, in my view, you can pursue a practice-oriented approach to learning.

The choice between those alternative institutional futures is, in my view, profound. Down the pathway of remaining in your historic niche lies the opportunity to preserve coherence and to perfect and deepen an approach to practice-oriented education that stresses maximum integration of academic studies with workplace competence; the price you pay in this model is likely to be a certain narrowness of focus in the liberal arts and a tendency to treat all learning as valuable only if it can help you accomplish a known, predetermined task. Such an approach can give students a great deal, and teach them a great deal about the liberal arts, but it may leave out some of the spirit of liberal learning to which I referred at the beginning of these remarks.

Should you pursue the second course—toward a larger and more diversified campus—you will, I suspect, find yourself pushed in the direction of more traditional patterns of courses and majors and also toward a somewhat less tight connection between each student's work and their program of study. With this, some institutional coherence will inevitably be lost, but the gain will also be substantial in terms of offering students an increased range of learning opportunities in the liberal arts that perhaps will allow them to grow in a wider range of ways than is possible given your traditional model.

There are undoubtedly some middle grounds here, and choices less stark than the two I have just depicted. I am sure you will identify such possibilities. Whichever path you choose, I would urge you to seek ways, consistent with your other educational commitments, to provide an experience of liberal learning that empowers your students to lead the fullest and most rewarding lives of which they are capable: that frees their minds from bias, that cultivates rigorous thought, that teaches not only tolerance of difference but appreciation of diversity, and that gives them the tools for a lifetime of intellectual adventure and social contribution. These goals of liberal education go beyond a strictly instrumental approach to helping students become more effective in their jobs, but they are, in the end, deeply compatible with the principle of purpose-driven education.

You have launched an exciting discussion of importance not only for Metropolitan College but also for all of higher education. I look forward to learning from you as you pursue your deliberations.

Thank you very much.