



WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY
Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Research

Memorandum

TO: Faculty Senate Planning and Budget Committee
FROM: Gary L. Miller *GLM*
DATE: April 2, 2009
RE: Reshaping and Rebuilding WSU: Urban Legacy – Liberal Arts Challenge

In a recent memo (02/27/09¹), I outlined some broad issues in higher education that affect the process of *reducing, reshaping* and *rebuilding* that we are now undertaking in response to the economic turbulence of our time. I suggested that our efforts to respond to budget reductions and to reshape the university for the future should be guided in part by an understanding not only of the economic environment but, also, by an appreciation of the modern critique of higher education. It is my belief that, in this way, we will emerge from the current crisis in the best position possible to take advantage of opportunities to strengthen Wichita State University.

With the broad higher education landscape in mind, together we have begun to examine the strategic focus of the university and work toward a set of planning priorities and assumptions that will guide our efforts to reshape and rebuild. I have emphasized that this planning must take place within the urban research university model and a number of you have asked me for a more expansive discussion of the roots, attributes, and future of the urban mission, which is now the centerpiece of the university strategic vision. In particular, there is need for a richer discussion about the importance and role of the liberal arts and sciences in our future. I am happy to provide some thoughts on that here.

Liberal Arts Roots – Urban Imperative

Before we can decide where we need to go, we must reflect on where we have been. Craig Miner has provided the most comprehensive history of the University. His book *Uncloistered Halls: The centennial history of Wichita State University* (Wichita State University Endowment Association, 1995) is fascinating and engaging and forms the basis for the following summary of the university's consideration of its urban nature and the role of the arts and sciences.²

¹<http://webs.wichita.edu/depttools/depttoolsmemberfiles/academicaffairs/Memos/FacultySenateBudgetMemoFeb09.pdf>

²I am most grateful to Craig for reviewing this essay.

Throughout its history, Wichita State University has struggled with how to revise the classical foundation of Fairmount College to meet the circumstances of the time.³ To some extent this struggle has reflected historical trends in American higher education philosophy, which by the 1900s already included many of the tensions between liberal and vocational studies that form a significant part of the forces of change in higher education today.⁴ Complicating this struggle for a philosophical grounding has been the question of how to reflect the urban setting.⁵ The transformation of Fairmount College to Wichita University in the 1920s, the efforts to understand WU's post WWII future, and the recognition of Harry Corbin's dream to become a state university in the 1960s all required a very intentional consideration of the dimensions of the urban imperative and with it the reengagement of the ancient discussion of the role of the liberal arts and sciences in a changing world.

In a speech given around 1895 Fairmount College's first President Nathan Morrison expressed fears of the loss of the college's classical roots:

More and more the old ideal in Education that School and College training must seek as its chief end the symmetrical development of all the mental faculties, what we term 'culture,' is giving way to the popular conviction that education...must be specialized, directed to so called practical ends.

*God save America from an education...in which the child and man are trained solely...to tend machinery, to manage a railway, to win a law-suit, to gain a material livelihood."*⁶

It is likely that Morrison would have felt defeated by the form of the struggle of Fairmount College to survive the severe economic down turn of the early 1920's. It was by connecting that struggle for the survival of the "college on the hill" to a municipal purpose – part of a national movement of the time – that President John D. Finlayson and his allies prevailed upon an initially reluctant city to absorb Fairmount College into the new city-owned Wichita University in 1926. Finlayson was remarkably ambivalent both about the importance of the urban perspective and its relationship to the balance between liberal arts and vocational training.⁷ But he understood that the most likely path of survival was to form a very close bond with the city. The arguments that eventually prevailed in the vote to establish Wichita University turned on the advantages of a city university. For Finlayson, the urban imperative was probably more about economics than about educational philosophy. But, the character of the new WU reflected a more pragmatic approach. Of the four units that comprised the new WU (Education, Liberal Arts, Commerce and Industry and Fine Arts), two were professional schools.

The postwar planning committee that convened in the summer of 1943 and chaired by Hugo Wall recognized the importance of integrating the liberal arts and sciences with the imperatives of the urban university. The committee examined a wide range of materials related to, among other things, the characteristic of postwar cities, issues related to diversity and general education. The final report emphasized the importance of the liberal education and, in particular, the humanities. The group

³It can be argued that the institution's early roots were, in fact, not classical. Here I am referring to the Fairmount College of Nathan Morrison.

⁴I have briefly discussed some of the forces in my memo to Faculty Senate Planning Budget Committee, February 27, 2009. <http://webs.wichita.edu/depttools/depttoolsmemberfiles/academicaffairs/Memos/FacultySenateBudgetMemoFeb09.pdf>

⁵Craig Miner noted that it was Wichita State President Clark Ahlberg who said: "Fairmount was an urban university long before they invented the term." The connection between the City of Wichita and the College has never been in doubt, just the form of it.

⁶As quoted (p. 41) in Miner, Craig. 1995. *Uncloistered Halls: The centennial history of Wichita State University*. Wichita State University Endowment Association.

⁷IBID

committed themselves to a definition of liberal education that, while clearly humanist in tone, also acceded to the utility of citizenship preparation and the desire for productive life, thereby at least skirting the values of professional formation. The final report declared that a liberal education “...is one which frees people from ignorance, superstition, intolerance, and provincialism, and which enables people to develop their powers to be useful, free, and happy men and women. A liberal education ought to develop good character and high ideals and it ought to make men and women at home in the society in which they have to live. In a word, a liberal education ought to make good citizens.”⁸

But it was under the leadership of President Harry Corbin that the university first enjoyed a cogent reconciliation of its urban roots and its educational mission. Miner put it this way: “In the 1950’s, under what can only be called inspired leadership [Corbin], the university reached its apogee as the totally captive university of Wichita, Kansas. Showing characteristics in full bloom that would have pleased both Morrison and Finlayson, it struck the academic/urban balance as finely as had ever been done, expanded to many times its historic levels in students, programs and faculty, and matured just as specified. The new set of problems it exhibited derived largely from difficulties of success and continued evaluation. That the university on Fairmount Hill should disappear from the face of the earth became by 1960 nearly unimaginable. The only remaining question was what kind of influence it could devise to exert on that local and broader world.”⁹ Corbin’s vision to win entry into the Kansas regents system was utterly transformational and required a pioneering re-conception of the university. To Corbin, success meant a university with a broader impact, to include the entire playing field of American higher education, leveraged from the power of its local partnerships. It also meant the embrace of the spirit of intellectualism, the inseparability of research and teaching, and the wonder of simple imagination.

The directionality of the relationship between the institution and the city is an important feature of the struggle for meaning in the urban mission. Finlayson had to project a vision of service; the new Wichita University, it was argued, would be of great benefit to the city. Corbin’s vision preserved the service orientation of the university even while insisting on a deeper reflection of purpose and value. The directionality of this relationship was changed by President Hughes’ “Metropolitan Advantage,” which seemed intended to increase awareness and, perhaps, pride among faculty and students (and potential students) of advantages of the Wichita environment. Positioned as a recipient of the “Metropolitan Advantage” the university’s values were seen to be informed by the urban spirit rather than transformative of that spirit. The emphasis on accountability that is the centerpiece of President Beggs’ vision restores the sense of outreach and service to the community that formed the basis of public support for the formation of WU and the emergence of Wichita State as a public research university. If we embrace this commitment to accountability to both our past and our future then, in my view, we are compelled to develop our own “academic/urban balance,” one that will be robust to the extraordinary times that we face. The current vision fully embraces our urban heritage. Our challenge is to understand the role of the liberal arts and sciences. Let me turn now to that challenge.

Urban Imperative – Liberal Arts Challenge

Over the past three years we have developed a narrative around the urban serving research mission that is informed by national priorities and the strategic directions of the Kansas Board of Regents and embracing of our urban legacy. But the narrative is not yet fully formed. There are at least two important questions that we must continue to examine as we work in the coming years to *reshape* and

⁸ IBID, Page 182

⁹ IBID, Pages 184-185.

rebuild our urban mission. The first is how we will manage growth and emphasis in our professional and research programs. The second is the question of the role of the arts and sciences.

In many ways, necessity and momentum have required us to think more intensively about the first question. Critical shortages of engineers, nurses, accountants and teachers in Kansas and the nation have resulted in a number of initiatives – supported by state and federal funds – to grow those professional training programs. Prominent research programs have emerged from individual initiative to take advantage of opportunities in the local business and manufacturing sector and these efforts continue to yield remarkable results. Thus, it should not be surprising that our response to the request by the Board of Regents in the summer of 2007 for a proposal of how we would invest “new” money (oh, for the good old days!) was a document that focused on professional education, engaged research and workforce development, all central to the modern urban mission.¹⁰ Likewise, the draft *Planning Priorities and Assumptions Document* that you are now considering derives mostly from our strong professional orientation.¹¹

Our consideration of the second question – the contemporary role of the arts and sciences in the current mix of professional programs – is just beginning. In my last memo to your committee I wrote: “...ultimately, our success in this [urban] mission depends both on the efficacy and quality of the liberal arts and sciences core and the vitality of those liberal arts disciplines included in the program mix. The way in which we will reshape and leverage the liberal arts and sciences both in order to support the professional programs and, very importantly, to strengthen and expand key traditional liberal arts disciplines is perhaps the most important set of questions for the near term.

Given the extraordinary circumstances of our time, it is my view that our consideration of the arts and sciences will require revolutionary thinking, perhaps at a level even Corbin could not imagine. We must stipulate the great personal satisfaction of pure learning – and, incorporate it into everything that we do. But, given the pressures on higher education today, we cannot be satisfied to accept personal enlightenment as the survival argument for strengthening the arts and sciences. Nor should we simply bite our tongue in response to the self-assurance and focus of professional education and hunker down reluctantly in search of the *applied* within the humanities. Rather, we must search for the attributes of humanist thinking that *inform* the applied. Geoffrey Harpham struck this theme in a recent essay where he wondered how all the powers of analysis and predictive modeling of economics failed to see what, in retrospect, was fully visible in the run up to our current economic crisis. His conclusion is that rather than a quantitative dynamic, the principal factor of our predicament “...escapes abstract models because it is human and social, not mathematical – a vast imaginative construction composed of hopes, fears, illusions, calculations, judgments. Unlike the house, the imaginative construction that determines the house’s value can be destroyed by a pinprick – hence the term bubble.”¹² Harpham suggests that the study of the humanities is important even though it cannot predict because it calls to memory and imagination which are prerequisite to a deep understanding of any human activity. This is what I believe Donald Levine means when he suggests that the modern reformation of liberal learning boils down to connecting the arts and sciences with *realm of ultimate concern*.¹³ Neither Harpham or Levine (or me) curl up beside the comfortable fire of simple deep reflection. Nor do

¹⁰Wichita State University. *Urban Higher Education: Investing in Kansas*.

<http://webs.wichita.edu/depttools/depttoolsmemberfiles/academicaffairs/Reports/WSU%20concept%20paper%20-%20final.pdf>.

¹¹See Provost’s web page for copy of this document.

¹²Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. 2009. *The Humanities’ Value*. Chronicle of Higher Education, the Chronicle Review, B6-B7, March.

¹³Levine, Donald N. 2006. *Powers of the Mind: The reinvention of liberal learning in America*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

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they look to extend classical education into inappropriate spaces.¹⁴ They seek a modern concept of liberal arts learning through *connection*, embracing the practical while imagining the power of enlightenment of the classical. This is, in my view, the commitment of accountability in the spirit of Corbin and Beggs that will serve us in this critical time.

To be sure, the practical concerns about where to start such a discussion are not trivial. Unlike professional schools, the arts and sciences represent a disparate collection of disciplines conveniently housed in a single college. Nevertheless, there are a number of important possible points of convergence currently available to those committed to rethinking the arts and sciences. These include general education, honors education, globalization, and diversity. Important initiatives are ongoing in all of these except general education. All of these areas offer avenues for considering more deeply how the values of liberal arts inform professional education. Moreover, all of these initiatives are (or, in the case of general education, could be) informed by professional education (usually through their accrediting philosophies) and, thus, are ready made channels for campus-wide discussion.

An effort to reframe general education at Wichita State seems to me to be the most likely activity to generate the depth of discussion required for the level of reshaping we will require going forward. To consider general education we would have to confront the most difficult questions about our philosophy and operation. Can the arts and sciences, like the professional schools, define themselves in critical ways *outside* the general education curriculum? Is there an accommodation to be made by administration regarding the way in which resources are managed to promote this redefinition? And, most importantly, can we envision a general education program that is intentionally mutually reinforcing of the applied and the reflective? Surely, a successful answer to the latter question would be an important contribution to the national higher education discussion.

I very much look forward to our coming discussions. As always, I am most interested in your comments.

GLM:lcm

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¹⁴ In a recent book (*Save the World on Your Own Time*; Oxford University Press, 2008), Stanly Fish proffers the provocative argument that it is inappropriate to seek and teach political or ethical relevance in the liberal arts and sciences. He admonishes liberal arts professors to stick only to the internal context of the material never veering to make an external connection. Needless to say, this is creating quite a stir. For a sample of Fish's response to what some have suggested is a Neoliberalist view of the arts and scientists see: Fish, Stanley. 2009. *Neoliberalism and Higher Education*. New York Times, March 8. For a thoughtful counter view to Fish see: Kellman, Steven G. 2009. *Education for Education's Sake: That's what Stanley Fish wants, but is it possible?* Chronicle of Higher Education, Chronicle Review, September 5.