

Crossing the Threshold

Matriculation Convocation 2013

The beginning of the academic year always brings a sense of hope for what we can accomplish together, and a sense of expectation that our learning this year will transform us, and the college.

In recognition of Rik Warch's death on Saturday we will start today with his voice, one very familiar in this Chapel. Our 14th President believed "that the collegiate model of higher education transcends the curriculum and the academic program of the institution. Among the attributes that make the liberal arts college distinctive are those that emanate from the fact that it enrolls a predominantly "traditional" undergraduate student population, that it is of a size that makes its claim to community realizable (if not always realized), that it is in the main, residential and coeducational, and that it intends the student undergraduate experience to be whole rather than bifurcated into curricular and extracurricular segments. Further, the liberal arts college seeks not only to prepare students for lives of career and work, but also to equip them to develop as private persons and as public agents." Thus, for us the community we create is part of our curriculum.

Rik's quotation raises at least three important questions for us. Have we realized true community here at Lawrence? What are the challenges we face as the concept of a "traditional" undergraduate population is in a state of nearly constant revision? And what would it mean for us to more adequately prepare our students to become public agents?

I begin this talk knowing the limits of my analysis. I have been with you for less than three months and I am still learning Lawrence, its history, traditions and community. On the other hand, fresh eyes can sometimes provide new insights about who we are and what challenges we face.

The move to Appleton this past summer provided many opportunities to accumulate knowledge and encounter new experiences. For example, the first time someone told me to park in "the ramp," I thought why not park in the spaces on the level floors? Then, I realized, that here "ramp" meant the entire parking garage. And of course there is our love of intersections with four way stop signs. We hardly ever have them in New York; there, only loud arguments could decide who got to the stop sign first. I actually had to look up the driving instructions to figure out how to navigate these intersections.

I am also artfully trying to use new idioms like “A Horse Apiece” in common conversation. For example, in Andrew Commons, the distance between the salad bar and the grill station is now a *horse apiece* to me. And after eleven weeks here I almost have the nerve to wear my Packer’s jersey given to me by the president of Princeton, which includes my last name and my Princeton honorary class numbers. I am sure everyone will believe number 83 on the Packers has the last name Burstein.

Being here has given me an opportunity to see how gracious, welcoming, and supportive we can be to newcomers. Members of the Lawrence and Appleton communities have gone out of their way to explain the area’s traditions, unwritten rules, and language. This process of accumulating membership has given me ample opportunity to cross the threshold into Lawrence, like many of the new students in the Chapel today, and also to consider the state of our community.

My move to Appleton has also led me to rethink what community means in our time. Social, economic, and technological changes in the last 50 years have also changed communities. The common characteristics around which communities were organized – some might call them superficial characteristics such as gender, race or place of origin – have been transcended by a new understanding of commonality defined in part by a sense of shared purpose. In these new social structures individuals who may be very different from one another decide to participate. Elliot Deutsch describes this new version of community in the following way, “We have said that a person *participates* in communities . . . It requires a certain openness and sensitivity ... a willingness to contribute to the evoking of a special atmosphere or presence which becomes the basis for further personal involvement. Participation ... is a mode of being together with others in such a way that something entirely new is engendered. “

Deutsch’s definition of community clearly fits institutions like Lawrence. We are a voluntary community, formed more by active participation than by common beliefs, geography or origins. But have we created what he calls a special atmosphere or presence through our participation?

In part, we have. As Rik stated in many of his writings, we believe education takes place through our residential community. Learning is transmitted from faculty to students directly and also in classroom dialogue, in residence halls, in the Warch Center, and in the Mudd Library. The playing field, campus activities and community service also provide ways to better understand ourselves and the liberal

arts and conservatory curriculum. This learning community is carefully tended by faculty and staff and nurtured by all Lawrentians.

We have much to be proud of. Our social norm -- to have students from different class years live together in residence halls and to eat together at one location -- has created a strong, distinctive campus cohesion. Almost everyday I am struck by this unified identity. This sense of Lawrence as a coherent whole also permeates faculty and staff. As I met with colleagues this summer, common themes, hopes, and aspirations clearly outweighed individual or disciplinary concerns.

Yes, we have the physical divides of College Avenue and the Fox River, we have pedagogical differences between the Conservatory and the liberal arts and science departments and we have different agendas for administrative units. But the sense of a shared Lawrence is palpable. It is one of our clearest strengths. This interconnected community of ideas, hopes and support is unique in my experience, and an aspect of this college we should nurture whenever we can.

To be fair, there is one topic of disagreement I found in conversations with academic departments and programs and students-- that is our academic calendar. The trimester system is not universally loved. I have heard many conflicting suggestions of how we can improve the situation. For example, someone suggested we should consider having classes on the weekends, which I am sure all assembled would support wholeheartedly. This response has confirmed for me that this is a topic I should avoid for at least a couple of years.

Nevertheless, I believe we can—we need to—build on our strength as a cohesive community. Our own students tell us why. Data from the student climate survey, which was administered by the President’s Committee on Diversity Affairs in 2007, 2008, 2011 and 2013, underline areas for improvement. Between 84 and 96 percent of the respondents over that four-year period said they felt comfortable, accepted, and safe on campus, and intellectually stimulated. This is a stunningly good appraisal of our community. But some areas raise concerns. For example, a surprisingly high percentage of our students whose religious faith is an important part of their identity said they experience discrimination on campus.

These concerns were also voiced in comments collected annually. For example, one student wrote last year on the survey, “People seem pretty dismissive of the opinions of those with religious beliefs. I don’t feel comfortable talking about my religion here.” Another stated, “I feel that as a Christian, and as a practicing Catholic in particular, I am looked down upon here at Lawrence University because it is

overall a largely secular institution. Many students view my religion as a joke, and the culture in general is not at all accepting of Catholics, unless I am with a group of people who are Christian as well.” This is one of many similar issues raised by students of different groups.

The tone of these comments repeats itself in the sample, and underscores the complexity of a community that is created through participation rather than centered around common characteristics. A community in which difference, rather than similarity, is the rule. I hope we can use this information, which will be disseminated by the President’s Advisory Committee on Diversity Affairs, to frame a campus conversation in which we can, paraphrasing Deutsch, participate openly and sensitively. This dialogue will not only strengthen Lawrence; it will also provide an opportunity for us all to learn from one another.

We also need to make sure that social cohesion does not prevent us from offering opportunities to learn from others with radically different opinions. When I think back to my college education, I remember a guest lecturer in my German history course who argued that the Holocaust was overblown and needed to be put back into the historical arc of European history. Other students and I tried to mount opposing arguments after the lecture but the speaker had a much better grasp on the period than we did. The lecture motivated me to study that point in history and form my own opinions rather than to accept either the view of that historian or the prevailing societal view.

I used this example on the Princeton campus when LGBTQ students asked me how I could be a senior member of the administration and allow a tenured faculty member to provide the intellectual and philosophical inspiration for the No On Marriage organization, the largest organization in the United States fighting same sex marriage. I believed that as long as he supported alternative views in the classroom, this faculty member provided an opportunity for students to research and better understand their own views. In the end, discussion with this faculty member did not make me change my own decision to marry, but it did make me think through my motivations, their legitimacy, and the societal impact of my decision.

I have heard criticism from a number of Lawrentians who believe we do not provide enough opportunities for our students to hear opposing views. They believe we stick to our normative arguments. Certainly many of us have similar views on a number of issues and it is unclear whether we invite speakers and scholars to provide alternative perspectives. If we truly intend to prepare students to be public agents in a complex world and to prepare students to work with people very

different from themselves, then we must provide access to the diversity of opinions that exist in our world today.

A student last spring encapsulated for me another strength of our community, he called it “humbleness.” In a conversation about what kept him at Lawrence he described, in rather moving terms, this college as a place where students rarely compete with each other except on the playing field. Elliot Deutsch addresses the same topic in slightly different terms. When describing how participants approach their role in communities, he states, “. . . there is a peculiarity in this vulnerability, this exposure of personhood, which is that real openness, as distinct from superficial good fellowship, comes from a strength of spirit, that special non-egocentricity which transcends potentially destructive egotism. “

Coming from an east coast, Ivy League environment, I have seen how egotistic competitiveness can hamper learning and community connection. I am very interested to see how education is different when intense competition is absent from the classroom. I agree with Deutsch that egoism -- the practice of talking and thinking about oneself excessively because of an undue sense of self-importance -- inhibits learning and intellectual exchange. As the student I spoke with last spring said, this special aspect of our community is a prerequisite for our unique intellectual discourse. And for the fostering of the community we have made here.

Rik understood and described this special and important feature of intellectual discourse at Lawrence. He stated, “By intellectual community I mean ... a place where ideas are taken seriously and where a common curiosity and a spirited exchange about ideas of importance and influence are central and significant. Such a community is not a place where each individual only does his or her intellectual thing apart from and hence uninterested in others, but where we have conversations across disciplines, beyond disciplines, and where we understand the life of the mind to be an experience of pleasure and of purpose. It is a place, in short, where individual intellectual competencies flourish, to be sure, but where communal intellectual concerns thrive as well.”

Through my conversations this summer I have asked many of you how we can better support communal intellectual concerns. I wholeheartedly agree with Rik that pursuit of knowledge, irrespective of disciplinary boundaries, is essential to the intellectual community we strive to be. I believe our humble approach to learning makes us uniquely prepared to pursue this goal.

In one of my last conversations with Rik we discussed the need to both celebrate who we are and motivate Lawrence forward. The strength of the community we have created gives us much to celebrate. It also provides unique opportunities for students and the rest of us to learn and grow. But we can certainly enhance what so many have worked to build - the “special atmosphere” Deutsch so compelling described. I believe we are up for this challenge and I look forward to joining with you in this endeavor.