Remarks – Popular Culture Association Welcome

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I am pleased to welcome you to the St. John Fisher College campus for this year’s Annual Conference of the Northeast Popular Culture Association. Looking at the sessions on the program, I see that you have good reason to immerse yourselves in this weekend’s conference activities. I do hope that you get some opportunity to take in a bit of Rochester during your stay. Our city is a moderately-sized industrial metropolitan area seeking to transition itself to being relevant and vibrant in a post-industrial economic environment. This region has had a history of re-invention – Rochester was an original boom-town during the westward expansion precipitated by the Erie Canal. It boomed again as a center of technological innovation and manufacturing activity in the heyday of Kodak, Xerox, and Bausch & Lomb. Its current rebirth is largely driven by the higher education, technology, and health care sectors. While the Rochester area faces many of the same daunting challenges of other north-eastern and rust-belt cities, its attributes - a highly educated work force, a business culture of technological innovation, and a community tradition of philanthropy – provide a fascinating opportunity to observe and be part of the cultural, economic, and structural transitions underway.

Dr. Madigan asked me to make a few observations about the liberal arts and I’ll do so briefly so that we can get to the keynote address of Dr. Scott Eberle, the Vice President for Play Studies at the Strong Museum. I should note that Dr. Eberle and the Strong Museum have just recently generated quite a bit of regional media attention as a result of their involvement in a proposal for a new billion dollar lakeside sports-entertainment complex in Buffalo that could be a key cog in this region’s ongoing revitalization efforts. The project would serve as a new home for the Buffalo Bills of the National Football League and allow for the creation of a North American Museum of Sports and Culture.

I see from a glance at the program’s listing of presenters that while your departmental homes may be in the liberal arts, most of you are situated in institutions that range from traditional liberal arts colleges to settings where the liberal arts primarily occupy a service role. The liberal arts programs at Fisher fall closer to the former than the latter. A young institution, the College was founded in the middle of the last century to instruct young men in the liberal arts and commerce. Over the last decade we’ve expanded our business, nursing, and education programs and added practice doctorates, most notably those awarded by the School of Pharmacy. That said, Fisher looks to position itself in terms of its Catholic heritage and its foundation in the liberal arts. As you can imagine, there have been and continue to be many interesting discussions about what this positioning actually implies. Despite the fears and concerns of some of my colleagues in the School of Arts and Sciences, the liberal arts have not been pushed aside or diminished by these changes. While we provide service to undergraduate majors in the professional schools, over 40% of undergraduate majors are in the situated in the Arts and Sciences. That portion would be even larger except that nearly a third of the undergraduate students entering Fisher each year come as transfers, largely from 2+2 programs with local community colleges, with most of those transfers being in pre-professional programs. I provide this background to give you a
little perspective on the challenges we face in maintaining the liberal arts as an essential component of our identity and practices.

So what are those challenges that we face here at Fisher and I anticipate that many of you are encountering:

1. The United States seems to be going through one of its periodic bouts of anti-intellectualism – a long and grand tradition. Presidential candidate Santorum’s comments during the Republican primaries provide a well-known recent example. “President Obama once said he wants everybody in America to go to college. What a snob,” said the former senator from Pennsylvania. “There are good, decent men and women who go out and work hard every day and put their skills to test that aren’t taught by some liberal college professor to try to indoctrinate them. Oh, I understand why he wants you to go to college. He wants to remake you in his image.”

2. The commodification and modularization of the college degree is seen by some as part of the solution to the country’s stagnant job market and low rates of productivity growth. Economic circumstances, with persistent annual increases in the costs of attending college being set against the persistence of a weak job market, have encouraged the following:
   - Parents and students increasingly view college education as a commodity, the benefits of which are narrowly confined to measurable economic outcomes in the form of jobs and salaries. With the cost of their investment in higher education being so substantial, parents and traditional-aged students are looking for the “sure thing.” In this view, the certainty thought to result from choosing a major that prepares a student to apply for a position after graduation that directly follows from the course of study (e.g. accounting, nursing, etc.) is much preferred to an exploration of interests and opportunities. The serendipity that is inherent in liberal arts study is seen as an unaffordable luxury. Keep in mind the extent to which the current generation of high school graduates has been provided with a structured childhood. How often did they spontaneously arrange a baseball game or tennis match? Leagues, travel teams, and sports camps may be a more efficient way to arrange recreational opportunities but what is lost?
   - Many politicians view college completion as the metric to target and portray education simply as an economic development lever. Many of these college-completion initiatives appear to focus primarily on least-cost ways to bundle 120 college credits so that a credential can be awarded. The intentionality of a curriculum that cumulatively seeks to develop capabilities of inquiry, analysis, and communication is viewed as an obstacle to efficiency and cost-effectiveness in producing credentials rather than being essential to the creation of the value and attributes the credential is supposed to signal.

And so where does this leave the liberal arts? There’s little sense in attempting rational refutation of the posturing of politicians seeking the aura of authenticity and rugged individualism through anti-elitist diatribes. With public confidence in the institution of Congress hovering around ten per cent, there may be some benefit in being held in such low esteem by this group. More worrisome is the contention that
what students gain from a liberal arts education is irrelevant and that they and society would be better served by a more practical type of education.

Here, briefly, is how we in the School of Arts and Sciences at Fisher are looking to address these challenges. I should note that the appropriateness of these strategies and tactics are an on-going subject of discussion. While I can’t claim unanimous agreement regarding the relative importance or effectiveness of each tactic, the liberal arts faculty at Fisher are largely supportive of this approach.

1. There is a strong consensus that it is essential that we fight the good fight and that the inherent nature of liberal learning remains worthy of defense and promotion. While the immediate economic concerns and interests of both the students and the institution cannot be minimized, developing student capabilities of inquiry, analysis, and communication through a liberal education is critical to well-functioning communities and economies.

2. In today’s higher education environment, it is necessary but not sufficient that we remain confident of the relevance and value of a liberal education. We must also have a presentation strategy that addresses the economic concerns and constraints of students and families. This requires that we fight the battle on the economic turf that has been presented us. Most if not all of us believe that the value of a liberal arts education is not reducible to the easily obtained output measures and metrics although this information may be quite important in the choices of students and parents. Studies by groups including the American Association of Colleges and Universities show that employers are looking for college graduates who can communicate effectively, possess critical thinking and analytical skills, and have the ability to work collaboratively in diverse group settings. These are among the attributes we seek to develop in our students. By informing prospective students of this intent and presenting evidence that our graduates have mastered these capabilities, we can seek to convey the pragmatic relevance of a liberal arts degree without compromising its full value (i.e. to include those elements that are not immediately or ultimately recognized in the labor market).

3. Presenting the successes of our alums in corporate and other settings is something that we have always been proud to do in Open Houses and similar events. We tend to expect these results, seeing them consistent with our mission of preparing students for lives of intellectual, civic, and professional integrity. We have come to recognize that prospective students and their families are sometimes leery of choosing to major in the liberal arts, not because of the long term employment prospects, but because they cannot see how such a choice can lead to a first job after graduation. While continued work is needed, we now introduce career exploration into our first year program and a number of programs have introduced career or professional development seminars. We also have developed or augmented a range of experiential opportunities including internships, summer and other directed research opportunities, service learning, and study abroad. Most importantly, through interaction with faculty members, both inside and outside the classroom, students are encouraged to start early in their college careers to begin developing the narrative they aspire to present to potential employers or graduate
school selection committees. Applicants need to be able to sell themselves in order to land that first position or to gain entry into graduate school. Who better than liberal arts faculty to help students to identify and present their narrative?

And so, in closing, I am concerned but optimistic about the prospects for the liberal arts at Fisher and in the higher education environment we face. We have the pleasure of hearing Dr. Eberle’s remarks to look forward to and so I will not dwell further on these matters this evening. I wish you all the best on your presentations, conversations, and explorations this weekend.