Introduction: Liberal Education and Practical Wisdom

‘Phronesis’ is the Ancient Greek word for practical wisdom. A person with practical wisdom is one who knows how to live well, one who has the qualities of heart and mind, who has the intelligence and wherewithal, to flourish as a human being. For the Greeks, this is someone who is vitally healthy, prosperous, and civically engaged, because to be human is to be in relationship with others, exercising all those capacities that make us who we are. A practically wise person has the intellectual and moral qualities necessary to live a good life and contribute to the happiness of others.

What is the goal or value of liberal education? It is the cultivation of one’s humanity, all those skills and abilities, propensities and proclivities, that when exercised constitute a life well lived. It is the cultivation of insight and judgment; it is the cultivation of practical wisdom. A liberal education enriches one’s capacity to do well in the world, and to do good, and importantly, one’s understanding of what it means to do well and to do good. Is this practical? Is this valuable?
These sound like a silly questions, but the value and practicality of liberal education have been questioned in our society time and again over the last decade. At Rollins College, we proudly declare that our mission, our very reason for being, is to educate students for global citizenship and responsible leadership, empowering graduates to pursue meaningful lives and productive careers.

In my remarks today I am going to probe some of the history of this mission, tying it directly to our current context. Let me offer one comment on the overall framework of my remarks.

One of the strengths of Rollins is that we have organized programs of studies for students at different places in their educational arcs. We have the undergraduate residential college, the extraordinary Hamilton Holt School for working adult learners, and the Crummer Graduate School of Business. But we only have one mission—to educate students for global citizenship and responsible leadership, and the different schools are just so many different approaches, tuned for their respective student bodies, to achieve this mission.

I hope, therefore, that you will hear all that I have to say as speaking to all that we do: one mission, one Rollins.

Recognition of Others

Before I continue, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to so many here who have brought us to this place.

I wish to recognize my colleagues, former presidents of Rollins College, on whose shoulders I stand. I have tremendous respect and gratitude for your
decades of leadership that have created the Rollins College we know and cherish today:

- Jack Critchfield, who served from 1969 to 1978;
- Thaddeus Seymour, who served from 1978 to 1990;
- Rita Bornstein, who served from 1990 to 2004; and
- Lewis Duncan, who served from 2004 to 2014.

I wish to express my respect and gratitude to David Lord, the current chairman of the board of trustees at Rollins College. Thank you, David, for your wise counsel and steady-handed leadership through this transition.

Thank you, Allan Keen, who served as the chair of the presidential search committee. I am forever grateful for this opportunity to serve and will always cherish the fact that it is through you and the rest of the search committee that I came to know and love this fine college.

Thank you, Shawn Garvey and Sarah Sprinkle, for your greetings from the church and community that came together in 1885 to found Rollins College.

Thank you, Dale Perry, for extending greetings from The College of Wooster, and a heartfelt thanks to all of the Fighting Scots who are here today. Peg and I cherish our years of service at Wooster and are proud to hold dual citizenship as Scots and Tars.

Thank you, Dan Sullivan, for your greetings from our shared alma mater, St. Lawrence. You are a dear friend and mentor. So much of what I know about being a college president I learned from you.

Thank you good people of Rollins—staff, alumni, faculty, and students—for your warm welcome today and every day since we joined you. Rollins is
renowned for its warm and beautiful campus, but what is truly warm and beautiful about Rollins are the people.

Thank you, Billy Collins, for your poem of tribute today. What an honor to have a Poet Laureate of the United States compose words to mark this day.

And thank you, Carol Schneider, for your introduction, too generous by far. Your leadership and the good work of AAC&U have been an inspiration to me for decades.

Finally, let me express my respect and gratitude to all who have created the extraordinary music today!

➢ Thank you to the choir and the orchestra.
➢ Thank you, Professor John Sinclair, exceptional director and chair of our music program at Rollins;
➢ To Chuck Archard, our artist-in-residence, for arranging, and to our own student Elodie Germain for her singing in “Up to the Mountain”;
➢ To Professor Dan Crozier for your original composition we just heard, “Fiat Lux Fanfare”;
➢ To Jamey Ray for your stirring arrangement of “Amazing Grace”;
➢ And finally to our student, Catherine Psarakis, for your original arrangement of our alma mater, which we will hear shortly.

Fiat Lux!, indeed, but let us also proclaim, Fiat Musica!

Let me also recognize my wife, Peg, who is my partner in all of this work we do together, and our boys, Kelsey and Tosh. And thank you to all of my dear family gathered here today.
Fiat Lux!: The Vision and The Legacy

Today we celebrate a legacy of liberal education at Rollins, 130 years in the making. Our motto, which can be found on our seal, and which we have adopted as the theme for our celebrations of Rollins over these days, is Fiat Lux!

This Latin phrase, found in the Book of Genesis, is most commonly translated as “Let there be light!,” an emphatic phrase referring to the God of The Bible bringing light to a universe of darkness by his will.

But the metaphor of light replacing darkness, knowledge replacing ignorance, love replacing hatred, can be found in every culture’s history of thought, from the Hindu Shloka, “lead us from darkness to light,” to the Confucian proverb that “it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness,” from the enlightenment of the Buddha to The Enlightenment Era of 17th- and 18th-century European thought, which sought to replace dogma with the exercise of reason, and all the way to Martin Luther King’s admonishment that only light can drive out darkness, only love can drive out hate. The metaphor of light, the hope that light brings, but also the insistence that light will prevail over darkness, is as fitting for our time and place as it has been, always and everywhere.

Thus we celebrate the light that Rollins College brings, and we are emphatic about this: Fiat Lux! There will be light!

We celebrate the first president of Rollins College, Edward Hooker, who, in 1885, proclaimed that the torch of learning needed to illuminate the forests of Florida through the founding of the state’s first college.¹

We celebrate Hamilton Holt, the eighth president of Rollins College, who served from 1925 to 1949, whose vision brought John Dewey to our campus and
a philosophy of practical liberal education specifically committed to innovation and to offering a curriculum designed to enable graduates to pursue meaningful lives and productive careers in a democracy.

Holt was a graduate of Yale, and he came to office with decided views on teaching and learning, mostly negative lessons he had taken from his time at Yale. He said of the Yale pedagogical system of lectures and recitations that it was the “worst pedagogical method ever devised for imparting knowledge,” decrying, in his words, “the assumption that knowledge may be poured into another and assimilated without the other going through something of the same process of preparational study is perhaps the greatest fallacy of modern pedagogical psychology.”

One cannot but wonder, what Hamilton Holt might say of the mass market of online programs being sold as education today.

Holt brought to the fore, and brought to Rollins, the insight that the most valuable and difficult kind of learning takes place in the context of human relationships, through the critical give and take of testing ideas through dialogue, between professor and student, and between and amongst students, engaged in the common enterprise of advancing understanding.

In his article, "On the College Frontier: The Rollins Idea," published in The Nation in 1930, Holt says that at Rollins,

we hold the belief that the individual student's growth and development are the all-important things, and that to justify itself, every course, by its subject matter and manner of being taught, must deepen and broaden the
student's understanding of life and enable him to adjust himself more quickly and more effectively to the world in which he lives.iii

Holt ushered in Rollins’ storied “Conference Plan,” where the traditional mode of pedagogy relying on faculty lectures and student recitations was abandoned in favor of curriculum that had faculty and students working together, engaging subject matter in dialogue and examination as co-learners in large blocks of time, and where learning, as I have said, emerged in the context of these rich human relationships.

What I am talking about here, of course, is mentoring, that special kind of relationship that is built on twin pillars of care and rigor. What Holt saw then, and what we know now, is that it is the texture and quality of mentoring that is what really matters in college.

In the largest study of this question—What matters in college?0—the Gallup research firm together with Purdue University conducted interviews with over 30,000 graduates with degrees from the full range of American colleges and universities. They sought to discern from this study what factors in the college experience really made a difference in shaping the quality of life and the quality of work for alumni after graduation. Was it where one went to college? Was it one’s major?iv

Their chief finding bears directly on the question at hand. Gallup looked for correlations between those who reported having great jobs and great lives, and what these respondents said about what mattered most in their college experience.
By “great jobs” they mean more than being employed, more than income level, but those who reported being intellectually and emotionally engaged in their work, who have a satisfying sense of purpose and identification with their work. By “great lives” they mean those who reported having a deep sense of well-being in their lives, a sense of personal thriving and social connectedness.

What was the main finding, the chief correlation? Those who reported having “great jobs and great lives” said that what mattered most in college was that they were mentored by faculty who took an interest in their intellectual and personal development, who challenged them to dig more deeply into their work, who personally held them to high standards while supporting them to achieve those standards.

In other words, what matters most in college is exactly the kind of relationship between students and faculty that Holt was advocating for in 1930 and that Rollins remains committed to up to this day.

Deep learning, transformational learning, happens when one’s words and ideas, one’s reasoning and questioning, are individually and critically engaged by faculty passionate about the endeavor. Is a Rollins education practical? Does it lead to great jobs and great lives? The evidence suggests that we are on the right course, indeed.

John Dewey came to Rollins in 1931 at Holt’s invitation to lead a curriculum review. Dewey’s influence on American philosophy of education is vast. In Dewey’s thought we find the groundwork of what we now talk about as experiential education; from civic engagement and service learning, to study abroad, to internships for academic credit, to the very idea of a residential
campus community as a laboratory for democracy, Dewey’s thought helps us see that professors are architects of experiences that educate and that there is no more influential teacher than the pragmatic realities of lived experience, reflected on, analyzed, and brought to articulation in dialogue with one’s peers and professors.

For Dewey, education is essentially a social endeavor; learning takes place in the context of human relations and this learning is, in turn, necessary for the maintenance, the progress, the very possibility of civil society. In his book *Democracy and Education*, Dewey writes:

> In final account, then, not only does social life demand teaching and learning for its own permanence, but the very process of living together educates. It enlarges and enlightens experience; it stimulates and enriches imagination; it creates responsibility for accuracy and vividness of statement and thought.\(^v\)

It is this thinking that enlivens the spirit of the American residential liberal arts college. We are a community of learners, pursuing our mission together in the intimacy of dialogue, contest, criticism, and collaboration, because it is only through this shared experience that our educational goals can be achieved.

I will add, this is exactly why diversity matters so much to our mission. We can only hope to offer a liberal education for global citizenship and responsible leadership with integrity if our learning community holds in dialogue a diversity of points of view and lived identities. One need only observe the trends in contemporary political discourse to see that the more one listens and speaks only
to those who share the same point of view, the more insular, narrow, and
dogmatic beliefs become.

On the other hand, true vitality of thought, innovation in insight, and
subtlety in understanding emerge from a cauldron of contested points of view,
generously engaged in a process of listening and learning, collaborating across
differences in a shared endeavor to advance understanding. It is not easy; in
fact, there is nothing more difficult. But the habits of heart and mind that are
cultivated in this process are exactly the most practical and the most valuable
qualities needed to exercise global citizenship and responsible leadership, needed
to pursue meaningful lives and productive careers in the world today.

In extensive research commissioned by the Association of American
Colleges and Universities, time and again employers report that what they most
value and seek are those with intercultural competence, the ability to work with
people from different backgrounds and cultures, and the capacities required to
solve problems with people whose views are different from their own.\textsuperscript{vi}

With Hamilton Holt, I would maintain that one does not cultivate these
qualities in large lecture halls listening passively. With John Dewey, I would
maintain that these qualities are cultivated best within an intentionally designed
experiential learning community, where one is listening to and living and learning
with and from others who bring to the common project the insights hard won
from triangulating different identities and points of view—a diversity of religious,
racial, socioeconomic, gendered, and sexually oriented identities and points of
view.
And going beyond Holt and Dewey, I would maintain that these qualities, so practical and valuable for meaningful lives and productive careers, are not going to be cultivated through an outdated pedagogy of large lectures, nor through its contemporary equivalent of online, impersonal, disembodied digital delivery systems.

At Rollins College, we continue to innovate and reinvent our approach to liberal education, not because we cleave nostalgically to a past, however noble, that was enlivened by the thinking of Hamilton Holt and John Dewey, but because we believe that our approach is demonstrably the most effective way to engage students in a rigorous preparation for the demands of global citizenship and responsible leadership.

Let me say a word directly addressing some consternation one finds in the media and among our public officials about what might be called traditional liberal arts majors. In the recent past, we have heard President Obama question majoring in art history, Governor Bevin of Kentucky proposing that majors in French literature should not get state funding for college tuition, Governor Rick Scott suggesting it is not in the State’s interest to fund the study of anthropology, and Senator Rubio and Jeb Bush saying we don’t need philosophy majors—imagine that! There are themes resonating in these positions that are both wrongheaded and empirically mistaken. I do not offer them here with any intention of contributing to the political escapades surrounding us, but to signal the disjuncture that seems rampant between contemporary popular myths about liberal education and the demonstrable reality.

First and foremost, there is a mistaken assumption found in these positions that an academic major somehow constitutes one’s career destiny. Nothing
could be further from the case. Undergraduate majors should not be confused with job training. An academic major is simply a way for a student to organize her liberal education around a set of questions or modes of inquiry found by her to be particularly compelling or important. It is simply a way to provide coherence, depth, and rigor to a course of study. How many of you here can draw a straight line between your undergraduate major and your current work? Yes, I hope you draw upon the skills and knowledge you gained through your major course of study, but you would never confuse that study as job training.

As evidence, let me simply recount the majors and professions of a few members of Rollins’ board of trustees:

- Rodney Adkins, who recently retired from IBM and served as senior vice president of corporate strategy, also led the team of engineers who developed IBM’s Watson cognitive system. Mr. Adkins was elected into the prestigious National Academy of Engineering and also was recognized as the Black Engineer of the Year in 2007. He studied physics at Rollins.
- Pat Loret do Mola held senior leadership positions in banking at Manufacturers Hanover, Mitsubishi Trust, and Merrill Lynch, and is now president of Virtus Trade Settlement. She majored in philosophy at Rollins. Yes, philosophy.
- Rick Goings is chairman and chief executive officer of Tupperware Brands Corporation. He majored in history.
- Michael O’Donnell is chief executive officer and president at Ruth's Hospitality Group, which includes, among other enterprises, Ruth’s Chris Steakhouses. He majored in English at Rollins.
➢ And, of course, our very own Mr. Rogers: Fred Rogers of the famed *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* educational preschool series majored in music at Rollins.

I could go on. I cite these exemplars of liberal education to illustrate that an undergraduate major in no way constitutes one’s career destiny. And yet, if asked, I am sure that each of these people would regale you with testimony of how their undergraduate studies laid a foundation upon which they continued to draw and build throughout their careers. In fact, I know they would, because I have asked them.

And this is no surprise. Though a liberal education does not reduce to job training, it does develop exactly the breadth of understanding, the skills, and the qualities of heart and mind sought by employers.

In a series of extensive studies undertaken by Hart Research Associates and the Association of American Colleges and Universities, polling a wide range of employers for what they seek in those they hire, the chief finding is that, and I quote, “when hiring recent undergraduates, employers place the greatest priority on a demonstrated proficiency in skills and knowledge that cut across majors. Written and oral communications, teamwork skills, ethical decision making, critical thinking, and the ability to apply knowledge in real-world settings are the most highly valued by employers.”

What is more, 96% of employers agree that “all college students should have experiences that teach them how to solve problems with people whose views are different from their own,” and 78% agree that “all college students
should gain intercultural skills and an understanding of societies and cultures outside of the United States.\textsuperscript{viii}

This sounds to me like a liberal education for global citizenship and responsible leadership is precisely what employers are looking for from higher education, and it is no wonder our graduates do so well in the world, pursuing meaningful lives and productive careers.

Finally, and to my point, 91\% of employers surveyed agree that for career success,“ a candidate’s demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important that his or her undergraduate major.\textsuperscript{ix}

In conclusion, a Rollins education does not reduce to job training or workforce development. Though our alumni do have great jobs, we are educating students for dynamic careers full of change and challenge.

Do not tell me this isn’t a practical education. If not this, what? Do not tell me this is not a relevant education. If not this, what? Do not tell me this educational mission is not of vital interest to our democracy. As I have argued in my essay “On Purpose: Liberal Education and the Question of Value”:

Pursuing a liberal education in earnest is a kind of soulcraft; in the very process of liberal inquiry one is creating an identity, not just with greater breadth and depth of understanding, but also with greater capacity for action, greater freedom and independence, both to pursue one’s own ends and to influence positively the well-being of the world.\textsuperscript{x}

Therefore, we must not be shy, must not have a cloak of diminished confidence draped over us, clouding out the light. At Rollins College we will offer
a liberal education for global citizenship and responsible leadership boldly, proudly, and exceptionally well. And we will demonstrate the value of this by the work of our alumni as they put their ideas to work in the world pursuing meaningful lives and productive careers as global citizens and responsible leaders.

I say, *Fiat Lux!*

Thank you.

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.