OPENING REMARKS

President Lewis M. Duncan

One hundred years ago, higher education in America was without direction and in general disarray. The rigid, constrained studies of classical European languages and literature had been replaced by a new educational model, one that proclaimed unrestrained equity of thought across the full extension of human interest and intelligence. Yet, when students merely chose courses of their liking, without systematic structure or purposeful reason, this redefinition of liberal education resulted in an education that was manifestly without definition, without commonality of purpose or shared learning experience. In 1907, Jacob Schurman, president of Cornell decried that the American college experience was “without clear-cut notions of what a liberal education is and how it is to be secured.” In answer, John Dewey, the predominant educational philosopher of the early 20th century, brought forth a more purposeful, yet still modern model, a model of pragmatic liberal education. Founded on the Jeffersonian ideal that a strong democracy requires an informed and an engaged citizenry, Dewey charged that the principle of democracy should serve as the unifying framework for American higher education.

A landmark national colloquy called “The Curriculum for the Liberal Arts College” was convened in 1931 here at Rollins College by our president, Hamilton Holt, and chaired by John Dewey. The call went forth for a radically different form of practical liberal education: learning still based upon the traditional liberal arts and sciences, but calling also for an education put into practice in our lives, a call to active citizenship and civic service. Rollins has historically embraced this special mission: to graduate students who are not merely reflective, but also reflexive, prepared to act upon their beliefs in service to human needs. This educational model stands in contrast both to the static great books curriculum looking backwards at our Western heritage and traditions, and to the undisciplined egalitarianism of a curriculum structured only by curiosity. We assert that the purpose of our liberal education is to liberate the minds of our students so that they can become not just informed spectators, but also engaged participants in some of the great issues, debates, and challenges that will define their times.

Ten years ago, President Rita Bornstein convened here at Rollins another educational colloquy, this entitled “Toward a Pragmatic Liberal Education: The Curriculum of the Twenty-First Century.” The educational philosophers and pedagogical experts who attended and debated curricular ideals spoke passionately for the need for a new pragmatism, of a progressive education moving from discipline-based to problem-centered styles of learning. Over the past several decades, we have incrementally altered our curriculum in accordance with these principles.
However, today at Rollins we are in the formative stages of a much more substantive curricular review. And so, in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the colloquy convened at Rollins by Hamilton Holt and John Dewey, we convene a new educational colloquy, motivated by our own ongoing curricular reform, but inspired by an entirely different unifying purpose for curricular design. While Dewey spoke of democracy as the basis for a uniquely American indigenous education, today we experience a much faster-changing and interconnected world. This is reflected in our new vision statement, “educating for global citizenship and responsible leadership.” The organizing principles of a 21st-century American liberal education can no longer be satisfied within a myopically American perspective of the world around us. As we step across the threshold of this new millennium, if our goal is to prepare our students to truly become informed participants in some of the great debates, issues and challenges of the 21st century, before we become entirely overwhelmed by the practical realities of course selections and delivery, and subtle complexities of academic disciplinary expectations, should we not invest some time ... some essential time ... in exploring the fundamental concerns facing the world today, and giving thought to the great issues challenging the human condition? Should we not invest some essential time in discussing our fundamental human values, our historical lessons, our cultures and beliefs, and the collective wisdoms of human experience? To do so allows us then to better define the needs and renewed purposes of a modern liberating education, and to better inform our curricular planning choices for the future.

This colloquy is explicitly part of that deeper exploration of need and purpose.

*Photos by Judy Watson Tracy*