

College Relations
Convocation Addresses

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Liberal Arts 2.0

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Liberal Arts 2.0
Convocation Address, August 28, 2008
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Thank you for the introduction. Greetings to fellow colleagues and staff at the College and to the students: those returning from abroad, seniors who constitute an elite, if anxious, group unto themselves, and a special welcome to the entering class. You have ahead of you a time of tremendous change and growth, as well as frustration, worry, and probably some bad decision-making. Leap into this new period of your lives with a sense of risk and wonder.

I should probably begin this talk by explaining my title: Liberal Arts 2.0. It stems from the term Web 2.0, which refers to the recent evolution of the Web as interactive, participatory, collaborative and collective. Web 2.0 includes blogs, wikis, user-generated media, social networking: like much of what it describes, the definition is amorphous and inexact. I believe that Web 2.0 and all that it implies will necessitate a revision of the way we do liberal arts and thus my title “Liberal Arts 2.0.”

Web 2.0 has uncovered a set of dichotomies; discussions of these dichotomies are ideally suited to liberal arts colleges. The first one that I want to mention is the simultaneous connectivity and isolation of the current technologies. The connectivity is now almost constant. Note the ascendance of the letters “i” and “e” in our vocabulary: ebooks, eBay, iPhones, eHarmony, email, iTunes, iPods. And our expectations for technology and what it can accomplish have grown. We can look up everything from how to cook an artichoke to getting directions from the Plex to the nearest Target, to what the unit of currency is in Malawi to the rate of words per minute during the average speech (around 125 per minute, by the way). We expect to find video on demand (note the huge shift in the way we experienced the current Olympics), a blog on the best route for climbing Mt. Washington, live pictures from the protests in Myanmar and the Facebook profile of our classmate from third grade. And what about the lack of connectivity for those on the other side of the digital divide? Will they become even more isolated?

There are curious ways in which we use some of the new technologies to isolate ourselves and create some space. We sit in our rooms having solo encounters with the Internet. We use our cell phones to shut out the environment around us. Look at the number of people who walk around with earphones on sidewalks, in gyms, in subways. I have thought it would be fascinating to actually know what people are listening to on their headphones. I’m sure it would smash many cherished stereotypes: is that 65-year old woman listening to salsa, is the 15-year old rocking out to Brahms?

To the incoming freshmen I would advise: use this double-edged sword of connectivity and isolation wisely: turn off your cell phone every once in awhile, shut down your computer, be careful about isolation, talk a walk in the Arboretum, get high .. on ideas and conversations with your friends, nurture your relationships. Remember to take time for Life 1.0.

And who determines the kinds of technologies we have? By and large the people who have created the technologies and thus have shaped the ways in which we access them and interact with them, have been young and male. And they come from a limited racial set and economic background. Liberal arts colleges can help change those demographics.

And I would argue that “young” is perhaps the strongest determinant of the way we will use these technologies. I was listening to an interesting podcast by Henry Jenkins, a media guru from MIT. He was talking about the way students multitask and whether or not this is a good thing: students have the ability to be checking their email, listening to music, talking or texting their friends, having several browser tabs open at once, all the while completing their homework. For most of the professors and staff here, this is not how we work; while you are doing five things at once we might be doing one (although the one could be

reading Ulysses). This is a manifestation of the young/old dichotomy. Jenkins argues (and I think I'm inclined to agree) that multitasking is a skill that is essential to the world in which we now live; it is the current norm.

So does that mean that we professors need to re-think how we teach, that you need to be showing us how to navigate and multitask in this digital realm? To some extent, yes. Some feel that you (the students) are the "digital natives" and we are the "digital immigrants." There is some merit in this admittedly imperfect analogy. We are the ones more unfamiliar with these new modes of operation that to you are second nature. We often gather our information and communicate by other means. I'm guessing that an extremely high percentage of the freshmen here looked up their roommates on Facebook and corresponded extensively by e-mail with them before they arrived. Web 2.0 and multitasking is how you operate. In fact, I suspect that as I am talking up here, scores of students are texting their friends or looking up information. I'll flatter myself and assume you are also paying nominal attention to what I have to say.

The amount of information on the Web is increasing exponentially (and yes, I use the word "exponential" advisedly): there are currently over 175 million different Web sites, whereas in 1993 there were about 100; four years ago YouTube wasn't around and today there are over 80 million videos on it with several billion video views each month; World of Warcraft, an online game, was launched in 2004 and currently has over 10 million active players; the size of the economies of virtual worlds such as Second Life rival that of many real countries. We "digital immigrants" have something to contribute here. The things we can help you with, such as synthesizing sources, critically appraising what you are seeing, evaluating, making connections, drawing conclusions — are skills you're going to need in increasing supply as you navigate this flood of information. These are important liberal arts skills.

Another of the dichotomies that Web 2.0 and the Internet have intensified is interdisciplinary vs. specialized knowledge. Many of our disciplines have been enriched and expanded by Web 2.0 and the huge availability of information. For example, in biology it is now possible to connect to the NCBI (National Center for Biotechnology Information) Web site and analyze genomes for more than 4500 species. Language instruction makes use of blogs and news sources from other countries not only to teach languages but to create more familiarity with the cultures being studied. Government and political science researchers have access not only to local news sources but a wide range of blogs and opinions that were previously unavailable and they can also study the ways in which the Internet influences politics (witness the recent disruption of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Web site of Georgia, presumably by Russian hackers, or the ways in which the Obama campaign has communicated and fundraised online). In the humanities it is now possible to analyze large numbers of books (Gutenberg alone has over 25,000 ebooks) for content, style and linguistic expression. In the introductory course in computer science we use computer programs to solve problems in the sciences, the arts, humanities, social sciences — and in more advanced courses we talk about how to mine, organize and filter the vast amount of digital information. So the liberal arts are evolving, as they always have.

The digital availability of information in all disciplines has abetted a blurring of the lines between disciplines. At Connecticut College, note our academic centers and the recent post-doctoral hires, the number of new faculty positions that stress interdisciplinarity, the Sherman-Fairchild initiative for team-teaching in the arts, the International Cultural Commons initiative, the number of collaborative team-taught courses, the new course in media studies, the list of freshman seminars. An increasing number of students have double (and even triple) majors as well as minors and center certificates. Part of this may be a concern about finding a job, but I think much of it reflects the broader nature and availability of knowledge and our own success in promoting a liberal arts education.

There are fascinating discussions taking place within the academy about the nature of majors and disciplines. I question whether the departmental structure isn't becoming as obsolete as the check box on the census form for race: it may work for some but for an increasing number the answer to the race/ethnicity query is "yes" or "lots".

I am by no means implying that a trend towards interdisciplinary knowledge is universal or should be. There is an appropriate and central place for prolonged and focused engagement within single disciplines. There is no "Twitter" shortcut to learning to play a Bach cello suite or becoming proficient in Japanese or proving a complex theorem — you need hours and hours of specialized background and concentration in a very circumscribed field of study. There is room and a need for both interdisciplinary and specialized knowledge at a liberal arts college.

Another contradiction inherent in Web 2.0 is the simultaneous anonymous and public nature of information. Race, gender, class, age, sexual preferences aren't apparent in anonymous posts and in many ways this has been a democratizing trend; it is more difficult to discriminate. But the cover of anonymity has also permitted "conconfessions" and other malicious gossip sites, hate sites, child pornography sites, and personal attacks that can't be traced. It has given freer rein to racist and sexist statements, meanness and slander. It has caused us to consider, as a community, where our boundaries are, where do free speech and responsibility meet, where does the first amendment collide with harassment. These are issues our courts and our society debate; liberal arts colleges are excellent venues for these discussions and our community should be talking about them in our dorms, in our classrooms, in forums and in conversations. Grappling with these problems is fundamental to defining who we are as a community.

Another danger of this anonymity is that it is often false. We tend to think that what we do on the Internet in private stays private. I wonder if most of us are aware of just how extensive a "residue" we are leaving every time we use a browser: cookies, profiles, logs of places we have visited and when we visited them. As Hal Berghel noted "cookies are transforming our private sanctuaries into electronic auditoriums." Internet Explorer is particularly egregious in the amount of browser residue it leaves behind. And that information is available to browsers in subsequent sessions, to law enforcement officers, to hackers, and to identity thieves. And it's not just browsers that keep logs of information; word-processing documents keep track of revisions and these may be accessed. There is even a new specialization in computer science called BRAP (BRowser APplications) forensics. Just how much information should the government or any corporation be entitled to gather from your machine? Where is the border between personal privacy and the Patriot Act; where is the line between spying and providing services; where is the division between student freedom and censorship? These are not just theoretical questions. Connecticut College faces these issues on a constant, daily basis.

The anonymity or seeming anonymity of the Internet is contrasted with the public exposure of much of Web 2.0. The number of pictures, video and private and/or boring information that people seem willing to share is astounding. The propensity to record ourselves, our friends, and so many of our actions also means that even if you don't post your own picture someone else might. And this information has a permanence that is frightening. I can guarantee you that those hilarious pictures with the clever captions from the party when you were wasted won't amuse a prospective employer. And that prospective employer will figure out a way to access your Facebook history. This means that much of what we do becomes public, a harsh punishment for any of us. This means it's much harder for us to take risks and make mistakes.

A final dichotomy that is highlighted by the Web 2.0 phenomenon concerns the very nature of knowledge and whether it is a collective, anonymous enterprise or an individual one. This is not a new question. But the speed and availability of electronic information have taken the collective aspect of knowledge to

unprecedented lengths. One of the tenets of Web 2.0 is that collective wisdom, contributed by ordinary citizens, is the path to enlightenment. This is not a tenet that is embraced by many academicians.

An example that illustrates this flashpoint is Wikipedia. Wikipedia is a repository for collective knowledge, although it has gatekeepers. Jaron Lanier summarized for many when he said “the problem is in the way ... Wikipedia has come to be regarded and used; how it's been elevated to such importance so quickly. ... a resurgence of the idea that the collective is all-wise.” Some faculty won't allow Wikipedia to be used as a source in a paper, others exhort students to look at it critically and not trust it as an exclusive source; many of us use it routinely in our non-professional lives. Much of the information in my own field is very accurate and well written. Even if you are skeptical of the worth of Wikipedia, collective knowledge has other realizations that we embrace.

Just this summer the College moved to Moodle (replacing WebCT) for our course management system. Moodle is an open source product, which means that it is freely available and is developed through collaboration. In open source software the code is accessible and contributions are welcome, although there are filters by groups of people who judge the merit of submitted entries; the result is organic and collective. Our computer science students are involved in a joint project with Trinity and Wesleyan to develop open source software to be used for humanitarian purposes. Another successful example of open source software is Zotero, whose development has been sponsored by the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University and several foundations. Zotero is a research tool that is an extension for the Firefox browser (itself open source) and which can be used to organize, manage and cite data.

Look at the struggles that newspapers are having trying to survive in printed form and how they have shifted to online versions, with opportunities for blogging, reflecting the notion that news is formed by the collective wisdom of ordinary citizens posting blogs and media. So, what will happen to the news? Will the reporter become obsolete? Is it a battle between a few, large, centralized news organizations and a free-for-all on Web 2.0?

Is the “collective” a legitimate way to reach wisdom? Where does the truth lie? Given this public, collective move towards knowledge, what is the role of the individual expert in all of this? What is the role of the professor? Discussions about what constitutes wisdom and knowledge and how to navigate through the choices available in Web 2.0 belong at a liberal arts college.

In conclusion, a liberal arts college is a place where teaching and research are improved by digital tools, where students are taught to negotiate and synthesize the sea of information available to them, where important ethical questions are discussed and aired. It is a place where the liberal arts are evolving into version 2.0. And a liberal arts college is also exactly where students should be in this digital era. You have come to the right place.

Thank you.