

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT



Inauguration Address
Washington College
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“Our Aim is Truth”

Part One: The Aims of Education

Good afternoon! I want to thank you all for being here today, and for your steadfast support for this historic and wonderful institution, Washington College. I want to offer special thanks to Mr. David Foster, the Mayor of Chestertown, for being with us today, and to Rev. Bobby Brown of Bethel AME Church in Chestertown. You lift up and bless these proceedings with your participation, and I am grateful for you both.

One of my favorite memories of my time as a graduate student at the University of Chicago was attending the annual “Aims of Education” address, given by a distinguished faculty member to the incoming first-year class during orientation. This is a great tradition at the undergraduate college, which was embedded within the larger university, and dates back to the 1960s. I loved this event because it was such a thoughtful, reflective moment during the hustle and bustle of orientation, a moment to pause and consider the meaning of the powerful intellectual journey on which students were about to embark. These addresses were always carefully prepared, often funny and sometimes quite moving. The first Aims of Education address was given in 1961 by three University of Chicago faculty members, Aaron Brumbaugh, Clarence Faust and Joseph Schwab. It was entitled “How to Shop in a Cafeteria,” and though the

text appears to be lost to us now, from the title and the context I surmise it was likely a talk on the best way for a student to navigate and make the best use of required general education courses.

When I arrived at Washington College about a year ago, I was delighted to see that we have our own version of this meaningful tradition in which we celebrate our learned faculty colleagues by giving them a similar opportunity to the one I experienced at the University of Chicago many years ago. Each year at our Fall Convocation, close to the end of new student orientation, the recipient of the Alumni Award for Distinguished Teaching is invited to address the first-year class and to reflect on the nature and purpose of education. This past September the honored speaker was Dr. Sara Clarke-De Reza, Assistant Professor of Education. She gave a wonderful address, one that I know we will all remember. It was titled, "Teaching: A Vulnerable Privilege."

At Chicago, following the Aims of Education address, students returned to their residence halls and their academic advisors led them in group discussion of the talk they had just heard, a way to deepen the reflective moment, and a good opportunity to eat some pizza and get to know their advisors better. The origins of the Chicago tradition date back a little over a decade before the first Aims of Education address was given in 1961. The influential educational theorist Robert Maynard Hutchins, who served first as president, then chancellor of the University of Chicago from 1929-1951, penned an important essay the year before he retired called, "The Idea of a College." Hutchins was no shrinking violet, and he had a very bold presidency. He had previously been dean of the Yale Law School and was a creative educational thinker. He was a renowned champion of the so-called "Great Books" curriculum, a model still

pursued by a select few colleges, including our neighbor institution St. John's and the undergraduate college at the University of Chicago.

But Hutchins was perhaps most famous in the popular imagination for something he did in collegiate athletics, namely withdrawing the university from the Big 10 Conference and from Division One athletics altogether in 1939. The University of Chicago may not sound like an athletic powerhouse to you, but consider this: Chicago was a founding member of the Big 10 and the collegiate football team had won the conference championship seven different times since the league's inception in 1896. Their coach was the legendary Amos Alonzo Stagg, and their famed running back, Jay Berwanger, won the very first Heisman Trophy in 1935 (then called the Downtown Athletic Club Award). This was not exactly a marginal program he was dispensing with at the height of its success. As you can imagine, Hutchins received a lot of flak for this decision, and he absolutely relished it. In "The Idea of a College," published eleven years after his decision to drop major athletics, he writes,

...big-time, industrial football...confuses the public mind about what education is and contains elements of injustice, hypocrisy and fraud that run counter to the high ideals that our education institutions profess. It is perfectly possible to be against football of this type and to be for health and exercise. As for me, I am for exercise, as long as I do not have to take any myself.¹

Hutchins was certainly a wry maverick in this regard, and while I do not share all of his views on college athletics—don't worry, I'm not about to cancel the lacrosse season—he did have some interesting ideas about the purpose of a college education that still resonate today.

¹ Hutchins, Robert M. "The Idea of a College." In *Engaging the Humanities at the University of Chicago*. Ed. Philippe Desan. Garamond Press, 1997, p. 87.

For starters, Hutchins was a strong proponent of the liberal arts and very much against what he called “vocational education,” which he defined as narrow job-specific training. He argued strongly against such training in college, “because the shifts in technology and the migration of workers may make vocational training at one time in one place useless.”² In 1950, well before the digital age we now live in, it was already clear to Hutchins that technological advances would quickly outpace most job-specific education, and that something more was demanded. For Hutchins, the highest and best purpose of a college education was to impart what he referred to as “the power of understanding and judgment.”³ Students achieve these twin intellectual capacities not by narrowly focusing on one or two fields of knowledge, but rather through careful study and debate of issues and texts in a deliberately diverse array of academic disciplines. This is what we might today call general education.

Douglass Cater, Washington College president from 1982-1990, very much echoes Hutchins’ sentiment on the value of a general education in his own inaugural address, which he titled, “The Idea of a Small College.” Like Hutchins, he worried about the trend toward over-specialization in higher education. “Knowledge grows ever more specialized, ever more quantified,” he wrote, and then in a move that combined Hutchins’ concerns about rapid technological advancement and the danger of over-specializing, he warned us that “fragmented knowledge can destroy the human race it was meant to serve.”⁴ In arguing for the intrinsic value of a broad general education, Cater goes on to quote Washington College founder

² Hutchins, 88.

³ Hutchins, 89.

⁴ Cater, Douglass. “The Idea of a Small College.” (1982) Reprinted in *The Talbot Spy*. Accessed Sept. 18, 2022. <https://talbotspy.org/the-idea-of-a-small-college-by-douglass-cater/>.

William Smith, who described the early Washington College curriculum in a way that would have very much pleased Robert Maynard Hutchins a hundred and seventy years later. “What chiefly has been aimed at,” Smith attests, “is to teach youth to think well and justly.”⁵

Hutchins and William Smith were in full agreement on this point. For Hutchins, the ultimate aim of a college education was to create and strengthen a democratic community in which “every citizen has as much power of understanding and judgment as they can develop, because every citizen has a voice in the management of the community.”⁶ To better understand why he felt so strongly about the civic duty of higher education, some historical context is helpful. It’s important to remember that Hutchins was writing in 1950, in the aftermath of the Second World War. It was also the dawn of the nuclear age, and the beginning of the Cold War. Much of Europe was still in ruins or slowly rebuilding, and the reordering of society was a subject on the minds of many after the cataclysms created by fascism and the World Wars unleashed by it. Higher education has always concerned itself with the formation of individual citizens, but for Hutchins, college had the opportunity and the duty to play a vital, leading role in building a better society. He surely had the mid-20th-century wartime nuclear devastation in mind when he wrote, “[t]he human community has been split in a billion fragments, which the cults of nationalism, racism, or regionalism are constantly reforming into more and more dangerous combinations.”⁷ He could have easily been writing about the complex media and political landscape of the contemporary United States and much of the western world in that

⁵ Cater, Douglass. “The Idea of a Small College.”

⁶ Hutchins, R.M. “The Idea of a College,” (89).

⁷ Hutchins, 94.

passage, and the way he concludes his essay is also highly relevant to our current situation.

Speaking of the pivotal role of a college, Hutchins exhorts:

Now we must apply ourselves to the task of creating a community in this country and then throughout the world. The education that will help us toward these ends is liberal education, the education of free men [and women]. This education is the task of the college.⁸

Part Two: The Aims of Washington College

Hutchins' words are good to reflect on in a moment like this. As far as the value and purpose of higher education go, these days we may not be split into quite a billion fragments, but we find ourselves deeply divided. The cost and return on investment of college are being questioned as never before. Science, medicine, public institutions and truth itself are all being routinely questioned and cast into doubt. A great deal has been written recently about political polarization between groups that would prefer to embrace enmity rather than empathy. That sense of civic community that Hutchins aspired to feels sorely lacking. Does the College still have a role to play in healing these painful divides? Does higher education still have the capacity to create and strengthen our democratic values and community?

I believe with every fiber in my being that the answer is yes. As an institution dedicated since its inception to humanistic and scientific truth-seeking, Washington College has not only an ethical calling to address these challenges, but an historic one as well. Washington College is beginning its 240th academic year. The year 2032 will mark the College's *semiquincentennial* and also our founding patron George Washington's 300th birthday—he was born in February of 1732. So, as I embark on this presidency and we begin to map out the next decade that will

⁸ Hutchins, 94.

bring us to these incredible anniversary celebrations, let's entertain the question: what are the aims of Washington College in this special moment?

There can be no debate about the fact that Washington College is deeply and historically committed to educating and preparing citizens for lives of meaningful leadership, citizenship and service. Our mission statement tells the story in plain language: *Washington College challenges and inspires emerging citizen leaders to discover lives of purpose and passion.* And we continue to embrace the core values shared by our founding patron, George Washington: integrity, determination, curiosity, civility, leadership and moral courage. While all of them are important, I want to draw a circle around those last two core values, because I see them as especially urgent parts of our mission today.

I want to make a bold proposal today about leadership, moral courage and the truth. I believe that you cannot be a true citizen leader, acting in good faith for the common good, without a genuine reverence for truth in your heart. What makes this proposal a bold one is the fact that we appear to be living in an age in which truth seems irrelevant to many, especially when it doesn't support our opinions or interests, whether they be about politics, global climate, or something else entirely. In a letter to Georg Christoph Lichtenberg on Oct. 3, 1790, German scientist and philosopher Alexander von Humboldt—a contemporary of George Washington—wrote, "Truth itself is precious, but even more precious is the ability to find it."⁹ This insight by Humboldt takes us straight to the heart of the mission and purpose of Washington College, because one of our most important aims as an institution is the search for

⁹ Website of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, accessed 27 September 2022. <https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/en/explore/alexander-von-humboldt/if-humboldt-were-on-twitter-today>.

truth—by our faculty, through their engaged research and teaching, and by our students, through their own study, research and hands-on engagement with important issues that are moving our world today. This vital, ongoing search for truth is in essence the core of what we teach students today, and it was already valued highly by Humboldt and George Washington, which the latter saw as essential if the new nation were to succeed. I would go further to say that love of the truth, and the honest search for truth, are no less essential today, and the future of our democracy may well depend on it.

One thing Humboldt knew innately was that truth was not to be found in only one discipline. The German concept of *Bildung* was developed by Alexander von Humboldt's older brother Wilhelm (also a celebrated 18C philosopher and educational theorist who founded the renowned Humboldt University in Berlin), and he used it to describe the very nature of human education. Wilhelm von Humboldt defined *Bildung* as the process of transforming the self through study and reflection upon a variety of subjects in the human and natural world. *Bildung* aims at cultivating the mind, body and spirit, and in these ways, it prefigures the modern notion of the liberal arts. We know that the liberal arts have a special way of transforming those who experience them, and intuitively we have a sense that the magic of this approach is in the wide range of subjects and disciplinary approaches to knowledge. Humboldt never would have built a college curriculum that contained only one or even a narrow set of subjects to study, and neither would we.

We know from experience that the truth is often discovered in and at the intersections of different ways of knowing the world, and that is what has made Washington College a beacon for truth seeking throughout its history. By teaching students how to locate truth in a

range of academic disciplines, and in an interdisciplinary way, we are teaching them to value and truly appreciate multiple perspectives on an issue, and to resist simple pat answers to complex problems. We teach them to not only be open to difference, but to energetically seek difference out as a source of wisdom and truth. At Washington College, we aim to be truth-seekers, and in a sense, we see our mission as building and strengthening our democracy, one citizen leader at a time.

Part Three: Moral Courage and Confronting our Grand Challenges

I said earlier that among our core values, leadership and moral courage are the most urgently needed, and it's the combination of the two that will be crucial as we face the three grand challenges that will define the next decade and beyond for Washington College. As we work together as a community to define our College's future over the next five and ten years, these grand challenges will demand to be addressed in meaningful and distinctive ways. They are the global climate crisis; the crisis of democracy, both in the United States and abroad; and the challenge of renewing the liberal arts for the 21st Century.

First, we will need both tremendous moral courage and bold citizen leaders who have learned to tackle complex problems through multiple perspectives as we confront a global climate crisis that is approaching at a pace faster than many thought—and is, in many ways, already here. On the Chesapeake, we are on the bleeding edge of climate change; and because of the hands-on preparation they receive at Washington College, our graduates must be on the leading edge of confronting it. The climate crisis is a classic example of a global challenge that utterly defies resolution or mitigation by attacking it through the lens of any one discipline:

scientific data collection and analysis, critical reading and persuasive speaking and writing, entrepreneurship and innovation, and much more will be required to effect the changes we need to preserve our planet.

Secondly, Washington College has an important role to play in addressing the global crisis of democracy. In recent years we have seen autocratic rulers assume high office and proceed to quickly erode democratic norms in places like Hungary, Turkey, Venezuela and more. At home, we're witnessing a deeply disturbing trend: elected leaders casting doubt, without credible evidence, on the integrity of our elections. We have witnessed an outgoing president attempt to overturn a presidential election and encourage the storming of the nation's Capitol in order to unlawfully disrupt one of this republic's great traditions, one that was initiated by our founding patron and namesake himself, the historic peaceful transfer of power. To these challenges we can add the more long-standing anti-democratic trends toward gerrymandering and the influence of unchecked corporate donations upon elections, both of which shift power away from individual votes. Does Washington College have a role to play in confronting this national and global crisis? Absolutely, we do. Ron Daniels, President of Johns Hopkins University, agrees. In his recent book, *What Universities Owe Democracy*, Daniels writes,

Universities are places of such influence that they will, either through action or inaction, shape the society around them, and it would be a scandal for them to sit passively by as the political structures aligned with their mission degrade around them.¹⁰

Washington College is thankfully a place of action, where the search for truth still matters, based upon reason and evidence, never bluster and bias. To address this unprecedented crisis

¹⁰ Daniels, Ronald J. *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), p. 9.

in democracy, we will need to summon great moral courage and instill in our emerging citizen leaders the skill and ability to read and evaluate arguments with critical precision, to separate fact from fiction, and to identify and seek truth in a complex and confusing media and policy landscape often designed to obscure truth rather than reveal it. Our history calls us to this vital work. Not since the founding of Washington College has the nation truly needed the liberal arts more than it does right now.

Lastly, as we work together to set our strategic course for the next five to ten years, the grand challenge we face will be to renew the liberal arts for the 21st Century. We can see vivid examples of how vital an education in the liberal arts will be to confronting the two existential threats I've just discussed. For Washington College and our graduates, and for our region and world to endure and thrive, we will desperately need future generations of students to experience the benefits of this kind of education. The economic and demographic headwinds we face are well-known and strong, so as we craft our strategic vision for this great college, we will need to take care to renew the stem of the liberal arts to ensure we remain relevant and vital for future generations. I'm eager to lead the College community in developing the dynamic plans that will set our course toward success. And as we work to address these three grand challenges, we will do so with unshakeable resolve to keep the values of diversity, equity and inclusion of all people—those who study here, and who work here—at the center of our efforts.

I want to conclude my remarks today by sharing with you my high level of confidence in our collective ability to meet these grand challenges. One of the reasons I'm so confident is that I have learned that moral courage isn't merely an aspiration at Washington College—it's not only our tradition, it's our defining characteristic. Let me give you a few examples. This

semester, we are completing the College's first ever Strategic Plan for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. It is the result of comprehensive, community-wide efforts by many people that spanned a number of years. Yes, it takes great moral courage to look honestly at the past, to embrace uncomfortable truths, to commit to systemic change and ensure that equity and inclusion are the reality for every member of our community, every day on our campus. You can see how moral courage and aiming always for the truth are inseparable.

It has taken great moral courage for Washington College to withstand economic crises in every century of its 240-year existence. And indeed, moral courage was called for as the College faced down a global pandemic—that is not yet quite over—and emerged a more resilient and resourceful institution. The courage that helped Washington College withstand these daunting challenges, both recent and past, is what gives me confidence that we can and will summon that courage once again, and it will not fail us.

This confidence I have in the fiber of our moral courage is the same confidence that I have in our future success. We have recently embarked on a \$20M program of investment in improving the quality of the student experience. Today, it is my pleasure to announce the launch of The Bridge Project, an ambitious and forward-thinking initiative that seeks to raise an additional \$100M over the next two years for even further investment in the quality of the student experience here at Washington College. We will complete this project by May 2024, and we will pair this aggressive fundraising effort with our formal strategic visioning process this year, ensuring that we are clear and transparent in our goals as we maximize the opportunities that the Bridge Project will open for us to enrich all facets of the Washington College experience.

Finally, let me offer a word of sincere thanks to all of you for your warmth, generosity and support. I count these as tremendous gifts, and I have felt them in new ways every single day. I want to thank my beautiful family—my brilliant and luminous wife, Cori, without whom I could never have dreamed of standing here today; our handsome, big-hearted and accomplished sons, Peter and Nick; my beautiful sister Carla, who is with us here today; and my parents, who led by example in teaching, academic leadership, and in love. Thank you to the Board of Visitors and Governors for entrusting me with leadership of the College they hold so dear. Thank you to the incredible faculty and staff, for your trust and your partnership, and to the amazing students of Washington College, who dazzle me with their accomplishments every day, and will continue to do so as alumni. Without all of you and your support, I could never do my work. I'll be forever grateful to you for the opportunity to work side by side with you as we lead our historic and beloved Washington College into what I know will be a very bright and important future. Thank you.