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**Remarks at the Council of Colleges of Arts & Sciences Annual Meeting**  
**Thursday, November 7, 2013**

**“Liberal Arts in the STEM Era”**

Good afternoon. I’m delighted to join you for this 48<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Council of Colleges of Arts and Sciences. You may have noticed in the program that the title of my remarks is: “Liberal Arts in the STEM Era.” This may give you the impression that you’re in for a long, ponderous lecture full of doomsday predictions about the fate of liberal-arts education.

But nobody wants to hear a lecture after lunch, *especially* a doomsday lecture, so instead I’m going to share a few stories with you. These stories hold lessons about the liberal arts; their value; how we can communicate their value; and some of the misperceptions we need to overcome to get our message across.

Here’s the first story ... Katie Couric is an alumna of UVa’s College of Arts & Sciences. Two weeks ago, she came to Charlottesville to moderate a panel discussion about endowment giving. The panelists were highly successful UVa alumni who have made gifts to endow professorships in the College.

Eventually, the discussion turned to the value of liberal arts education. Katie Couric asked the panelists if, in their roles as business leaders, they would prefer to hire a graduate who had specialized in marketing, finance, or some other niche field ... or a liberal arts student.

One of the panelists is the CEO of the largest Anheuser-Busch distributor in the nation. Another is the CEO of a prosperous private-equity firm. Another is chairman of a medical facilities company. Another is a retired partner from a major law firm. *All* of them agreed they would hire the liberal-arts graduate over the specialist any day. As one of them said, “I can teach a new employee the work, but I can’t teach him how to *think*.”

Here another story ... Last fall, I met with UVa’s Young Alumni Council; this is the group that represents alumni who have graduated within the last 12 years. It so happened that a few days after my meeting with this group, I was scheduled to speak to our students and their parents during UVa’s Family Weekend. For that speech, I was planning to describe what students can do during their undergraduate years to prepare themselves for the job market.

So I posed a few questions to the Young Alumni Council. I asked them: “What advice do you have for current students who will enter the job market soon?” “And what types of skills and knowledge do new employees need to succeed in the businesses and organizations where you work?”

One alumnus emphasized the importance of learning to analyze and interpret large amounts of data. He had learned how to do this while doing undergraduate research at UVa, and now data- and information-analysis was one of the primary tasks in his job.

Another alumnus stressed the need to build a *broad* skill set that could translate to various jobs. Since graduating, he had already changed jobs several times himself, and he had seen many of his peers switch jobs and industries often.

An alumna who teaches in Teach for America recommended that students learn about other cultures. Her cross-cultural learning at UVa was helping her now, as a teacher, relate to her students who came from different backgrounds.

One alumnus urged students to take lots of writing courses, including students in engineering and business. In his job at a large association, he had discovered something that many of us have discovered — that the ability to write coherent sentences is a rare and nearly extinct skill among the adult working population.

Two stories ... with two very different groups of people ... at different phases of their lives.

But you may have noticed a common theme. Both the younger, just-getting-started alumni and the older, highly-experienced donors believed that a liberal-arts education is the best preparation for career success.

Nobody talked about specialized knowledge in niche fields; what they *did* talk about was the importance of being able to analyze information, think critically, write and communicate clearly, appreciate diversity, and so on — all the products of a liberal education.

Former Seagram Corporation CEO Edgar Bronfman expressed a similar view in a recent essay in “Inside Higher Education.” When aspiring business leaders and entrepreneurs come to him for recommendations about which college major to choose, his advice is simple: get a liberal arts degree.

Bronfman, a history major who spent his entire career in business, said, “Among all the people who have worked for me over the years, the ones who stood out the most were the people who were able to see beyond the facts and figures before them and understand what they mean in a larger context.”

Most business leaders agree with Bronfman. In a recent survey of more than 300 CEOs, 74% said they believe a liberal education creates a more effective, dynamic worker; 95% said they look for college graduates who can think clearly and solve problems, and can communicate their ideas with good verbal and written skills.

The notion that liberal-arts education is the best career preparation seems to contradict media reports that focus on return-on-investment for degrees. It’s true that graduates with certain degrees are having a harder time finding jobs in this economy. A study released last year by Georgetown University showed that, among recent college graduates, those with the highest rates of unemployment had degrees in architecture (13.9% ), the arts (11.1%), and the humanities (9.4%).

But reports that focus on the connection between job-attainment and specific degrees within the liberal arts overlook the reality recognized by our donor panel, our young alumni, Edgar Bronfman and a few hundred other CEOs — that is, a broad liberal-arts education gives students the best overall skill set they could possibly have for today’s economy.

As our young alumnus pointed out, a broad, adaptable skill set is essential in the rapidly evolving job market. Jobs and entire industries that existed 20 years ago are gone. And many of tomorrow’s new jobs and industries are yet to be discovered. Broad, liberal learning prepares students to be adaptable, with skills that are applicable in every industry — including ones that are still waiting to be born.

At a time when politicians and others are measuring the value of college education by its utility in the job market, misperceptions lead them to think that students in the liberal arts study subjects that have no relevance in the job market.

As proponents of liberal-arts education, we need to debunk the myth that liberal-arts students are unemployable, and make the case that these students are, in fact, some of the best-trained and most capable young graduates coming out of college.

Here’s another story ... When UVa’s football team played in the Chick-fil-A Bowl in 2011, we held an academic panel on the morning of the game for our alumni and fans. One alumnus posed the following question to the dean of our College of Arts & Sciences: “Given all the national emphasis on the STEM disciplines,” he said, “what do you think is the prospect for the liberal arts at UVa?”

Now, the last time I checked, two of the disciplines covered by the STEM acronym — “S” for science and “M” for math — were essential parts of Arts & Sciences. Our dean pointed out that she was dean of both Arts *and* Sciences, and she explained that our College produces more STEM majors than any other school at UVa. About one-third of our students in Arts & Sciences graduate with majors (either single or double) in the sciences. This includes Psychology, which at UVa tends to be heavily neuroscience-oriented.

In our national focus on producing more students with STEM degrees, STEM disciplines are often portrayed in contrast with the liberal-art disciplines, as if they were mutually exclusive. This might be because a lot of people — perhaps including some of our own faculty members — do not really understand what the liberal arts *are*.

Many people default to a process-of-elimination definition for the liberal arts. We think of the liberal arts as including every subject that is *not* in some way professional or technical.

Other people seem to associate the liberal arts with 1960s counter-culture. The late John Strassburger, former president of Ursinus College, wrote a 2010 article about a focus group that was asked about perceptions of the liberal arts. The group was made up of parents of prospective students. In their responses to questions, 19 of the 20 parents thought that the liberal arts were either “touchy-feely” subjects, or subjects that were “leftish” and “came out of the 1960s.”

Talk about an identity crisis! If we want to make a strong case for the value of the liberal arts in the STEM era, we may need to conduct a global PR campaign to properly define the “liberal arts” for prospective students, parents, legislators, employers — and even our own faculty, in some cases.

This is an era of obsessive quantification for higher education, when the value of learning is often measured by return-on-investment. In fact, if you Google the term “College ROI,” you will get 17 million results.

There’s nothing wrong with measuring our effectiveness in preparing students for careers, especially in a tight job market. But we need to acknowledge that *not* all progress is measurable.

Here’s one last story ... at UVa, our students invented a new kind of learning experience called Flash Seminars. These are one-time mini-classes that bring together faculty and students in small, informal settings to explore ideas outside the classroom. Flash Seminars are announced one week in advance, and students sign up by email to join.

Together with Michael Suarez, who is the director of UVa’s Rare Book School and also a Jesuit priest, I teach a flash seminar every year that poses the question, “What is the Good Life?” We began by asking the students some questions: “What is the good life, and how would you define it?” “How would you know if you were living the good life?” “What is the definition of happiness?” “What is the role of suffering and failure?”

We asked the students to ponder these questions in the personal, individual context, and also in the larger context of community.

Through the course of their discussion, students came to agree that perceptions of “the good life” are very individualized. Each person has his or her own, unique definition. They also agreed that “the good life” is harder to define for a whole community, except in very broad terms. In other words *my* “good life” — and *your* “good life” — resist extrapolation to a measurable mass scale.

I think we could say the same thing about the true value of liberal-arts education. Its value is individualized in each person who enters the company of educated men and women. It resists easy quantification. We may not be able to assign a metric to its value, or enumerate its value on an Excel spreadsheet.

But our panel of donors at UVa understood the value of liberal- arts education. Our Young Alumni Council understood its value. Edgar Bronfman and most CEOs in the country understand its value. *You and I* understand its value.

And speaking of the “good life,” liberal education is one of the essential preconditions for living the “good life” in its deepest, truest sense. In addition to equipping students with marketable job skills, a liberal-arts education prepares students to be good *human beings*. It prepares them to be thoughtful citizens of the world, who seek to appreciate different cultures and different perspectives. It teaches them to be humane, to have empathy. It steers them away from a life of self-interest, and toward a life of civic responsibility and service to others.

Columbia University professor Andrew Delbanco underscores this dual nature of liberal learning, when he writes that a liberal-arts education “should help [students] develop certain qualities of *mind* and *heart* requisite for reflective citizenship.”<sup>1</sup>

Developing strong qualities of *both* mind and heart is certainly an important part of the human maturation that we derive from college education. But qualities of mind, and qualities of heart, may not generate a measurable ROI.

As we promote the value of the liberal arts within our universities and the larger community, maybe this is the point we need to make: The metrics for success are not numbers; the metrics are human beings — people who succeed in their jobs but, just as importantly, lead the “good life” characterized by citizenship, service, tolerance and appreciation for other cultures, and empathy for all.

Getting a “good life” out of college education is a pretty good return-on-investment, and it’s an investment worth promoting at this conference and everywhere.

Thank you very much.

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<sup>1</sup> College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be (2012), location 135 Kindle edition