

**“Reimagining the Liberal Disciplines in Our 2<sup>nd</sup> Half-Century”**  
**Council of College of Arts and Sciences**  
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This year, CCAS is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary – a half-century of networking arts and sciences deans. The first half-century of our existence saw major changes in the landscape of higher education and during those 50 years CCAS accomplished a great deal on behalf of the arts and sciences. I have no doubt that our second half-century will witness equally dramatic changes and impressive accomplishments. But I don’t have a crystal ball, so I’m not going to try and predict what those changes and accomplishments will be. Instead, I want to step back and take a look at the nature of the academic disciplines we represent to see how we might think about them in the decades ahead.

CCAS is an organization dedicated to supporting those, like yourselves, who attend to the welfare of the liberal disciplines in colleges and universities. Our name references Colleges of Arts & Sciences, but we administer academic units that have a variety of titles – we lead both Colleges and Schools not only of Arts & Sciences, but of Liberal Arts & Sciences, of Arts & Letters, of Letters & Sciences, of Sciences & Mathematics, of Social & Behavioral Sciences, and many more. In fact, the academic units currently represented by membership in CCAS carry about 120 different names, and that doesn’t include small liberal arts colleges in which the college itself is the only academic unit and the dean may also be the chief academic officer of the institution. Given all of these different titles, what is it that unites us so that we all want to belong to the same organization – other than the fact, of course, that we throw better parties than anyone else?

When I look at my own College, and compare it with the other academic units in my university, I’m struck by another kind of variety – namely the wide range of disciplines represented among my own departments. I’m not unique, not even (in this company, at least) very unusual in administering disciplines as diverse as history and mathematics, chemistry and philosophy, sociology and art, all under the banner of the College of Arts & Sciences. This is a very different kind of composition from the homogeneity of the professional schools in my university (such as Nursing, Business, and Education), or the schools and colleges of law, medicine, or engineering that some of you have on your campuses. Given all of those very different disciplines, what is it that unifies them so that they belong under a single collegiate banner? (Other than the fact that we are well known, at least on my campus, for throwing better parties than anyone else.)

This is a question that I think all of us confront from time to time. When I interviewed for my present position some 15 years ago, the dean of the School of Nursing asked me, with some incredulity in her voice, “Why do you want to be dean of Arts & Sciences – you’ve got all this weird stuff to manage.” Now, I don’t know about you but the “weird stuff” – all that diversity and heterogeneity – is a good part of what makes it so much fun to be a dean of arts and sciences. But I will confess that I sometimes envy my colleagues who are deans of professional schools for

the much easier time they have explaining just what their job entails. When they're at a party or non-academic social event and someone asks – “So, what do you do?” – they have a fairly straightforward answer. When they say “I'm Dean of the School of Business,” or “Dean of the College of Nursing” everyone understands, at least vaguely, what that title encompasses. (I leave aside here the separate question of how many non-academic audiences understand what deans of any variety actually do.) But the title “Dean of Arts & Sciences” is less transparent:

“So, what – you cover, uh, painting and chemistry?”

“Well, no – my College also includes anthropology and mathematics and philosophy and psychology and physics and languages and English . . . ”

I don't know – somehow that kind of list-making seems to make the task of explaining coherently what I do harder rather than easier.

So what are we? Are we just Colleges of Everything Else? Containers for the stuff that doesn't fit into one of the neat categories defined by a profession? I suppose that's possible – maybe calling something a College of Arts & Sciences is just an administrative convenience – a way of grouping together all the disciplines that don't fit under any of the more coherent appellations such as business, law, nursing, etc. Of course the composition of our colleges and schools *does* reflect historical and institutional contingencies to some degree, but we should surely be able to identify some principles of disciplinary coherence, from which those contingencies are understood to be deviations. After all, however they are organized administratively, I think we can say that the arts and sciences are truly the core, the heart and soul, of any research or comprehensive university. As I say repeatedly, and unapologetically, at various gatherings of my own College, we could imagine having a perfectly good university at UNC Greensboro without any of our six professional schools; but without the College, without the arts and sciences, we simply wouldn't have a university worthy of the name. We house the disciplines that knit the whole academic enterprise together, in addition to providing the intellectual foundations on which the various professional disciplines build. We really are the core of the university enterprise and as such it's important for us to think about what connects the varied disciplines that make up our variously titled academic units.

Now certainly, one of the things that connect us and our disciplines is our investment in liberal education. This is an important value and it's one that gets a lot of attention, especially during economic downturns when we hear repeatedly how useless the liberal arts are in terms of gainful employment and earning power. Since these assertions frequently come from governors, legislators, some business leaders, boards of trustees or regents, and other influential decision-makers and purse-string-holders, we pay close attention to them. Of course, the current criticisms of the liberal arts, and predictions about their imminent demise are nothing new. Indeed, as Michael Roth describes in his excellent book, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*<sup>1</sup>, disagreement over the relative importance of liberal education and practical training in the missions of colleges and universities goes back at least to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael S. Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.

In mounting our defense of the liberal arts, we know to avoid some potential pitfalls. For example, I'm sure you've all had the experience of explaining that when we speak of the *liberal* arts we are not making a political statement. We're not putting the liberal arts in opposition to some hypothetical category of *conservative* arts. Every year, when I speak to the new class of inductees to UNCG's chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, I talk about the origin of word *liberal* in higher education and explain its historical connections with the classical and medieval *artes liberales* – those things that it was deemed important for a free man (and I use the gendered noun advisedly) to know in order to take his place in society. This is a useful and enlightening conversation to have with undergraduates and also with some skeptical parents – it allows one to make important points about the practical utility of a liberal education in today's world and also about the broader value of a liberal education for university graduates as they make their way in society as, we hope, leaders and shapers as well as workers.

I think we have some powerful rebuttals against the critics of liberal education, with which I am sure you are all familiar. Let me briefly mention three in particular:

- **First**, a university education is preparation for a lifelong career (or series of careers) not training for a job after graduation. That's not to say that we should ignore the fact that most college graduates need to find gainful employment; rather, it's saying that it's very short-sighted to think that the first job is the sole, or even the most important payoff from a university education. We need to encourage people to “go long” in their thinking about this investment. A number of useful analyses have appeared recently showing that long-term earnings of liberal arts graduates compare quite favorably with those of more professionally focused programs, and it's helpful for us to have such data readily to hand.
- **Second**, the working life of our graduates will be very varied and unpredictable and the broad, foundational education provided by the liberal arts is the best preparation for that kind of uncertainty. In my presentations to student and parent groups, I emphasize that training in a narrow set of professional skills is today a risky bet and that our graduates should prepare for a life of change and unpredictability. I point out that many people today make very good livings in ways that could not even have been conceived of a decade or two ago, and that it is precisely the restless and inquiring mind of the best liberal arts graduates that equips them to deal with this unpredictability.
- **Third**, the aim of a university education is not just to prepare graduates for the working world – it also aims to prepare them to be useful contributors to society in other ways. We often argue that higher education must be seen as a public good, not just a private benefit, and by that we mean that the benefits of a liberal education diffuse out from its individual recipients to the society in which they live. Those benefits may be manifested in a multitude of ways – better informed and more critical voters; public servants with a more nuanced sense of the complexities of modern life; business executives and entrepreneurs with the inclination and ability to look beyond next quarter's profits.

So we can certainly make a compelling case that our critics are mistaken in their belief that an education in the liberal arts and sciences has no value in the modern world. But beyond that,

those critics don't seem to have much of a sense of what defines the disciplines they are attacking. They do, of course, each cite their favorite examples. English is a perennial favorite, but Bill Bennett (himself a PhD in philosophy) has targeted philosophy; the Governor of my own state, Pat McCrory, singled out Women's & Gender Studies, and compared it unfavorably to heating and air-conditioning maintenance; Governor Rick Scott of Florida cited anthropology. Just last week, Jeb Bush took on psychology. But as we know, the liberal disciplines as we understand them include many that our critics invariably exempt from their criticisms. Biology, chemistry, and mathematics are all well-established components of the liberal arts and sciences and no one suggests that they are useless. If we were to list all of the disciplines administratively represented among the arts and sciences, I expect that we could divide them into two groups based on the frequency with which they are denigrated by some politician or other in terms of their inutility.

But surely we can do better than to define the liberal disciplines just as those that encompass something not apparently practical but perhaps at least defensible in practical terms. I don't think we do it by pointing to a list. The old lists (such as the seven *artes liberales* that make up the classical *trivium* and *quadrivium*) are outdated and unhelpful and it's hard to know where one would turn for an authoritative alternative. Looking to the constituent departments of our own colleges and schools gives us a more contemporary perspective but is in many ways equally unhelpful. As I noted a moment ago, colleges are not constituted solely on the basis of a rigorous definition of what disciplines *ought* to be in them, but on the basis of a mixture of coherence, the accidents of history, and political and administrative convenience. My own College of Arts & Sciences, for example, includes many of the "traditional" liberal disciplines, but it lacks economics (part of our School of Business and Economics) and theatre (included within a professional School of Music, Theatre, and Dance) and it includes Interior Architecture, a professional program that joined the College some years ago as a fugitive from an administrative reorganization of two professional schools. It also has Computer Science, a discipline often located in schools of engineering. I'm sure that all of you have similar idiosyncrasies in your own colleges. There really is no canonical, even if disputed, list of "liberal disciplines."

I want to suggest that the test of whether a discipline should be designated as liberal in its practices and applications is as follows: A discipline is liberal in the extent to which it contributes to its practitioners' ability to responsibly exercise important freedoms as members of their society. That's rather complicated, so let me do some unpacking:

- First: By **practitioners** I mean two groups of individuals – the students who study liberal disciplines and are learning how to make use of the knowledge they provide, and the scholars and teachers who discover new knowledge in those disciplines and thereby teach the students who study them.
- Second, **important freedoms**. We could spend a good many hours trying to characterize the freedoms that are enabled by the liberal disciplines and while I think that would be an interesting exercise, it's not one I'm prepared to undertake today. I do believe we should include freedom from economic want, which is why establishing the ability of liberal arts graduates to earn a living is not unimportant. However, the various possible definitions of "economic want" lie on a very long continuum. Just because one cannot afford a 15-room

penthouse on Central Park West does not mean one is therefore suffering from economic want. The stereotype of the unfortunate “starving artist” needs to be tempered by the realization that a lot of people can be quite satisfied by a relatively modest standard of living, provided that their lives are enriched in other ways. Another very important freedom is the freedom of unrestrained inquiry, whether inside the academy or outside, about which I’ll have more to say shortly. But I’ll leave the enumeration of additional important freedoms we might want to consider as an exercise for you to work on after class.

- A third important feature of the liberal disciplines is that they encourage **responsible exercise** of the freedoms they enable. Mindfulness about the ethical consequences of our actions is something that the liberal disciplines take, or should take, very seriously. A liberal education seeks to educate students about ethical expectations and we are rightfully disappointed when more mature practitioners ignore those expectations, as in instances of academic plagiarism or scientific fraud. Of course, professional disciplines, such as business and medicine, are also concerned with ethical questions, but they draw heavily on the liberal disciplines (especially philosophy) for guidance on ethical issues.
- Finally, the social context. The liberal disciplines certainly enhance the individual lives of their practitioners, whether students or professionals, and that’s one important reason for recommending their value in our educational system. However, as I noted earlier, we want to argue that higher education generally, and liberal education specifically, must be understood as a public good, not just a private benefit. When we do that, we take on an obligation to explain the value it provides to each individual’s contributions as a **member of society**. So, we believe that our students benefit individually from the education they receive in the liberal disciplines, but also that our society is enriched by the engagement of its liberally educated members. The same can be said for the faculty who are the professional practitioners of the liberal disciplines and discover new knowledge. That activity may indeed enrich the lives of individual scholars and researchers but its real value, understood as a process of liberal inquiry, is what it contributes to the social good, not just to the benefit of individuals.

If we take this as a place to start thinking about the liberal disciplines, we are led in some interesting directions, not all of them immediately congenial to some conventional defenses of the liberal arts. For one thing, the definition leads us in more instrumental directions than some advocates of the liberal arts may like. I’ve been talking about understanding a discipline’s liberality “in its practices and applications” and I mean that formulation to be taken seriously. It’s undeniable that scholarship in the humanities, for example, expands and enriches our understanding of our literary and cultural heritage, and that studying those things is enriching and possibly even ennobling for the individual who undertakes it. But is that enough to justify a societal investment in the humanities? Many critics of higher education say that it is not – indeed, the humanities feature prominently when the liberal disciplines generally are subject to criticism. One response is certainly that studying the humanities as part of a liberal education enhances students’ ability to contribute thoughtfully as members of civic society, but I think there is a broader kind of advocacy open to us, if we are willing to embrace it. Let me quote from an Op-Ed column in the *New York Times* last month by David Brooks entitled “The Big

University.” Brooks writes about what he takes to be modern universities’ failure to “cultivate their students’ spiritual and moral natures” but he also writes approvingly of our efforts to “stem the careerist tide and to widen the system’s narrow definition of achievement,” particularly by supporting the humanities. He offers several prescriptions for doing this, including the following:

“Fourth, apply the humanities. The social sciences are not shy about applying their disciplines to real life. But literary critics, philosophers and art historians are shy about applying their knowledge to real life because it might seem too Oprahesque or self-helpy. They are afraid of being prescriptive because they idolize individual choice.

“But the great works of art and literature have a lot to say on how to tackle the concrete challenges of living, like how to escape the chains of public opinion, how to cope with grief or how to build loving friendships. Instead of organizing classes around academic concepts — 19th-century French literature — more could be organized around the concrete challenges students will face in the first decade after graduation.”<sup>2</sup>

This quotation from Brooks is an instance of what I mean by the “practices and implementation” of the liberal disciplines. On the account I am offering, the humanities can be counted among the liberal disciplines only to the extent that they embrace their potential for promoting the responsible exercise of important freedoms in a societal context, one instance of which is by helping to address some of the concrete challenges faced by society and its members.

I am not arguing here that the humanities, or the liberal disciplines generally, should become applied branches of knowledge. There is, of course, an increasing number of good examples of such application, particularly in community-engaged research and scholarship where the focus of a research program is to leverage the intellectual fruits of scholarly inquiry into publicly appreciated and valued insights and understanding. The field of public history is a particularly good example of this, and there are many others. We want to defend higher education generally, and liberal education in particular, as a public good, not just a private benefit, and we should defend investment in the liberal disciplines more broadly conceived in the same way, by being self-consciously concerned with the ways in which they support the exercise of important freedoms to the benefit of society. Let us by all means point out that one can make a perfectly good living with a degree in medieval history, even (who knows) become the CEO of a major corporation, but let us also show how that discipline benefits the broader society of which we are members.

The familiar discourse about liberal education takes the perspective of the student, examining the benefits to be gained from the teaching and learning that goes on in the classroom. Let me turn now to the other group of practitioners of the liberal disciplines: the scholars and researchers who uncover the new knowledge that can be taught to students. Inquiry in the liberal disciplines tends to be driven more by curiosity than by the desire to solve particular problems, although that statement should not be taken naively at face value. No one supposes that liberal inquiry advances very well when individual investigators simply pursue whatever questions happen to strike them as personally interesting. Inquiry in all disciplines is constrained by some set of

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/opinion/david-brooks-the-big-university.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/opinion/david-brooks-the-big-university.html?_r=0) (print edition, October 6, 2015, p. A31)

communally accepted structures and rubrics that define what count as interesting and important questions, and what are the acceptable range of methodologies for investigating them. This is what Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*<sup>3</sup>, referred to as “normal science,” and something like it goes on in every organized scholarly discipline. The structures and rubrics change, certainly, sometimes at a gradual evolutionary tempo, sometimes in more dramatic and revolutionary ways. My point is that even the most purely “curiosity-driven” inquiry typical of the liberal disciplines always takes place within some sort of more-or-less broadly endorsed theoretical or conceptual framework, articulated in canonical writings and implemented by the professional judgments of editorial boards and reviewers, granting agencies, dissertation advisors, and tenure committees, among others.

One criterion that those judgments generally do not invoke is whether a particular piece of inquiry will have some immediate practical or economic payoff. We’re often asked, by legislators, trustees, or members of the general public, to justify some of the research of our faculty. Dismissing such requests out of hand is generally not an option (at least, not a very helpful one) and my definition of the liberal disciplines implies that the work that we do should be beneficial in a social, not just an individual context. It’s true that we can sometimes point to immediate payoffs of research, especially in the sciences, but we need to be a little cautious about generalizing too much from such examples, just as we should be cautious about the example of the liberal arts graduate who makes a 6-figure income in her first job. These examples may be nice but they are not typical and tend to set up inappropriate expectations. The fact is that most inquiry in the liberal disciplines does not have immediate practical payoffs and we must be prepared to argue that that’s OK, even desirable. We have to make societal investments in endeavors whose payoff is not immediately obvious, and may not even exist, because without the knowledge resulting from those endeavors, we constrain our understanding of the world in potentially dangerous and certainly disadvantaging ways.

The dangers of looking only at immediate payoffs apply in the lab sciences just as much as they do in other, more vulnerable disciplines. In North Carolina in the last several years, the biotech and pharmaceutical industries have been tremendous drivers of economic expansion. According to the NC Biotechnology Center<sup>4</sup>, in 2012 these sectors generated \$73 billion in economic activity and showed a 31% growth in employment over the preceding decade, contributing roughly half of all new jobs in the state. The state invests substantially in those sectors and is eager to support university-based research in biotech and drug discovery. Even here, some of the claims of immediate economic payoff may be overstated but there’s not much question that these areas of research are far more likely to lead to such payoffs than are many others, even in biology and chemistry. But these payoffs do not occur in a vacuum. They build on numerous other inquiries that were undertaken without any hope or expectation of immediate, or even of any, practical benefit. The biotechnology industry, with all of its undoubted economic benefits, depends for its existence on decades of curiosity-driven research into genetics and cellular and molecular biology. No one imagined that those research projects would have any particular economic or practical benefit and, if they did imagine it, it would have been impossible to know

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1<sup>st</sup> edition). Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ncbiotech.org/business-commercialization/why-choose-nc/numbers>

which projects would lead to such payoffs and which would turn out to be inconsequential dead ends.

An analogy I have found to appeal to business groups in particular is between curiosity-driven research in science and venture capital investments in business. Venture capital firms invest billions of dollars annually in highly risky ventures most of which, they know absolutely, will fail. But at the same time, they know absolutely that some of them will succeed. It's just that no one, not even Warren Buffett, knows just which will pay off and which won't. If there were no venture capital firms willing to take those risks, industrial innovation would eventually come to an end.

We mustn't claim that there will be unanticipated economic benefits from curiosity-driven research across all of the liberal disciplines. That plays into the assumption that all inquiry *should* have economic benefits, even if we can't tell right away what they are. Rather, we must clearly articulate how the knowledge and understanding produced by such research benefits society, whether by enriching cultural opportunities, by helping us understand the historical and cultural context of contemporary events, by giving us new ideas about the proper administration of justice, or by predicting how demographic shifts will affect future demand for social services, to name just a few. The NEH's The Common Good initiative<sup>5</sup>, launched earlier this year, is an example of this kind of opportunity to speak more broadly about the value of work done in the liberal disciplines.

We make advances and achieve important ends, whether in our personal lives, in business investments, in education, in artistic creation, or in the process of intellectual inquiry and discovery, by taking risks. Some of those risks lead to failure or at least to outcomes whose value may not be immediately apparent and we try to mitigate the downside consequences in various ways – by due diligence in advance, by not taking too many risks at the same time, by installing protections of one kind or another. But if all the outcomes we achieve are just those we have foreseen in advance, if every path leads to a safe and comfortable conclusion, then we are not taking enough risks and we are undoubtedly foregoing important benefits that can't be anticipated or, in some cases, even described.

Much of the curiosity-driven research undertaken in the liberal disciplines is risky. This is not just because a lot of it doesn't produce any immediate socially beneficial return (whether economic or any other kind), but because some of it poses questions and pursues inquiries that tend to trouble entrenched interests of one kind or another. This points up the special importance to our disciplines of tenure and other guarantees of academic freedom. As scholars and researchers we use the intellectual tools of our disciplines to make sense of the world, to answer questions, sometimes possibly disquieting questions, about it, and to teach the methods and results of that inquiry to others (be they students, colleagues, or interested members of the public). Beyond the walls of the academy, where the protections of tenure don't apply, it's harder to secure the freedom of unrestrained inquiry and expression that is one of the freedoms most importantly engaged by working in a liberal discipline. Liberal inquiry leads in unpredictable directions towards unsuspected ends, and the more thoroughly one embraces that kind of

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.neh.gov/commongood>

liberality, the more one risks displeasing powerful and important interests. It's hard to engage in liberal inquiry without legal and social protections of some kind.

If, as I have suggested, we define the liberal disciplines by how they conduct themselves, we can see that a particular discipline might be liberal in one instantiation but not in another. It's possible for a discipline like chemistry, for example, to be so narrowly practical and unconcerned with any broader implications of its discoveries and ways of knowing that we'd hesitate to designate it as liberal. But in most of our colleges, chemists are generally as liberal in their outlook as historians or philosophers – that's why those particular chemists are working in a College of Arts & Sciences rather than in some other, more narrowly professional environment. We can say the same about a discipline like modern languages – the development and application of the Rosetta Stone language lessons is a practical, not a liberal enterprise, whereas the superficially similar work that goes on in our language departments is, or should be. Part of our responsibility, and that of our faculty, is to explain what makes such humanistic inquiry liberal, and why that is important.

In a similar vein, I think there's no reason that professional disciplines such as business, medicine, or engineering cannot, in principle, take on some of the attributes of the liberal disciplines for which we are advocates. In the 1970s and 1980s, Samuel Florman's writings, such as *The Existential Pleasures of Engineering* and *Engineering and the Liberal Arts*<sup>6</sup> explored ways in which the values of the liberal arts can be seen in and incorporated into the professional practice of engineering (and Florman is a businessman, not a university professor). More recently, Loni Bordeloi and James Winebrake<sup>7</sup> follow Florman's lead by advocating greater integration of the liberal arts into the engineering curriculum. The benefits of a liberal arts education for the practice of medicine have been quite widely recognized for some time. In a recent review in the *New York Review of Books*<sup>8</sup>, Jerome Groopman, Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School, asks "Who will be the best doctors?" and continues:

"Some argue that those with refined senses from studying painting or sculpture or music, or those who have delved deeply into novels that explore character, will be more insightful observers of the patient and his distress."

Perhaps recognizing this, Brown University offers a Program in Liberal Medical Education that combines a 4-year liberal arts degree with a 4-year MD<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel C. Florman, *Engineering and the Liberal Arts*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1968; *The Existential Pleasures of Engineering*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976. See also *The Civilized Engineer*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Loni M. Bordeloi & James J. Winebrake, "Bringing the Liberal Arts to Engineering Education." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 27, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Jerome Groopman, "A Doctor's Body Language." (Review of *Adventures in Human Being: A Grand Tour from the Cranium to the Calcaneum*, by Gavin Francis.) *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 5, 2015, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.brown.edu/academics/medical/plme/>

There seems to be an increased willingness on the part of many professional disciplines to rethink the ways in which professional and liberal educations can be mutually reinforcing. Continuing that dialog could help to clarify the complementary contributions of the liberal and professional disciplines not just to education but in a broader social context as well.

There comes a point in every public presentation when the audience breaths a collective, though polite sigh of relief and stops glancing surreptitiously at its watches and that's the point at which the speaker utters the magic words, "In conclusion ..."

So, in conclusion, I believe that our work as advocates for the liberal disciplines can be enhanced by periodic reassessment and reimagining of what those disciplines entail. We tell our students that they live in a changeable and unpredictable world and that their education in the arts and sciences is the best preparation for dealing with it. We live in the same world, and change and unpredictability will be part of our future as CCAS embarks on its second half-century of advocacy.

Thank you.