

Aims of Education XVII 2010-11
The Value of a College Education: Asking Big Questions
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This year, as the members of our campus and community join in celebrating Chapman University's 150th anniversary, I am pleased to share with you the text of the address that kicked off our 2010-2011 academic year. The Aims of Education Address has become a much-beloved tradition here at Chapman, and it is considered a very high honor indeed for a member of our faculty to be chosen to give this address. This year's speaker, Dr. Roberta Lessor, has selected a topic that is as vital today as it would have been to our university's founders 150 years ago: the value of a college education.

Back in 1861, it was hotly debated in many families whether sending a son (or, in some cases, a daughter) off to college was of any value at all. America in the 1860s was still mostly rural, and although higher education had been a strong element in this country since the mid-1600s (Harvard was founded in 1636), those youngsters would have been more necessary for many families to keep at home, carrying out the work of their farms and households. Colleges back then were exclusive institutions – mostly educating young men to prepare them for positions of leadership in the religious, political and educational arenas.

A little school called Hesperian College – founded by the Disciples of Christ, a progressive Protestant group, in 1861 in Woodland, California – begged to differ with that exclusionary tradition, as did a number of other forward-thinking schools founded in the mid-1800s. Hesperian, which admitted women, blacks and Asians in addition to young male Caucasians, would eventually become today's Chapman University – a comprehensive institution of higher learning, recognized for its liberal arts core, distinguished faculty, innovative programs and personalized attention to students.

While it is true that a college education gives students an invaluable leg up the career ladder, it is even more true that a college education broadens perspectives and opens eyes, hearts and minds. Here at Chapman, we “tussle with big questions,” as Dr. Lessor puts it so aptly, developing in our students the ability to think clearly, communicate effectively, explore issues from many contrasting points of view, and make informed ethical choices and judgments in this increasingly complex world. I know that you will enjoy Dr. Lessor's inspiring thoughts on the real and lasting value of higher education.

The Value of a College Education: Asking Big Questions

Thank you, Chancellor Struppa, for the honor of delivering this year's Aims of Education address. On behalf of the university faculty, I welcome you, the entering Chapman University freshman class, and your families here with you today for

Convocation. Convocation is an event that marks the beginning of the academic year for all of us, and it is a personal milestone for you as you begin your university education. Convocation has a number of university traditions; one of them is the faculty robing in gowns and hoods with various colors and styles indicating the types of degrees and the institutions that conferred them. You all have had assemblies in high school, but in college the faculty dresses up for the occasion. We'll put on our academic regalia again for your graduation in 2014.

We wear it to remind ourselves of the values of academia that we know are worth preserving. We want to introduce these values to you, and we look forward to that process over the next four years. You are arriving at Chapman in a highly noteworthy time in its history: the beginning of our 150th anniversary year. During this coming year, there will be many occasions for us to reflect on our heritage and to think about how we will continue to build on our strengths as we go forward. We want you to join in these events as a proud member of the university community.

Keeping with this celebratory moment in Chapman's history is the theme of my message to you: "The Value of a College Education: Asking Big Questions." In some ways it might seem like I'm preaching to the choir. After all, if you and your parents didn't think an education is valuable, you wouldn't be here. And I'm going to assume it's something you and your family have been talking about as you moved toward finalizing your decision to attend Chapman. However, I want to give you a bit more food for thought about the value of a college education from the perspective of a sociologist and a member of the university faculty.

I think that you will have three value-based pursuits as you undertake your education: gaining the skills to make a comfortable living, acquiring the ability to be an engaged citizen, and learning to think about the big questions that confront each generation. The first pursuit, gaining the skills to make a living, means that you are here, in part, to enhance your future occupational and income prospects. You'll need to support yourself and your own future family, and eventually, to plan and provide for your children's college education. Your parents, too, will be pleased to see you acquire these capabilities.

A second pursuit, important for you and your fellow citizens, is acquiring the ability to become an "engaged citizen." You will need the tools to do more than simply live in the world; you will want to participate actively and meaningfully in it, starting with your own community. You will need to know how to make good sense of the ballot initiative petition thrust in front of you. You will need to know how to evaluate a contentious environmental issue up for a vote. You will recognize the plight of a budget-strapped library in your town and know why it's important for the future of your community for you to become involved. You may have a local live theater and you'll know why it's important to support the arts. Or you will take a further step and become the person who leads the political caucus, or who runs for office, or who becomes president of the library foundation, or who chairs the little theater board. Your college education, if you make the most of it, will provide you with the background and knowledge to do these things that make for a meaningful and contributing community life.

Additionally, I have no doubt that what you learn at Chapman will make you a more proactive and responsive citizen in the global world in which we all live. But I want to emphasize that gaining the ability to be an engaged citizen and acquiring these skills to enhance your employment and income prospects are contingent on the third and arguably most important value of a college education: learning to ask and think reflectively about big questions.

You will begin tussling with some of these big questions immediately this year, as a freshman. What are some of these big questions? “What are we here for?” “Do we have a purpose in life, and if so, what is it and from whence does it flow?” “Why does it appear as though we humans are in perpetual conflict, and why does most of this conflict seem to emanate from differences in religious or political beliefs and practices?” And perhaps even more critical to our survival, “What activates and sustains our cooperative inclination?” Other important big questions include: “How has our earth evolved and what are the prospects for its future?” Biological, physical and social scientists have long recognized the lives of all living organisms are in part contingent on the “carrying capacities” of the systems in which they live. Thus, “What is the carrying capacity of Mother Earth, and what kinds of lives might your children and their children expect to live if that carrying capacity is modified?” Further, “What has inspired poets, musicians, artists and scientists through the ages?” And finally, “From where or whence does our capacity for innovation and creativity come, and why in some moments of history rather than others?” These are but a few big questions that, in one way or another, you will ask, contemplate and perhaps even answer here at Chapman. And in doing so, the character of what you have to offer and achieve as you move on will be markedly enhanced.

In struggling with these big questions, you will have the opportunity to dialogue with your professors. We will talk with you about the questions the great thinkers have asked, and share with you the questions that both excite and trouble us. You will begin a dialogue in college that you will continue in your minds for years to come, whether or not we are in contact. But sometimes we are. This summer I received an email from Chapman alumnus Mark Krecek, who was a student in my social and political theory class in 1990. Mark has been engaged in the first two pursuits I noted earlier, but in making a film, he’s also been grappling with the question: “Can people overcome alienation from one another?” I’m pleased to be resuming such a conversation with Mark, and I hope that I will have the privilege of continuing it, or something like it, with some of you.

I think I’ve established that asking big questions is deeply gratifying, even fun. But remember I mentioned that asking big questions also has a bearing on the first two pursuits: gaining the kinds of skills that enhance your occupational and income prospects and becoming an engaged and useful citizen. An educated person asks big questions, and your ability to ask them influences your life in meaningful ways. I’ll cite four ways that I think are quite important.

Asking big questions enables us to keep learning.

First, asking big questions reminds us that we are lifelong learners, that a college education is more than four years of knowledge accumulation. You won’t acquire needed skills and knowledge once and for all. A valuable education will

ensure that you learn how to learn. This is true whether you major in one of the humanities, social sciences or natural sciences, or if you are preparing for a profession that requires, or will require a graduate level, training in certain complex skills: medicine, accounting, physical therapy. Chapman has been called by our chancellor a hybrid university, a university that even in its professional programs provides grounding in the liberal arts, or what I would call grounding in the art of asking big questions. I am a sociologist who specializes in health and medicine. This year, I'm very excited to be working with students in our new major in health sciences. These students want to enter training at the graduate level for various health professions such as physical therapy, nursing or public health. Our inquiries together, however, will extend further, to asking big questions about life, death, the nature of human suffering, and what is meant by a healthy life. Grappling with such questions will later motivate these students as professionals continuing to seek new knowledge. They will become lifelong learners.

Asking big questions enables us to think creatively.

Second, a valuable college education will help you to acquire new languages and new vocabularies that will enable you to think creatively. We want you to appreciate the languages that people of various countries, regions and cultures speak, and to learn to speak a second language yourself. But more broadly, I'm suggesting that another type of language to be acquired is the *language of the disciplines*. The more you can acquire new vocabularies, the more ways you can express yourself. And putting your new vocabulary together builds your intellectual capacity. One of our joys as professors is seeing you acquire and build your new language base. I've had this gratifying experience many times, such as when a student in my class pulled together the theories of the major social thinkers with their study of Darwin's evolutionary biology in their science class. It is exposure to different vocabularies among the disciplines and articulating them together to ask bigger questions that allows you to think more creatively.

Asking big questions enables us to interact with others.

Third, asking big questions is going to help you understand and work with others. I mentioned that one big question has to be "how is human cooperation possible?" To ask it, and to keep searching for answers, you will need insights into the world religions, into issues of race, ethnicity, culture and national identities. You will need to ask about the multiple ways in which human beings are motivated, for there are indeed multiple ways, and you will discover them in courses as diverse as economics, psychology and biology. Asking about human cooperation is indeed one of the big questions, but it is also a necessary one for your first two pursuits, making a living and becoming an engaged citizen. You must ask these questions, because for a meaningful and successful life, you will need to work with other people.

Asking big questions enables us to find wisdom rather than information.

Fourth, you will need to know how to acquire knowledge, not just information. We live in an age with more facts at our disposal every day, but information alone doesn't make us smarter or wiser. In fact, we are flooded with

information, some of it correct, some of it not. Such an overwhelming amount of information creates ambiguity. And since most people don't tolerate ambiguity very well, information overload is a fertile ground for the emergence of demagoguery of all types – religious, political or charismatic – offering the easy answers. Thus, seeking truth in today's world has become that much more critical, and means that a college education is more valuable than ever.

Asking big questions provides us with the kind of mental algorithm that helps us find our way through this world of information overload and hopefully to develop the wisdom to make informed decisions. Information becomes knowledge when you know what it means. The sign at Schmid Gate at our university says, "Let all who depart use their knowledge in the pursuit of truth." Continuing to ask big questions helps you move beyond the mere acquisition of information to the acquisition of a knowledge base that leads to wisdom.

A college education, then, is valuable because it enables you to be a lifelong learner, to put together a new vocabulary that will provide insights, to understand others, and to pursue the acquisition of knowledge rather than just information.

College is going to help you formulate more clearly life's big questions, and to think about them in a number of different ways as you move from one discipline to another. The answer that comes from religious studies may not be the one that comes from the natural or social sciences. But the more that you can formulate questions by pursuing various perspectives, the more effective you'll be in becoming an educated person.

To illustrate this point, and the valuable thinking that your college education will provide, I want to close by giving you an image to remember. It's from a famous essay by the philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. Berlin starts with a line from an early Greek poet, Archilochus, when he says, "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." That is, the fox is able to seek many strategies for his well-being, but the hedgehog only one, curling into a ball. Berlin uses this naturalistic reference to illustrate one of the most profound differences dividing critically thinking human beings: those who seek a "single, universal organizing principle" and those who perceive many ends in question, perhaps "unrelated and even contradictory." We certainly won't discount the value of the quest for a unifying theory, however, I would argue that your college education, by challenging you to draw on all the disciplines, will enable you to become a fox rather than a hedgehog – that is, to manage ambiguity, to move through difficult problems, to keep learning, to change your mind, and to keep asking lots of big questions. That is the value of a college education.

This year's university orientation theme – the theme that is carried into student life activities and into freshman year classes – is "Making It Count." Your college education is indeed valuable. Make it count – ask and tussle with big questions.

About the Speaker

Roberta Lessor, Ph.D., is professor of Sociology at Chapman University. She has served the university in a number of leadership roles, most notable Dean of

Wilkinson College of Humanities and Social Sciences from 2002 to 2009. As a medical sociologist, she has published on women's health and reproductive technologies. Her research also concerns work and organizations, focusing specifically on women and women's health in the workplace. She has published social-historical work on working women, focusing on flight attendants as a model for women's changing work force participation in the second half of the 20th century. She is co-author, with Myron Yeager and Eldon Griffiths, of *The Hutton Story*, examining Betty Hutton's work in business and philanthropy. She has participated in and studied international learning communities.

Dr. Lessor's recent publication includes the application of frame analysis to better understand health issue disputes and the use of framing to examine academic administration and university change. She is currently writing a book concerning women's workplace experience after the Women's Movement.