

Listening, Learning and Leading: Lessons of the Liberal Arts

Inauguration Address of Jill Tiefenthaler, President

Colorado College, September 22, 2012

I'd like to begin by paraphrasing Lou Gehrig, the great baseball player—today I consider myself the luckiest woman on the face of the earth. I live in one of the most beautiful places in the world. I'm surrounded by people of tremendous accomplishment, people with world-class ideas. I'm part of a warm, caring community where the life of the mind is at the center, where young people are transformed by dedicated mentors and go out and share what they've learned here to make the world a better place. For all of this, I am filled with deep gratitude and profound thanks in being named the 13th president of Colorado College.

Of course, it's not every college president who is able to serve a year before her own inauguration. If I didn't know it before I took office, I know it now: Colorado College marches to its own beat.

I've learned a lot over the course of this last year. I've learned that Colorado is absolutely stunning. Over the summer months I've been blown away—again and again—during my drives, hikes and rafting trips. I just wish we could find a way to bottle our mountain views and fresh air, the sunshine, the quiet solitude we find in nature here, the embrace of a community that comes together in times of joy and times of need—and send this bottle to our alumni, students and parents, wherever they are around the world.

Before I say more about my new home, let me thank those individuals who made this day possible. Trustee Susie Burghart and her Inauguration Committee did a fabulous job of planning this ceremony and the entire weekend of events. Thank you! I also want to thank our colleagues in facilities and Bon Appetit for their extra work on this weekend's activities. I greatly appreciate all of the lovely greetings offered today and thank the entire community for warmly welcoming my family and me to CC and the Springs.

To Professors Jane Hilberry and Ofer Ben-Amots, thank you so much for your beautiful, creative contributions.

Kevin, Olivia and Owen join me in thanking our family and friends who came from around the world to be here. It is so gratifying to have our families here today - Mom and Dad, Martha and Norm, Jen, Tom, Grace and Lily, Jon, Allisa, Ray and Harry, Kim and Martin, and Kolleen and Tim. It is also heartwarming to have friends from my Colgate and Wake Forest days with us on this special occasion.

I'm grateful to those who served as president before me—Kathryn Mohrman and Dick Celeste are here today, as are interim presidents Tom Cronin, Tim Fuller and Michael Grace. I thank you as well as Chair Woolsey, our entire Board of Trustees and my cabinet for their contributions in making Colorado College the fine institution it is today.

I'd like to thank the faculty and staff for their support and tireless dedication to our students. You make this place a living model of what a learning community should be.

I also thank my lucky stars for our alumni, our ambassadors in the world; the parents and families who entrust their students' educations to us; and, last but certainly not least, our students. It gives me great satisfaction to see you here today because you're the reason we're all here. In the last year, I've gotten to know many of you, and because of you, I'm filled with excitement about where we are headed together.

(PAUSE)

My excitement, my optimism, sometimes surprises others. When I was flying to an alumni event last year, a man in the next seat asked me what I did. I told him that I was the president of a small liberal arts college. "Wow," he said, "good luck with that."

And he's not alone. Many in our society are skeptical about higher education in general and the liberal arts in particular. People worry about the cost of college and the relevance of the liberal arts in the workplace. Some people think education should be packaged and distributed online for mass consumption. Others believe you can rely on surveys and rankings to compare more than 4,000 colleges and universities.

These people don't understand that we're in the business of educating creators of knowledge and innovators, something for which there isn't a consumer checklist.

We're not teaching to the test. We don't judge the success of our alumni by their salaries. We're opening minds and hearts so students can see opportunities in the world, focus their energies and collaborate with others to find new solutions to complex problems. We're preparing them to be more resilient in the face of change, which is the one thing they'll surely face for the rest of their lives. We're helping them discover a deeper appreciation for living things—and a passion for life.

Obviously, I'm a true believer in the liberal arts. Last year when I stood in this very place at the announcement of my hire, I told you that I believed in value of a residential liberal arts education because it changed my life.

Almost thirty years ago, I left the loving farm community where I grew up in Iowa to attend a small liberal arts college. I didn't know it when I arrived, naïve and homesick, but I was beginning the most transformative experience of my life.

I heard my first symphony, was captivated by contemporary art, struggled to improve my fluency in Spanish, read great books, enjoyed calculus and fell in love with my discipline, economics.

Most of all, I admired my professors. They were my mentors—both caring and challenging. I decided that I wanted to be just like them. So I set about forging a life that would allow me to spend the rest of my life in college. How lucky I feel today to be at this liberal arts college, to be at Colorado College.

Year of Listening

My first year at CC was a wonderful learning experience. I gleaned the extent to which this place is not your typical liberal arts college. It appeals strongly to certain kinds of people. During one conversation last year, a staff member joked that at CC, every student is a snowflake, and every faculty member is an entrepreneur.

There's definitely a western frontier mentality here—people with a strong sense of self-confidence and curiosity want to be here. We are independent thinkers—we want to explore things for ourselves. We are surrounded by nature and want to be challenged by the elements.

In the words of Professor of English David Mason, “Our students have an adventurous spirit, a willingness to try anything and a serious engagement with art that is bigger than any of us.”

And when we work together, there has to be a strong reason because no one is here simply to follow the crowd. As president, I love this ethic of individualism, but I also see the need for it to be grounded in community. In the world today, interdependence is key. The challenges we face are so complex that collaboration and understanding and respect for difference are critical to any successful endeavor.

So I think this tension between individualism and interdependence is a healthy one. I believe it is a distinctive part of our culture that sets us apart in the world of higher education.

This is just one thing that I have learned about CC. I called last year my “Year of Listening” because I realized that I could begin my work with no better foundation than a deep understanding of what the people who make up this special place see as the strengths, challenges, opportunities and aspirations that will determine how we move into the future. I spent my first year listening to our students, faculty, staff, alumni, parents and friends. I visited 13 cities, meeting hundreds of alumni and parents, and held dozens of listening sessions here on campus.

From one alumnus I learned that “It is the time and energy faculty give to students that demonstrate how much they value us. Professors’ availability and support for students both academically and personally make Colorado College special.”

And a student—a very special senior—wrote this: “I have heard that a liberal arts education is designed to prepare students for every situation they will encounter in their lives. Colorado College presents a broad field of chances to excel and gives each student the resources that she or he needs to explore their passions. This is what makes CC great. I sincerely hope that the college will retain its spirit of individuality and exploration. When I graduate this year, I will leave with confidence and pride. I feel that I know how to question, address, and improve the world I will enter.”

Since 1970 our defining block plan has exemplified this innovative spirit. It is the same spirit we see in creative team-taught courses, blocks abroad, student endeavors like Venture grants and block breaks. These learning experiences set our alumni apart as independent-minded leaders in their fields.

These kinds of learning and living experiences may be supplemented by online education, but never replaced. In fact, residential education is more important than ever as we welcome the new generation of digital natives to our campus. Students who grew up with the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are looking for a physical space and face-to-face interaction that matches the energy and personal engagement of their virtual spaces.

Darryl Tippens, who is provost at Pepperdine University, described this quite eloquently a few weeks ago when he wrote: “If a life—a soul—is to be formed, if college is about reflection, exploration, discovery, and self-discovery, then engagement with a mentor or guide in a lively community of learning is essential.”¹

These ideas can be seen in the comments of an alum who said: “Much of what I have learned from professors at Colorado College has been through example. The professors’ high standards of academic passion, intellectual engagement, and professional integrity, while expecting the same from students, have shaped me as a scholar and a person.”

My optimism for Colorado College is not just about our commitment to liberal learning but also because of who we are. During my Year of Listening I learned that this college is defined by two key characteristics—rigor and distinctiveness. I use rigor to describe the toughness, challenge and great reward of our academic program and the intensity of our engagement with each other as learners.

Our other defining characteristic is our distinctiveness as a place. We are defined by our very distinctive curriculum in the form of the block plan, the exciting move our faculty have made from oracle to mentor and our commitment to co-creating knowledge with this new generation of students. We are defined by our independence and adventurous spirit, which grew out of our founders’ ambition of building a foremost institution of higher learning to educate citizens for the New West.

It’s true that sometimes it takes extreme circumstances to reveal the true character of a community and its people. We saw that this summer during the wildfires—the most devastating in Colorado history—that destroyed nearly 350 homes in the Springs and affected the lives of many of our faculty, staff and students.

One community member lost everything in the fire, but days later I heard from him. His words were a great source of strength because they reassured me that he would be fine, and so would we.

He wrote: “The support from the CC community—administration, staff, faculty, and students—has been heartening. It’s at a time like this when being part of our unique institution is comforting and inspirational. If I practice what I counsel students about the management of

¹ [Darryl Tippens, “Technology Has Its Place: Behind a Caring Teacher,” August 6, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/Technology-Has-Its-Place-/133329/>]

anxiety, depression and grief, I should be able to navigate what promises to be a challenging year.”

Our commitment to the liberal arts and our rigorous, distinctive and caring place of learning combine to create an educational environment where students soak up knowledge and develop skills but also build character. A recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* listed the traits of successful people who accomplish their goals:²

- Resilience. The ability to recover from setbacks and cope with stress.
- Grit. Perseverance and passion for challenging goals.
- Conscientiousness. A tendency to be responsible, and willing to delay gratification.
- Creativity. The willingness to break with convention, challenge the status quo, and come up with new ideas.
- Focus. The ability to zero in on one thing at a time and tune out distractions.
- Self regulation. An awareness of what matters and the discipline to see something through.

Along with compassion and humility, these traits are nurtured by a liberal education and are especially prevalent in CC graduates.

Building on Our Strengths While Facing Challenges Together

If my first year was about listening to others and discovering the College, this year is the time to build on our very tangible strengths.

I don't, however, want to gloss over our challenges. Cost, access and the need to more clearly explain the relevance of the residential liberal arts experience—these are all very serious issues. In a book to be published next year by the Johns Hopkins University Press about the liberal arts, I provide an economist's view of higher education's challenges.

As I explain in my chapter, the decades before the Great Recession—when we could count on a steady stream of endowment earnings, philanthropy and tuition increases—were the anomaly, and we are unlikely to see that kind of stability again. Now, we are in a period of enormous transition, with institutions trying to do more with less while continuing to ensure that students and faculty receive the resources, support and encouragement they need.

How do we explain the rise in the cost of college? Higher education is one of the most intense industries in terms of employing highly skilled labor, and the wage premium paid to highly educated workers has increased rapidly in recent decades. We hire the best faculty and staff, and they offer our students intense interaction. And while in many industries, technological change has lowered costs, we have not enjoyed these reductions in higher education. There has not been a significant change in the way that we educate students in a century. The formula for a stellar education is still an excellent faculty mentor teaching a small number of eager students.

² [<http://chronicle.com/article/Traits-of-the-Get-it-Done/133291/>]

In fact, if anything, technology has increased college costs rather than lowered them. First, we had to wire every residence hall. Then, we had to make the campus wireless. Now, we must invest further in our classrooms and libraries, so they'll be connected with resources that were unimaginable only ten years ago.

Yet as tuition continues to increase, the public wants to know if a college degree is worth it. A recent poll indicated that 57 percent of Americans do not view a college education as a good value for the price. The anemic economic recovery has increased worries about finding a job after graduation. The publicity swirling around the growth in student debt and the increase in the default rate on student loans has led young people to wonder if they can afford college even if they get a good job.

However, if you look at the financial picture for college graduates, there can be no doubt about the value. The unemployment rate for **recent** four-year college graduates is at 6.8 percent while the unemployment rate for recent high school graduates is near 24 percent.

The average earnings for someone with a bachelor's degree are nearly twice that of a high school graduate. This wage premium from **just one year** of earnings is almost enough to pay back the average student's debt at graduation.

And yet, the most important benefits of a college degree, particularly a liberal education, cannot be measured in dollars. The benefits of living an examined life, a life of learning, are priceless.

Why then are we under more scrutiny about cost and value than ever before? It is a confluence of factors—a “perfect storm.” Over the past decade, tuition costs have continued to increase while real family incomes have declined across all income groups. Many families have also lost the equity in their homes, an important source of savings and access to credit to pay for college. Yet, at the same time that families are finding it challenging to pay for higher education, parents recognize that a college degree is more important to a young person's economic security than ever before.

So, how do we lead and thrive in this challenging environment rather than simply weather the storm? How do we respond to questions about costs, value, access and relevance?

We will continue to steward our resources—tuition revenue, gifts and endowment earnings—to the very best of our ability. Yet there is no silver bullet in terms of reducing costs. As long as we hold to our educational model of one talented faculty member guiding a small number of the brightest students from around the world, our cost structure will not fundamentally change. Our mission of providing the highest quality liberal arts education is costly.

In fact, the true cost of a CC education is more than full tuition – more than \$10,000 more. So, each and every student here is on a scholarship. We can do this, and provide additional aid to students who can't afford CC's full tuition, because of the generosity of the college's past and present alumni, parents and friends. To sustain that gift to future generations of students, we must continue to build our endowment.

Much of my optimism about the liberal arts comes from my firm belief that a liberal education, a CC education, has never been more relevant in terms of preparing young people for work and life.

The notion that we are becoming a more diverse society, that the world is continuing to flatten out, points to the importance of a learning experience that promotes understanding and respect for different cultures and the value of seeing things from different perspectives. The notion that the future will be even more about collaboration and communication brings home the importance of a nimble mind, comfort with ambiguity and skill at writing and speaking—all skills developed by the liberal arts.

As one of our alumni said at homecoming last year, “Colorado College trained me for nothing but prepared me for anything!”

It is clear to me that the CC version of a liberal education builds the skills and character in our students that will prepare them for the opportunities and challenges that they are sure to encounter in life.

Yet we can do more to help our students to transition from college to the world. Our students today, Millennials born between 1982 and 2000, are in many ways further away from the world of work than any previous generation.

Why do I say that? Members of this generation of students are less likely than their predecessors to have held a job before they arrive on campus. This is partly because unemployment rates for teenagers have increased, and partly because boomer parents organized wonderful summer experiences for their children that often conflicted with work. These students face a sluggish job market, yet they were raised in a relatively affluent time and have high expectations for their futures. We must do more to educate our students and young alumni about their options after college and ease their transition to the world of work by helping them to articulate the relevance of their CC experience.

However, we must approach this effort with great care to uphold our tradition of learning for its own sake. As our colleague Professor Tim Fuller writes in the foreword to Michael Oakshott’s *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, “At some point in the educational venture, students need an interval in which they are neither simply learning school lessons nor looking to their future careers. In this interval is to be found the full flowering of liberal learning, the blossoming of human life.”³

Concluding Remarks

I read an article recently in which the writer used a community garden as a metaphor for higher education: “democratic, shared, expressing unique and local values and engendering deep

³ Oakshott, Michael. *The Voice of Liberal Learning*. Liberty Fund International, Yale U.P. 1989.

loyalties.”⁴ The role of a president has a lot in common with being a gardener. The seeds have already been planted. As Professor Hilberry reminds us in her wonderful poem, plants are bearing fruit and vegetables all around us.

I see my job as a charge to nurture things—and people—and encourage them to continue to grow in soil that stays healthy and strong for years to come. For example, we are making great strides in thinking about our future as we begin our year of planning.

We are thinking of new ways to build on our rigorous and distinctive academic program, and seeing new and interesting ideas crop up from various parts of the College, from people who know better than anyone what they need to become stronger.

It’s a great honor to be a part of that, to work together to help us thrive. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for this opportunity, for the confidence in my leadership, for the chance to be a part of this community, for waking up every morning and looking at Pikes Peak.

I invite everyone to linger in this garden, enjoy the beautiful sights and smells and work to improve this incredible place for the next generation of learners and doers to come along.

⁴ Greenwell, Richard. “New Kinds of Leadership.” *Inside Higher Education*. August 8, 2012.
President Tiefenthaler’s Inauguration Address
September 22, 2012, Page 8