

The Knowledge Here Attained

Inauguration Address

The College of Wooster

Saturday, September 7, 1996

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Board of Trustees, Faculty and Staff Colleagues, Students, Alumni, Distinguished Guests, and Fellow Citizens:

Not a single one of us was present 126 years ago today, on September 7, 1870, at this same hour, in a sunny Oak Grove, for the dedication of this College. Between the several thousand in attendance that day and the several thousand of us here this morning there lies a great chasm of life and time, and we can only wonder about the anticipation which they felt at the opening of a new college. All that we can hold onto from that day are some precious papers, precious thoughts recorded on them, and this key to Old Main, ceremonially delivered then by the President of the Board, Rev. John Robinson to the first President Willis Lord, as it has been delivered to me today by Mr. Gault. 1870: one building and 34 students; today: 39 buildings and 1715 students.

At a ceremony in June of 1868, two years before the dedication, a cornerstone had been laid for that one building, Old Main, the College's first. On hand were 500,000 bricks made especially for the building, which unfortunately burned to the ground in 1901. This is one of those bricks, rescued over the summer from the charred remains of Old Main, now buried four feet under the Oak Grove. A hymn was sung as part of that cornerstone ceremony, with this closing verse:

O bless the work in coming days
O bless the assembled youth
O bless the knowledge here attained
With sanctifying truth.

What unites us today? I believe it is a deep fascination with time, and change and knowledge, and truth. What inspires us today? I believe it is the astonishing ability of an educational institution like this one to renew itself, to have the potential to be as fresh 126 years later as it was on the very day of its opening.

Why is this? Of course, colleges do have the opportunity to renew themselves every year, virtually coming to a halt in the spring and starting over again in the fall, with new faces, new plans, new hopes, and clean notebooks. Certainly, this annual rebirth is one source of the freshness we carry in us during these wonderful

weeks each fall. But a presidential inauguration offers renewal on a different scale. Inaugurations come infrequently, unpredictably. Inaugurations are times of deep reflection, opportunities to retrace in our mind's eye the paths we as an institution have taken, to celebrate what we have become and embrace the best of what we have achieved.

To stand here before you is a true honor, but the honor carries with it a mighty challenge. As a beginning, I take it as my assignment this morning to offer some thoughts and questions of my own about Wooster's future and in so doing to encourage all of us to take an open and inquisitive approach for the work ahead.

Each of Wooster's nine presidents has done this before me, and a reading of their inaugural addresses reveals the eloquence with which each, in carefully chosen words most appropriate to his era, posed the question of what the future of the College should be. At the opening, Willis Lord observed, "...is it not fitting...that we set forth...and vindicate our views, aims, and hopes in being born." In 1883, Sylvester Scovel inquired, "...shall I give...intimation of the ends to which our united endeavors are to be bent?...a direction...from which I hope the institution will never swerve?" Charles Frederick Wishart asked in 1919, "What is the real significance of The College of Wooster?" And so on, down to Henry Copeland, who in 1977 mused: "...what should Wooster's stance be? What image should we have of ourselves?"

Throughout his term, each president set about answering these questions in his own way, and the contributions that each made invigorated the College and left a tradition, a rich legacy which is handed over to us today. The stability of having only nine presidential terms in 125 years, with two exceptionally long terms of 23 and 25 years, is unusual, but not unique. At Union College, for example, President Eliphalet Nott served for 62 years, although it is said that the faculty did become a little restless near the end.

Please be assured that I do not intend my term to last that long.

During the coming two years, the faculty and administration will write our educational plan for the future, in concert with staff, trustees, and students. The task is to look ahead, envisioning the paths we will follow, the principles we will choose to guide the institution. This is made easier because, like Isaac Newton, we have the shoulders of giants on which to sit. I have known but one president of Wooster, and

whatever of value my administration is able to achieve will owe much to the initiatives, insight, and integrity of Henry Copeland.

It almost goes without saying that we shall remain a coeducational liberal arts college, with approximately 1700 students and a special focus on independent learning. Despite the splendid success of the recently completed campaign, whose total exceeded the \$65 million goal by more than ten million and which will have added substantially to our buildings and endowment, we will certainly continue to seek additional endowment for general and special purposes and to pursue other building projects--such as a field house and the remodeling of Kauke. But this morning I wish to speak specifically about several community aspects of Wooster which call for some caution and some optimism.

In the plan we design for Wooster's future, there is one model, recently proposed as a uniform solution for the renewal of our national life, which we must resist. It is a model which assigns to every arena of human endeavor the metaphor of customer-employee-CEO. The honorable profession of medicine, for example, is to be replaced by the health care industry, in which patients are only customers, physicians are mere employees rather than professionals and authorities, and the president of the HMO is the CEO, rarely a physician herself or himself. By the same token, the church is to become the religion industry; the parishioners, the customers; the ministers, the employees; and the bishop (pardon my Anglican orientation), the CEO. No mention of another One whom one normally thinks of as head of the church. And so on. The corresponding implication for the "education industry" is only too clear. And all interactions involving members of those spheres of endeavor are to be seen as no more than market exchanges.

In recent days, the encounters of this College's family with tragedy have exposed the inappropriateness of this point of view. When alumnus Kirk Rhein '77 went down in the New York crash of a TransWorld Airlines plane in July, we did not lose a former customer; we lost a devoted friend and elder of this family. When Professor Daniel Winter died eight days ago, we did not lose an employee; we lost a wise colleague, a great performer, a father, a teacher, a member of the community. And when Kate Risley, Tom Tabara, and Phil Yontz were killed in the tragic accidents over which as a family we have grieved so deeply, we did not lose customers; we lost delightful young friends, a daughter and two sons, active members of this community, and our students.

These were not market exchanges. These are family tragedies. Wooster is not a subsidiary of the education industry. Wooster is a community: a personal community, an academic community, a civic community. If nothing else, these losses must convince us to the core never to take each other for granted. But the lessons are broader than that; there are many aspects of Wooster that we must never take for granted. The renewal of Wooster I wish to speak to this morning is the renewal of these three community aspects of Wooster: the personal, the academic, and the civic, indeed things which we must never take for granted, or else lose them too.

Never should we take for granted our opportunities to be together as individuals, and yet even existing opportunities for this are under used. The program of faculty dining with students, which allows students to invite faculty members to meals in the dining halls, at no cost to either, is much undersubscribed. I would challenge students to raise this program to a new level. Moreover, a new trustee gift allows us this year to support faculty members in their entertainment of students in their homes; I likewise encourage us to see that this new program is fully subscribed. And I hold on to my long-expressed hope of finding funding to endow a periodic retreat of faculty and trustees together, perhaps to be initiated in the course of the planning work ahead, both for fellowship and for stimulating discussions about the College's future. We all need to talk within and across our respective constituencies more than we do. As expressed by President Wishart, our particular work can never be done in an institution where we pass beyond the point of personal contact between teachers and pupils and between the scholars themselves.

Neither for granted can we take a characteristic of Wooster, set by President Lord and the trustees at the College's founding and remarkable for its time, namely that this shall "be a place of studies for all...[that] the essential test of citizenship in this commonwealth of science and letters should be character, mental and moral quality and attainment, not condition, race, color, or sex." The education which this College offers can be said to be excellent only if both the community and the curriculum reflect the great cultural and ethnic diversity of this nation and world, as well as pay heed to the early disadvantage still suffered by populations within our society.

Certainly not for granted can we take Wooster's two most distinctive academic programs critical to our academic community, Independent Study and the faculty leave program, brought to Wooster through the leadership of the remarkable seventh president, Howard Foster Lowry. Howard Lowry transformed Wooster and its intellectual life with Independent Study. It perfectly represented the philosophy of teaching which he embraced and which has come to characterize Wooster's whole approach: to lead students to ask significant questions rather than learn easy answers, to give them the opportunity to be a critic, Lowry developed a passionate faith in "the free play of a student's mind" in the topic at hand; and this theme too characterizes I.S.

Just this summer, Robert Calhoun '58, now professor of history at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, wrote me to recall how his anxiety over I.S. had been allayed by Professor Dan Calhoun's encouragement simply to allow and enjoy the free play of his own mind. Underlying independent study is the recognition that the "intellectual generosity" of the faculty is essential to excellent teaching and to the maturing of the student.

The College's long experience in I.S. now means that any institution contemplating such a program must consult with Wooster. Independent Study is nearly 50 years old, and just as Wooster under Howard Lowry celebrated the 50th anniversary in 1951 of the rebuilding of the College following the fire that destroyed Old Main, we shall use this occasion to celebrate I.S. with a major national conference in the fall of 1997. Our obligation goes beyond celebration, however, and in our planning process we must reaffirm our dedication to Independent Study and shape it in a way that will make it at least as successful in its second 50 years as in its first. I do believe that there are several considerations to make: how best to share the excitement and results of I.S. with the rest of the campus in the spring, how to draw greater national attention to the program, and whether and how to incorporate aspects of teamwork and collaboration, as called for in national discussions of education.

From Lowry's passionate belief that this sort of education must be based on "first-rate scholarship,... enlivened by fresh research," and not on "stale platitudes, ...minor pieties,...and witch-hunts on small matters," he likewise argued for and established a new faculty leave program. Just as Independent Study depends on the intellectual generosity of the faculty, the success of the faculty role depends on

generous leaves. Major recent gifts from trustee William Thompson have supported the leave program by endowing special visiting positions as leave replacements, and the program's full success depends on securing more endowed positions like these.

Neither for granted can we take the "habit of mastery," an early tradition which perhaps more than anything established Wooster's immediate reputation for high standards. For this, credit is due especially to Jonas Notestein, teacher of Latin and classics. Notestein grew up in Canaan, just a few miles north of Wooster. By pure coincidence at age 17 he attended the ceremony at which this hill was chosen for the College in 1866; by design he attended the laying of the cornerstone for Old Main in 1868. As a sophomore transfer, he was among those first 34 students in 1870, then joined the faculty the year immediately following his graduation in 1873, only to stop teaching here when he died in 1928. Fifty-five years on the faculty, and he once recalled the source of his inspiration for this long service in these words: "A...prophetic feeling possessed us all that this was to be a great institution after a time, that we were starting ideals and setting standards, and that it became us to do our very best to make such a beginning that the after generations of students would have something to be proud of even in the record of the first days." With others of the earliest faculty, he insisted on the "habit of mastery" in every student. It is a worthy tradition, and for this reputation to continue to characterize Wooster and its students, it means for example being willing and eager to go beyond the bare minimum of assignments, accepting that assignments may take extended periods to be done right, expecting to be able to explain ideas in more ways than just that one used in class, and being willing to learn things in the thorough and professional way rather than the easy way. We will leave future generations something to be proud of only if we too maintain the habit of mastery.

Finally, to believe a steady stream of social scientists and social critics, we cannot take for granted the existence of a civil society for our students or ourselves, either on campus or off. Robert Putnam, a colleague of Edward O. Wilson at Harvard and professor and director of the Center for International Affairs, crystallized this concern in his 1995 essay, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." In it, he draws on evidence suggesting a recent decline in civic engagement, social trust, and simple good neighborliness. Nathan Baxter, dean of the Washington National Cathedral, has spoken publicly to the loss of trust in our

institutions. Both Alexander Astin, professor and director of UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, and author Jeremy Rivkin point to the colleges, saying that they have not done well in producing effective citizens and that they need to lead the way in preparing the next generation for a more civil society. This same theme was echoed in the cover article in the *New York Times'* education section several weeks ago. All point to economic and demographic causes and the tendency for citizens in large and anonymous settings to hide, to shrink from civic participation.

This reminds me of the reaction of a friend's son when he first attended a small private school after years in a large public one, he came home almost complaining, "You can't hide." In liberal arts colleges, it is nearly impossible to hide. At places like Wooster, a whole galaxy of programs draw students into participation and the high profile of programs like Wooster's Volunteer Network emphasize the social and moral values of social service. Indeed, this is one of our strengths, and I believe we should play to it, leaving no way untested to make this campus even more a real "hothouse" for cultivation of civic engagement. Leaving aside families and villages, I am inclined to say that, to raise a citizen, it takes a liberal arts college.

The 19th century was the age of liberal arts colleges. Nearly four-fifths of the colleges currently classified by the Carnegie Foundation as Liberal Arts I institutions were founded in the 1800s. In that period these colleges constituted a significant proportion of all educational institutions. But Wooster's opening in 1870 was coincident with another development, the appearance and rapid growth of the large university. The university was a hybrid with multiple purposes, blending specialized research and vocational programs and often giving only secondary attention to the liberal arts. By 1896, at the edge of the 20th century, the tide was already about to turn, and it is difficult to refute the assertion that the 20th century has been the age of universities. In 1996, now poised on the brink of the next century, liberal arts colleges constitute only 2 percent of the enterprise of higher education. Professor Wilson, there are concerns over extinction and institutional diversity here that you would quickly recognize. A natural question is this: of what type of educational institution will the 21st century be the age? On Thursday, Carol Twigg proposed an electronic candidate, while Sven Birkerts had a rather different nomination.

The 21st century may well belong to those academic institutions that guarantee the possibility of deep and lasting personal relationships between students and teachers; to those institutions that can restore faith in colleges and universities as temples of reason and understanding, providing individuals with discipline and inspiration for intellectual accomplishment; and to those institutions that can, in the words of Robert Atwell, retiring president of the American Council on Education and 1953 graduate of Wooster, can "bring healing to a fractured society." Is it therefore not the liberal arts colleges that will prosper in the new century?

"The knowledge here attained." I believe that Wooster has prospered because of its single-minded interest in "the knowledge here attained" by our "assembled youth." It is with the knowledge here attained over 126 years that Wooster's graduates have served the world and the College well. It is with the knowledge here attained that you, our current students, will perpetuate that tradition into the 21st century. And it is indeed also with the knowledge here attained that Wooster's nine presidents have given shape to an institution for which I have developed a deep respect and love and which I am proud to carry forward.