

CONVOCATION ADDRESS: FALL 2007

EDUCATION LEADERS: AN AIM OF EDUCATION

Last year, we started what we can now call a tradition (if something happens twice, I think it is fair to call it a tradition) --- each academic year should begin with an address about the AIMS OF EDUCATION.

Last year, my first year at SVC, I spoke to the assembled group about one of education's many gifts – namely the capacity to think multiperspectively. Some of you may remember the duck-rabbit drawing. Some of you have seen the artwork over the fireplace in my office that demonstrates how that which one sees depends on one's perspective. (Come on in if you have not seen it – it is not too late and it is worth seeing I think.)

Before I turn to my address this year, I want to announce something new about this AIMS OF EDUCATION tradition. While a college president could give this address year after year (and I have no shortage of things to say about education), I think it is wiser and more enlightening to have different members of the SVC community give this presentation each year.

And so, as a way of honoring members of our community and as a way of allowing all of us to listen to different voices, I plan to announce a different speaker who will deliver this address every year.

The speaker could be a dean or a faculty member or a staff member or a trustee or an alum. And, I hope it will be an honor for the person picked each year – it is a chance to share with all of you how he/she see the aims of education. I think we will all be enriched by reflecting on the AIMS of EDUCATION – as articulated by an increasing numbers of people within our community.

This year, I want to speak about another AIM of EDUCATION --- namely the creation of leader~~S~~. The key, as you will see, is the “S” at the end of the word “leader.”

For me, one of education's main aims is to create leaders – leaders in a wide range of settings:

Leaders in workplaces – both for and non-profit businesses. (Many people think leadership starts and stops there – CEO's of businesses. But that is too narrow a definition of who is a leader.)

There are:

Leaders in communities – both rural and urban

Leaders in the arts – in all of its mediums

Leaders in athletics – on the field and as coaches

Leaders in families – of all sizes and shapes

Leaders in government – local, state, national and international

Leaders in the financial markets – at every level

We need good leaders in all of these settings – individuals who can improve the worlds in which we collectively live.

And, there is space for many many leaders – it is not as if only ONE person is needed as a leader. Indeed, for all the obvious reasons, one leader in charge of everything is not good – it is dangerous even. History has taught us that.

This is the important point. Every person here IS and can become a leader. “LEADERS” IS, or should be, a plural word.

Leaders do not need to all look or act the same. They can, and indeed should, come, in all ages, from all socio-economic groups, from both genders, from all geographic locations, from all persuasions, from all religions, from all political groups, from all disciplines, from all educational institutions.

And, another reason for needing so many leaders: there is no shortage of issues that need to be addressed. The first-year book given to the entering class, Bill McKibben’s DEEP ECONOMY, makes this point well. We have issues in healthcare, the environment, energy, workforce development, education, food production and the list continues.

Take a moment and chat with the person on your left and name two issues that need careful thought in today’s world. It is not hard to come up with two...or twenty even.

PAUSE FOR AUDIENCE CONVERSATION

It’s interesting. Over the past year, I have been asked many times why I chose to leave my prior academic home – a law school – and become a college president. Why did I leave a place that focused on graduate education in New York City -- an institution that thought about issues of justice day in and day out?

And the answer (yes, I have one for you skeptics out there): My answer has been that in today’s world we don’t need more lawyers. Really. What we truly need are more thoughtful leaders. We need individuals who can think carefully about our world and help us move forward.

And, what better place to find and train leaders than an undergraduate college, with a myriad of students and an institution with core academic strengths in the key issues of our time. At SVC, we have a health professions expertise.

At SVC, we have a criminal justice expertise.

At SVC, we have a history/politics expertise.

At SVC, we have a humanities expertise.

At SVC, we have a business expertise.

So, I am here at SVC to think about creating leaders. I am here because I believe a leader's job (a job like mine) is to create more leaders – not more followers.

And those of you gathered here – all of you – are those leaders. The seniors – who marched in and are graduating this year – will be our newest leadership ambassadors. The seniors will leave us physically this coming May but they will carry their leadership abilities forward into the larger world.

But everyone here today can exhibit leadership on the SVC campus – every day. And, we can help you become leaders.

In fact, this Fall and as a commitment to the importance of leadership, we are offering a course in leadership – which I am co-teaching with one of our new Professors, Kurt Ward. (Just what a new faculty member wants – co-teaching with the President.... How calming is that?) Community members are, we hope, also enrolling in this course.

But, as wonderful as this course is (and it will be wonderful), real leaders are not produced simply through courses in leadership on a college campus. If that were the case, consider how many sensational leaders we would have.

The question – indeed the challenge – for SVC and across the globe is how to create leaders.

Answering that question would require a whole other lecture – or two or three. There are books and studies on this subject, and no shortage of high powered debate. We'd need to sit here together for hours -- weeks – months -- and, despite how much fun that would be (and it would be at least for me), we cannot have that conversation now. But, make no mistake about it – developing leaders and thinking about leadership is no small academic and intellectual challenge.

Despite the challenges of educating leaders, I would like to say a couple of things about this topic – three actually.

First, I believe that leadership can be learned. As the scholar Warren Bennis observed:

“The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born -- that there is a genetic factor to leadership. This myth asserts that people simply either have certain charismatic qualities or not. That's nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born.”

Second, as I have said many times this past year and as our website and educational publications now say: education happens in many spaces and places of which the classroom is but one. That means that we develop leadership in many ways across this campus.

I'd ask each of you to: Look for, identify and think about leadership in yourselves and in others

- in the hallways,
- in meetings,
- on the athletic fields,
- in internships and practica,
- in the residential halls,
- in the dining hall,
- in the new fitness center,
- in the new Burgdorff gallery,
- in the woods and trails surrounding this campus.

Third, I think leaders – whatever the scope and nature of their leadership – demonstrate certain shared goals and values. These values come through what they do, what they say, what they write, what they think. For me, several of these critical core values that are shared by many excellent leaders are:

ONE: the capacity to think carefully about issues;

TWO: the desire to consider the interests and well-being of others; and

THREE: a commitment to working to make the world a better place – whether that world in one's home, one's athletic team, one's college, one's business, one's local community, one's state, one's nation, one's international world.

And so, as we start this academic year ---- let's reflect on one of education's aims --- and our aim here at SVC – leadership creation. That is why I am here. Leaders are what, I hope and fully expect, you will become.

We need your leadership – and we will do everything we can to help you become leaders. Our community – indeed our world – depends up it.

And so, with this Convocation, we can truly say the academic year 2007 --- 2008 has begun.

Thank-you.