Continuing Scholarly Engagement
Faculty Retreat; September 14, 2009
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(I began my annual remarks at the close of the Faculty Retreat with a number of notes, chiefly that of thanking all for their support and engagement throughout the recent and difficult financial and economic times. I then turned to the heart of my remarks, which I am here reprinting for the Academic Affairs Committee. Thank you. Rob)

On the Vital importance of Continuing Scholarly Engagement

To the central theme of my remarks today let me move now. Return I am going today to a theme I’ve essayed before, to my own convictions about the vital importance of our continued engagement with scholarship. Bev has just spoken of this and of our support for faculty development. I want to speak of the reasons why such faculty development support, and the resulting research you produce, is based not on habit or routine but upon reasoned argument.

In speaking of research, of “research” or “scholarship and allied activities,” I think I can curtail what follows by something like ten percent if I say now that I will use throughout the words “research” and “scholarship” to refer to a wide and disparate variety of activities. Hence, “research” and “scholarship” refer in the verbal paragraphs ahead to books, articles, paintings, sculptures, set designs, fiction, poetry, compositions, material published alone or with others, including, of course, publications with Carleton students, material published in a variety of media, exhibitions, and, well, and to these and much more.

And so, I’ll pose the question: Why is scholarship, especially that subjected to the judgment of our national and international peers, vital at Carleton College? Making no claims for comprehensiveness, indeed, admitting that time prohibits such, let me formulate and then defend a handful of answers to this question – literally, a handful, since I am here offering five answers, confessing that some of my five answers might themselves be further divided.

In the interest both of clarity and of your knowing where we’ve been and where we’re going, let me read through the headings of each of these five answers now, then repeat each as I describe them in greater detail:

1. What we rightly expect of our students, we should expect of ourselves.

2. Research challenges and thus improves our own abilities, practices, arguments, and more in the company of our most knowledgeable and critical peers.
3. Scholarship demonstrates what we know and what we wish others to know -- that we have an immensely talented and committed faculty here at Carleton.

4. Research matters at Carleton of the disturbing prospect of the world of higher learning divided between solely research institutions on the one hand and purely teaching institutions on the other.

5. And finally, scholarly engagement is central to our teaching and learning at Carleton because there is little more exciting that studying with an active scholar, scientist, creative artist -- with someone making a difference for what counts as knowledge in her discipline, and this provides additional testimony on behalf of the argument that fine teaching and scholarship belong together, are joint partners which alone create and sustain the kind of teaching which we honor at Carleton.

Thus, back to each of these five reasons with more detail. It is customary on occasions such as this first to promise brevity, then to deliver anything but brevity. So, I’ll not make that promise.

1. First answer: What we rightly expect of our students, we should expect of ourselves. What do we expect of our students? Certainly, that they master a body of knowledge, that they read critically and comprehensively, that they are able to reproduce experiments and formulae first achieved by others, often long ago, that they become able craftsmen in drafting or in the basics of costume design, and so forth.

But, but we rightly expect more. We expect our students to become more than spectators. We expect our students to be participants. We expect our students to become partners with us in creating. And what we expect of them, we and they can expect of ourselves -- that we, too, are participants, that we, too, are part of creating the present and the future shape of each of our disciplines.

Now, and to be sure, every one of us works in a discipline of sophistication, a discipline which demands in some way or another a long apprenticeship. In my own discipline, it would be powerfully difficult for any student to offer a convincing new reading of Gilgamesh unless she had studied Akkadian and several other ancient Near Eastern languages for at least five years. It would be equally difficult for a student to present a plausible new interpretation of the Phoenician History unless he had studied Greek and Phoenician and Punic and Northwest Semitic Epigraphy for a similarly lengthy period -- and we could offer similar statements for Physics and Dance and Anthropology. This too, however, is what we can expect our
students to learn -- that creating new knowledge is not a glib or journalistic enterprise, but rather one which demands a full awareness of what others have done and of the necessity of acquiring appropriate tools.

Still, there are goals to the acquisition of these tools and to the mastering of what others have formulated or sung or designed. These goals include advancing knowledge, perfecting novel techniques, conceiving of and then performing new experiments.

And such goals have their own metonymic equivalents throughout our students’ lives and careers, including of course non-academic careers. This is best and most persuasively demonstrated by our own accomplishment of such goals, by our own demonstration that we have helped to create new knowledge.

2. Secondly, scholarship is important for us at Carleton because it challenges and thus improves our own abilities, practices, arguments, and more in the company of our true peers.

Posing for ourselves, always, the question, “Is this the best I can do?” is a part of the idea of the university or the college. We should repeatedly and tirelessly formulate the loftiest of ambitions and then challenge ourselves to achieve these. Seeking to accomplish that which is demanding is a significant part of what leading a worthy life is all about -- and hence, and in accord with my own favored definition of the liberal arts, the same ambition is a significant part of the aim of a liberal arts education.

Realizing this ambition, in turn, demands that we test our ideas, our creations, our conclusions in the most expert and sophisticated of settings. An apparently plausible reading of Dante may come to a quick and crashing fall when offered to those who have lived with the Divine Comedy for decades. And we could say the same for any of our efforts -- that the apparently discerning and persuasive is discerning and persuasive to many audiences, but must be tested as well in front of the most knowledgeable and sophisticated of critics.

As admirably gifted as our students may be, as quick and sharp and eager to challenge tired conclusions as they are, they have not and they cannot have devoted the decades of study to any area of knowledge which is true of those before whom we wish most to test our ideas. Add to this the fact that a college of our size often means that we are the sole local practitioners of our areas of teaching and research. How many Iberian medievalists, how many experts in early twentieth-century labor issues, how many Ancient Near Eastern philologists are there at Carleton? Often, and for the soundest of reasons, the answer is “a few” or “one.”

We do value the views of our students and colleagues; and often the
perspective of a student new to a problem or a colleague in a quite different discipline or sub-discipline is of inestimable value. Still, we should and must in the end present the results of our work to the most discerning and professionally able audience that can be found. For all the easy and often cynically amusing criticisms of the specialization of college professors today, such specialization is often the best, sometimes the only, way to forge new knowledge in a broader field. It is precisely such prudent specialization which requires us to include specialists among those who assess our work.

The assessment of our most expert colleagues across the globe can be painful or laudatory, and is usually a bit of both. But it is from such assessment that we stand the best chance of learning, of growing, of doing the best that we can do.

3. Thirdly, scholarship is of vital concern for us at Carleton because it demonstrates what we know and what we rightly wish others to know -- that we have an immensely talented and committed faculty here at Carleton.

Among the frequent, and perhaps frequently true, criticisms of college presidents or deans who seek to promote enhanced scholarship at their institutions are these: (1) we want research to be done either because we seek some readily measurable, soundly objective, and quickly countable method of assessing faculty which takes less time and effort than other means; or, (2) the leaders of colleges and universities promote research because it looks good -- to alumni, to potential donors, to applicants, to those whom we wish to recruit to our faculty.

There is doubtless something to both criticisms. With regard to the first, I think we can and should expect the leaders of higher education to devote their time and energy to the best and most comprehensive, and not the swiftest, means of evaluating faculty. With regard to the second criticism: it’s true; a faculty which engages in substantive scholarship does look good and we do welcome this. But this criticism hardly of itself demonstrates that there is to enhanced scholarship something inauthentic. Instead, it demonstrates widely what we know locally, and this is that the Carleton faculty is committed to teaching and learning at its best.

Moreover, and to choose but one of our prospective audiences, the finest students from the world’s graduate programs accept our invitations to join us because they know we are asking them to join a faculty which is committed to keeping up, to remaining fully aware of what’s transpiring in their disciplines, and to themselves creating what counts as new knowledge in the discipline.

4. Fourthly, scholarship is of special significance today because of the
disturbing prospect of the world of higher learning divided between solely research institutions on the one hand and purely teaching institutions on the other.

None of you, of course, is interested in my minor nightmares, nor do I wish upon you to inflict many of these. One I have shared with the faculty in several settings is this: the nightmare of a College which does not offer the experience of difference, that of a College whose faculty and students and staff does not embrace and welcome and celebrate diversity. Here is another: I also experience more than occasionally the nightmare of a future in which the world’s colleges and universities divide themselves into two, radically disparate places, some of which are devoted solely to teaching while others focus entirely upon research.

Nor is this nightmare anything like hypothetical. All Souls College, Oxford, and the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study, both of which are solely research institutions, exist and flourish now, and the same is doubtless true of some smaller institutions which proudly claim to be out of the business of research.

Neither sort of institution, were this to become the norm, benefits; both lose, under this prospective division of labor. Imagine research universities whose faculty never tests their ideas with their students, never even attempt the formidable task of attempting to explain their research to an audience of well educated if perhaps not of-the-guild audience. Or, imagine teaching colleges whose faculty rely entirely upon others for the shaping of the knowledge in their discipline, whose faculty are tutored in the state of the field but themselves are never the tutors.

This minor nightmare is, I am convinced, as great a danger as liberal arts colleges like Carleton might ever face. Of course, this argument, like several I offer this afternoon, is closely linked with others. But the interlocking nature of some of these arguments hardly eviscerates any of them. The danger of the division I here portray is real.

5. Fifth and finally, we seek to engage in scholarship because there is little more exciting that studying with an active scholar, scientist, creative artist -- with someone making a difference, and this provides additional testimony on behalf of the argument that fine teaching and scholarship belong together, are joint partners which alone create and sustain the kind of teaching which we honor at Carleton.

I am not sure of the probative value of an argument based upon “excitement,” but I have experienced this, know all of you have, and I am utterly convinced that learning is not just taxing and challenging and frustrating, but is also as inspiring as any human activity. And I also know
that this very message -- that the life of the mind offers excitements second to none -- is basic to what we wish our students to learn.

I will rely chiefly upon your memories here. Recall what it was like, as an undergraduate, when a professor entered the classroom to announce that a problem which had baffled her and others for perhaps decades was a problem she had solved. Remember the moment when you were taking a course with a professor whose article or book or design technique had fundamentally altered an entire discipline of learning. Some of us, perhaps a great many of us, can recall as well the justifiable, and hardly cheap, pride we felt when a teacher with whom we were studying received national or international recognition. Like yesterday, I recall the moments during my undergraduate days when a Biologist announced he had just won a Nobel Prize, when an archaeologist announced she had uncovered a hitherto unknown settlement in Greece.

I know what excitement that brings; I know that working and learning with scholars and artists whose accomplishments are such is honestly more thrilling than whatever thrills the world usually labels such. There are, there must be, non-academic equivalents to the combined intellectual and emotional response to which I refer. Still, it is in institutions devoted to the life of the mind that the response is most frequent and most treasured precisely because the breakthroughs we work upon here so often find their pay-off in ways that pay more than money.

This final argument, then, offers additional testimony in support of the proposition that fine teaching and scholarship belong together, are joint partners whose partnership alone creates and sustains the kind of teaching we wish to obtain at Carleton.

We ought to encourage and promote active and widely reviewed scholarship at Carleton because the finest teaching depends upon this. Put rather differently, it is very difficult for many of us to make a distinction between fine scholarship and fine teaching.

Our students deserve to be working on what is current, on material which reflects the best and often the latest thinking -- and this, I am convinced, is as true for the study of the Ancient Near East as it is in, say, Geology or Russian. Like a New York Times Sunday magazine article pillorying the latest MLA conference, it is easy to criticize this defense for mindlessly valuing the fashionable at the expense of the enduring. And certainly there have been, are, and will be trends within scholarship that do not stand up to time’s and criticism’s demands. But I am talking less about trends than about our need to be aware of and to participate in developments which have fundamentally altered the ways in which problems are posed and answered. We need to keep up not to be fashionable, but
because we are, as we ask our students to be, learners and contributors throughout our lives.

Further, teaching and research are partners because, perhaps most profoundly of all, because of the *curriculum*. On-going scholarship, tested and criticized by our ablest colleagues, is the surest foundation for our current and future curriculum. What to teach and how to teach it? Well, the “it” that we seek to teach should be and is constantly revised, and revised according to the changing and growing and sometimes revolutionarily different ways in which knowledge is divided and combined and conceived anew. It is scholarship which has created disciplines which once were not; it is research which challenges traditional disciplinary distinctions and forges new links between areas once entirely disparate.

Indeed, with specific regard for the curriculum, I think it not outlandish to claim that scholarship is of greater importance for the curriculum of an undergraduate college than for that of a research university. Our curriculum is not chiefly about apprenticeship and acquiring specific research tools, though these can be important. Our curriculum is rather chiefly about learning to think critically, to assess things in context, to confront texts whose constant challenge is “are you willing to be changed?,” to think openly about life’s most important questions which are, perversely, those easiest to ignore. And all of this means our curriculum had better have a sound foundation, a foundation based upon ambitious and openly assessed scholarship.

**Two final notes**

Keeping my pledge to offer but five answers to our question, let me conclude with those I have offered above, knowing, with you, that many others might be formulated and let me touch upon a couple of allied notes in conclusion.

First, is there time? This I consider an entirely appropriate question, and one which all of us are surely asking. If there are colleges whose faculty members teach seven or eight courses a year, there are also colleges which expect their faculty to teach five or four courses a year. If there are colleges with no sabbatical plan, and many with no sabbatical entitlement, there are also colleges and universities with many more research-leave opportunities than Carleton offers.

Given that some teach fewer courses, some have richer leave possibilities, some have access to far more professional development funds than do we, are we asking ourselves to do that which cannot be done -- or at least, to do that which can only be done at the crushing expense of devoting less time and energy and commitment to teaching?
Yes, it is difficult, often extremely difficult, to find or make the time to do the work which scholarship requires. Succeeding at meeting the crying, immediate, personal demands of our students and also maintaining our roles as active scholars is anything but easy. But we know it can be done because you have done and are doing just this. Succeeding here requires energy and commitment and skill, demands that we make the most of our sabbaticals and other leave opportunities, and with justice demands as well that I and others make every attempt to enhance these opportunities, in the conviction that our identification as a college offering the finest of teaching depends upon this.

Secondly, how much scholarship? And, What sort of scholarship? How wisely broad is our definition going to be of what counts as peer-reviewed scholarship? None of these questions is unimportant, but I think none of them brings an easy or precise answer. I have read, you have read, eight-page articles which revolutionized a discipline. And we have both read weighty tomes which have accomplished nothing like this. Perhaps it is best to say that we don’t count pages, we don’t count citations; we rather attempt to assess on-going engagement with research. And we are committed to working ever harder to secure the funds to continue to support faculty scholarship even in challenging economic times.

**Conclusion**

I doubt that anything I have said remains beyond question, unless it be our unquestionable commitment to teaching of the highest order at Carleton. I know that there are criticisms of the arguments I have presented, with some of which I am familiar and with others of which I may be lamentably ignorant. Still, I want to begin the current academic year with some arguments, however truncated, of the vital link between teaching and research.

To New Faculty this year, as in every year past, I have said that at Carleton I think we have the research-teaching balance right. This by way of making clear that my remarks today are not intended to indicate some significant ramping up of our research expectations. That we are not, nor are we ramping them down. Hence, and to repeat, I think we have the teaching-research balance right at Carleton.

**Conclusion**

(I was then able to conclude my Faculty Retreat with the very happy news that the proposed furlough for staff and faculty had been eliminated.)