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College and Character: Fostering Moral and Civic Engagement

I: Three reasons the role of college is crucial:

- A. Age i.e. developmental appropriateness --> cf. Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By*.
- B. Breakdown of family and religion as central actors in inculcating values.
- C. Even for those who come with deeply held values, college may provide the first opportunity for cross-community civic engagement.

II: One stage on which colleges and universities play this role is in mounting host of co-curricular programs that encourage cross-community civic engagement.

- A. Here again I will be brief because Sharon Parks has already provided examples and commentary on this crucial role of colleges and universities.
- B. But I cannot resist mentioning two co-curricular programs at Columbia: of the dozens that we have, the oldest and the largest.

1. Double Discovery - the oldest.
2. Community Impact - the largest.

- C. These programs and their many other counterparts illustrate how colleges and universities can play a crucial role in encouraging co-curricular learning that fosters both moral development and civic engagement.

III: In this conference these developmental and co-curricular dimensions of our topic have received and will continue to receive the extensive attention they merit; so I will in the remainder of my remarks examine the ways college and universities can and should focus on moral and civic engagement at the core of the enterprise, viewed as both an educational and an economic institution.

It is important to note the extent to which our other claims to foster moral and civic engagement will ring hollow if our practice as institutional actors in the larger society does not aim to embody the same values.

So here are some examples from our experience at Columbia: location of main campus - EZ; construction, employment, and purchasing.

Clearly moral and civic engagement can be fostered even if colleges and universities do not reflect these values in their institutional life - in which case the behavior of the college or university itself may become a target of criticism. We all know of such instances; and in communities that promote critical inquiry such disagreement and tensions are probably unavoidable and perhaps even salutary. Still, even with the allowance for healthy internal criticism, the fostering of moral and civic engagement is most powerful when our colleges and universities as economic actors aspire to exemplify the values fostered through co-curricular programs and through our education and research.

But important as is our behavior as economic institutions, the heart of our common enterprise is our identity as institutions of sustained inquiry, as centers for learning through both education and research.

The role of our colleges and universities in shaping character is certainly inescapable in undergraduate education. Our students arrive at a time of multiple transitions in their lives: some come from strong families with clear values and unambiguous standards or from relatively homogeneous communities in which taken-for-granted mores are widely shared; others come from highly pluralistic settings that purport to exemplify a kind of sophistication or cosmopolitanism that denigrates what is deemed to be uncritical provincialism. Those differences may, however, be deceptive in that all of our students are sorting out what they have experienced in their families and communities as they affirm the values and practices that will orient their lives. At this point they come to institutions that seek to assemble a rich diversity of fellow learners in settings designed to explore any and every question that arises.

I take it to be a crucial responsibility of colleges and the undergraduate divisions of universities to seize the educational opportunity that this situation constitutes. That means offering models of how we wrestle with the issues and options represented in every complex of traditions. While different institutions will of course approach this challenge in differing ways, every undergraduate education must include attention to this process through which our values and practices are shaped.

I am proud to be able to claim that Columbia has a long and distinctive history in rising to this challenge. The College has a core curriculum that for over 80 years has required students to engage the ideas and institutions that have shaped the central traditions of the West. It is noteworthy that this curriculum originated in an egalitarian impulse: the first of the core courses was launched in 1919 to address the needs of students who entered the College without the knowledge of Greek and Latin that the accepted curriculum presupposed. The core was a response to this new situation. It was designed to offer access to the classics of the West in a way that allowed all students to wrestle with contemporary issues based on a shared acquaintance with a common body of traditions.

That first course was called Contemporary Civilization. The title may seem odd for a two-semester sequence that begins with Plato, Aristotle, and the Bible and gets to what we call the modern era -- that is, the self-proclaimed enlightenment of the eighteenth century in Europe -- only toward the end of the first semester. But the title has stuck, because the point of the course is to connect current concerns with the preoccupations of our forebears, both to seek to understand the past and to learn from our history how most adequately to approach the issues of contemporary civilization.

Not only the title but also the basic content and format of the course has remained central to the experience of Columbia undergraduates for over 80 years. Readings have changed some, in particular to include women and minority perspectives where feasible. But the overall content, with its emphasis on classic texts, continues; and the format is small seminar, discussion-based, and writing-intensive, so as to draw students out and encourage their active engagement with the issues.

The two semesters of CC - as Contemporary Civilization is universally known among Columbians - have been joined by other required courses. The first was Humanities A, soon followed by Humanities B, now together called Literature Humanities and abbreviated as Lit. Hum. Lit. Hum. is like CC in that it moves from the Greeks to the present in two semesters.

Because it focuses on literature, it begins with Homer, the Greek tragedians, and the Bible, and moves on from there. Complementing these four semesters of basic texts are required courses in the history of art and the history of music. There are other requirements - in writing, in math and science, and in a foreign language. But the CC, Lit. Hum., and Music and Art Humanities are the core of the core.

From the late 1940s on Columbia has also offered courses in other major traditions that are modeled on the core curriculum. The sequence that large (and increasing) numbers of undergraduates have taken over the decades is a two-semester course developed by Ted de Barry and called Asian Humanities. Over time analogous sequences have been developed for other geographical and cultural traditions. Then, six years ago, we formalized a requirement that students take a minimum of three courses in a tradition in addition to the Western core. Called Major Cultures, this latest addition to the core requirements may be met through three courses in another tradition or two courses in a tradition plus a third that traces its further development in the United States, an option that encourages attention to African American, Latino, and Asian American studies within the core.

This development of the Major Cultures requirement expresses our conviction that our graduates must not only be grounded in the central traditions that have shaped the ideas and institutions of the West but also have an informed acquaintance with at least one other complex of traditions. It is admittedly only a feeble gesture in the direction of comparative understanding. But the gesture, feeble though it is, sends our graduates into our more and more interconnected world with the beginnings of an awareness that allows them to pick up their metaphorical legs to walk on two legs or see with bifocal vision.

I have offered this description of the College core curriculum, not to celebrate Columbia (though I suspect you can tell I am proud of this eight-decade-long achievement), but because it illustrates the way one institution has seized the educational opportunity to invite our undergraduates to a journey of discovery.

This journey is a process of comparative and critical appropriation of traditions. At its best, it is a process of active engagement in which students wrestle with texts and with the ideas and institutions (in the sense of practices and organizational forms) that those texts presuppose and express. The process is inherently critical and self-critical, the more so as a comparative dimension highlights differences both within and between traditions. It is therefore quite different from evangelization or propaganda or unqualified adulation. Yet it is still a process through which participants struggle with choices that in effect reject some positions and at least tacitly affirm others. While intrinsically critical and comparative, it is therefore in the end a process of appropriation, a process through which participants make convictions their own.

To provide a hospitable context for, and to encourage, this process of comparative and critical appropriation of traditions is, I submit, a (and perhaps the) central way that our colleges and universities can and should contribute to the shaping, the formation, of the character of our students. To create such learning environments does foster moral and civic engagement. And, with the breakdown of family and religion as reliably central actors in inculcating values, it is a challenge that is all the more crucial for our increasingly pluralistic society.

While this activity of appropriation is central to undergraduate education, the process certainly does not end there. As all of us can testify, it is in fact a life-long project. That means our colleges and universities must attend to it in all our offerings from co-curricular

programs and continuing education in all its forms to advanced study and scholarship. I realize that this conference is most concerned with learning environments at the undergraduate level. But I think it is worthwhile extending our consideration as well to graduate education and research.

Once again, to provide focus, I will refer to examples from our experience at Columbia. For us, civic engagement is not a matter only for undergraduates, even if most of the participants in our volunteer programs are undergraduates. Instead, our connections to New York City and to the communities around our two campuses are central to education and research across the University.

That New York City enriches our programs goes almost without saying. We have negotiated arrangements with major cultural institutions in the City. For example, the American Museum of Natural History, the Museum of Modern Art, the 92nd Street Y that allow free admission to our students in exchange for access to our libraries and other facilities. Clearly our Business School has a significant comparative advantage in terms of internships, guest lecturers, and the like because of our location in the capital of global finance. Similarly, our School of International and Public Affairs benefits from the presence of the United Nations and the endless stream of international leaders who visit New York. So, too, our School of the Arts has the benefit of the enormous cultural resources of the City. And the School of Journalism gains from its setting in a center for global media.

But beyond such benefits to the education we offer and the professional creativity and scholarship our people generate, we also cultivate relationships that connect us to our neighbors in a host of other ways. We provide desperately-needed health care to underserved populations through the clinics of our School of Medicine, Dentistry, Nursing, and Public Health. We offer legal counsel to people who cannot pay for it through a mandatory pro bono program in our Law School. The Business School works with inexperienced entrepreneurs who are launching their own enterprises in Harlem. Hundreds of students and faculty from the School of Social Work do field placements in social service agencies across the City. Our Schools of Social Work, Journalism, Public Health, and Architecture, Preservation, and Urban Planning regularly conduct field-based courses and research. I will not describe all of those programs though I will be happy to discuss any of them in more detail during the question period. For now I will say a little more about two sets of initiatives so as to give a concrete sense of the depth of civic engagement in our graduate education and research.

The first example is the impact that our health sciences are having on surrounding communities. Our health sciences campus is located in Washington Heights, 50 blocks north of our main campus on Morningside Heights. Washington Heights is an extremely diverse community with a large number of immigrants from the Dominican Republic. The single largest provider of the dental care in the area of Northern Manhattan is our dental clinic. Similarly, the largest Medicaid population in the City is served by the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center. Just to the south, our Medical School also administers Harlem Hospital, and our School of Public Health is conducting a comprehensive longitudinal study of asthma, one of the illnesses disproportionately prevalent in poor areas like Harlem. In sum, the health challenges surrounding our health sciences campus are great, and our students and faculty and staff are deeply involved in addressing them.

Through direct participation in meeting local needs, our health sciences are also contributing to the revitalization of the community in other respects. For almost nine years now I have had the privilege of observing and participating in this process. The single most substantial

example of the positive impact we are achieving is our construction of a biotechnology research and development complex in what was previously a dangerous three-acre tract of virtually abandoned property.

The first of what will be five new buildings is located on the site of the place where Malcolm X was assassinated, the Audubon Ballroom. There was considerable opposition to the project for that reason. But we have restored the facade of the Audubon Ballroom and provided for a memorial to Malcolm X on the ground floor of a major new building, which is now a thriving incubator for biotechnology start-up companies. Audubon 1, as we call it, was built with help from both the City and New York State. It is providing jobs for neighborhood residents and, because the ground floor includes commercial retail space, it brings pedestrian traffic to an area that had almost none before.

Following the completion of and increasingly widespread support for Audubon 1, we have constructed a large research facility (Audubon 2), have broken ground for another research building (Audubon 3), and are about to launch another incubator for biotechnology companies (Audubon 4). The impact of this set of initiatives has been profound and far-reaching. Employment opportunities have been created. Surrounding residential streets have been enhanced. Two new schools have been built. A police station has been located in the area. Immediately across the street from the Medical School, an old armory has been transformed into a state-of-the-art athletic facility, which brings countless numbers of school children and others to the area day in and day out. In short, the neighborhood is being revitalized for all of its citizens: civic engagement at its best.

The second concrete instance I will mention also exemplifies civic engagement at its best because it illustrates our efforts to identify distinctively appropriate ways for Columbia to connect constructively with our neighbors. The name of this example is the Urban Technical Assistance Project. Located in our School of Architecture, Preservation, and Urban Planning, UTAP was launched seven years ago and officially established in 1995. Its purpose is to make available to the communities around both our Morningside Heights and our Washington Heights campuses the resources of the University in the area of community revitalization and development.

In designing UTAP we asked ourselves and our neighboring communities how Columbia as an irreducibly urban university could launch the equivalent of what our great land grant universities offer to rural communities through agricultural extension services. The result has been gratifying. We provided UTAP with state-of-the-art instrumentation for mapping urban neighborhoods: from below ground infrastructure to ownership patterns to building design to streetscapes and traffic patterns. Those resources combined with astute leadership extremely well-connected to neighborhood groups has led to a series of splendid collaborative projects. The sponsors have ranged from tenant co-ops to block associations to philanthropic foundations to the office of the Manhattan Borough President. From its base in West Harlem, UTAP has created learning environments for students who come to the program in urban planning from around the world, and it has fostered civic engagement that contributes substantially to the revitalization of communities around the campus.

I am firmly convinced that colleges and universities can and should foster inquiry that leads to moral and civic engagement. I have focused on examples from my time at Columbia. But I know from my experience at other colleges and universities, both as a student and as a faculty member and administrator, that each one of our institutions nurtures impressive instances of such engagement; and I hope that we can use the time remaining to learn from each other about the full range of such ventures.

Thank you for your attention.