ARISTOTLE IN AN ERA OF ACCOUNTABILITY*

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Several thoughts crossed my mind as I wrote this presidential address.

One was House Speaker Thomas Brackett Reed's admonition that one *can* in public remarks, actually subtract from the sum total of human knowledge.

Another is how much I have come to admire this organization – Anne-Marie, the Board, members. You are all a bit "*mavericky*" at times, but you have taught and inspired me, often in ways you know not, and for that, I thank you.

Third, and the heart of the matter…the proprietary institutions and the accountability movement that are now part of the educational landscape are too often devaluing the liberal arts and sciences, and diminishing our collective appreciation of liberal education.

I.

The concept of liberal education in the western world may be traced to ancient Greece, where Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle collectively argued the pursuit of knowledge is intrinsically valuable; a contemplative life is a good life; education of the whole person is noble, for it facilitates a life of reason, moderation, and virtue.

In *The Politics*, Aristotle even specified the five components of a well-rounded education: reading, writing, physical education, the arts, and music.

[Applaud if in 2008, you would add a sixth item – retirement planning].

The precise origin of the phrase liberal arts is difficult to trace, but most credit the Roman orator Cicero, who believed the study of nature, math, and the humanities was essential to personal fulfillment and responsible citizenship.

Medieval scholars built a trivium and quadrivium upon this foundation – seven pillars of wisdom for an educated person.

Thereafter, liberal learning survived centuries of European turmoil. It did so partly by finding refuge in the Islamic world, where Aristotle was preserved; it also found sanctuary among ecclesiastical scholars, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, who blended Christianity and Greek philosophy, facilitating the great marriage of faith and reason found in so many of our CCAS private colleges, and in so many of our hearts.

[I once pointed out at an Augustana College banquet that my wife is a lot like Aquinas…a *saint* for being married to me…a *theologian* for knowing so much about the imperfectability of man].

Liberal education arrived on American shores, where only sixteen years after the Pilgrims landed, Harvard was founded with this grand vision: "To advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity."

The founders of our country – despite their human frailties – created a liberal learning impulse transcending their lives. Madison drew from a rich understanding of the rise and fall of regimes over the ages to design a living Constitution. Franklin said to invest your purse into your head; Jefferson said to enlighten people generally, so tyranny and oppressions of body and mind vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day. Recall that Jefferson's chosen epitaph does not mention his presidency, but only his major intellectual contributions.

The spirit of liberal learning subsequently took root all across this land, even in remote places. In 1882, the *president* of the University of South Dakota taught the first class of seven students a curriculum of Latin, math, grammar, history, German, composition, and public speaking.

[Included as ammunition for the next time you face faculty protesting three courses, two preps. Or a proposed teaching assignment for *your* president, if you are tired of deaning.]

Liberal learning offers lessons that carry over for the rest of our lives. I still recall a Chinese politics course where we read a 600 page book on the impact of the Cultural Revolution on a single village. It pushed us down to the lives of individual villagers, caught in the terror of Mao's misguided attempt to create a peasant utopia. The book forced me to think about communism and peasant life, to be sure, but also about issues such as retribution, reciprocity, and compassion. Every day, in ways large and small, we all face these same issues of human existence.

And liberal learning paves the way for later accomplishment. Exhibit A at my place is the Lawrence brothers of Canton, SD. Later in life, John helped his mother by experimenting with radiation on her cancer, and is known as the father of nuclear medicine. Ernest Lawrence created the cyclotron that split the atom, won a Nobel Bell Prize in Physics, and is the namesake of two national labs.

[I'm also a South Dakotan by birth, and I had a hole-in-one in 1995.]

Kidding aside – [well, I'm not actually kidding about the hole-in-one, hit with a five-iron] – I say thank goodness for liberal education. It expands the intellectual horizons of our students; instills a commitment to ethics and service; fosters appreciation of diverse people, democracy, and freedom; and teaches the importance of personal and global responsibility.

And thank goodness for organizations like this one, and for our friends in PBK, AAC&U, and AASCU, so ably represented here this year.

II.

Yet, for all of its virtues, liberal education has always faced challenges. It has been hard in recent decades to explain that liberal education has nothing to do with politics, amidst pundits calling liberal the "L" word.

[And liberal education is beyond the ability of some to grasp, such as the student who wrote on a course evaluation that he did not like the course initially, but by the end of the semester, had done a 360 degree turn.]

[Or outside the academy, consider the fellow in Maine who called the obstetrics office and asked my wife, a registered nurse, how long he should take the pill for his girlfriend to prevent a future pregnancy.]

[He could read St. Augustine's *Confessions* closely, but I doubt he would grasp the nuances of original sin.]

Still other challenges to liberal education exist within the academy, but are desirable in their own right.

A research tradition arose in Germany, emphasizing discovery through the scientific method. It has nibbled at liberal education in simple ways, like taking faculty time out of instruction. And yet, so much research is directly aimed at improving the human condition, and it has driven the great discoveries of our age. And research wonderfully complements the arts and sciences, with its focus on generating knowledge, within and across, academic disciplines.

The land-grant tradition embodied by NASUGLC has also nibbled at liberal education, with its focus on agriculture and applied knowledge.

CCAS was born from this conflict. NASUGLC's decision to include agriculture and engineering deans in their 1965 legislative agenda, but not arts and sciences deans, created a walkout and this organization.

Yet, even as land-grant institutions remain true to their roots, they also advance liberal education, pushing it out to more and more people.

Finally, accredited programs have flourished. This can be lovely for arts and sciences – we too can wave around accreditation reports to leverage resources from our provost. But more often, accreditation shifts goodies to professional schools. The American Association of Liberal Learning has countered by offering its own accreditation. But AALE's ride has been bumpy, even with the Department of Education. It has accredited mostly a small slice of international universities and private colleges.

So perhaps the time has come for CCAS to start its own affirmation of liberal learning. This could be a full-blown effort working with a newly staffed Department of Education to develop an accreditation framework that supplements or supplants AALE. If that seems too ambitious given our mission and turnover, we might consider the simple path of a liberal learning endorsement of our own making.

Unlike other self-appointed bestowals of academic legitimacy, such as *U.S. News* - whose questionnaire last year asked me to rank academic quality at 262 institutions in 49 states where I don't work or live – our affirmation of liberal learning would be scholarly and on the ground.

Back to accredited programs, they are a good thing. We need engineers designing our airplanes and accountants doing our taxes.

[And as a guy who turned fifty this year, how much better a podiatrist than a poet for those bunions yet to come…]

Here is the bottom line…arts and sciences deans blend research and accreditation with liberal education, while also holding the intellectual center of the university against their sometimes balkanizing effects. In that respect, we are indeed the Flying Wallendas of academic life, balancing many worthy trends.

Worried that I will spook our new deans, the Wallenda analogy stops here.

III.

Some more recent trends are diminishing liberal education.

The rapid rise of the spiffy propriety institutions, and their ugly cousins, the electronic diploma mills, has been unfortunate for liberal education. The August *Chronicle* reported more than 900 for-profits out of about 4400 higher ed institutions – some 21%.

At a rudimentary level, pause for a minute…and think how odd it is to have institutions of higher learning motivated less by sharing the value of wisdom, than by the value of shares.

Corinthian Colleges is the funniest in this regard – on their web site, they thoughtfully refresh their stock price on the NASDAQ every 20 minutes during trading days.

And stock price has pushed the for-profits to skirt common practice and financial aid regulations, drawing scrutiny and fines.

Being a simple fellow, I pose a simple, and maybe naïve, question - isn't a little something being lost here? Contrast Corinthian's frame of educational reference to Marcus Aurelius's thought in *The Meditations.* Here one finds the emperor of the western world lamenting the life of power given to him, when what he wants is the quiet life of the Roman Stoic, striving to become a better person. Now in truth, *The Meditations* is a rather dreary book, but it shines a bright light: education can be mostly about wisdom and virtue, as it has been traditionally, or it can be about profit, as it has often been lately.

And think about how the for-profits are recasting education as a matter of personal convenience.

More students equal more money, and with their dismal retention rates (16% at the University of Phoenix), the proprietary institutions feel the need to convey a message that one can painlessly earn a college degree. Phoenix tells students to "earn your college degree without putting your life on hold." Capella must have hired the same marketing firm because they tell students to "move forward without leaving the rest of their life

behind." But the winner in the rhetorical race to painless education is Kaplan, which tells students to "earn a college degree on your terms."

A college degree on *your terms*.…now that is a sweet promise, that skips entirely such fussy notions as educational standards and student effort.

[It is second only to free admission at the county fair to see the invisible man].

Obviously, I overstate the situation to make a point. Many of the for-profit institutions are innovative and legitimately accredited, and no doubt have high standards in their courses.

But their relentless rhetoric of earning a college degree in record time, or on your own terms, is a steady disservice to educational standards, and to America's global competitiveness.

Let's stand tall on this particular issue.

Let's exercise our professional responsibility as arts and sciences deans, and issue a public statement through CCAS that takes the for-profits to task for their persistent educational pandering.

For true education is not a painless credentialing process, but rather is a matter of profound personal struggle, where students must read, write, question, and think. Students learn so much when they grapple with the likes of *Billy Budd, Beloved, or Night* – chilling books about injustice and mass murder that are the antithesis of painless education.

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People where I live have a subtle sense of humor that includes advice for a rider who finds himself atop a dead horse – dismount. But I'm going to ride this hobbyhorse a little further.

The money-making institutions should be embarrassed pitching college degrees with ooh-so-little effort, but are not because they are making so much money doing it. Stock in the University of Phoenix rose from an IPO of 72 cents, to more than $80 per share.

And in the ultimate statement of education as a private rather than a public good, they are now telling policymakers that they pay taxes, while we drain taxpayers.

And for the liberal arts this situation is worse. The for-profit institutions focus heavily on applied and profitable fields of study. Criminal justice, accounting, and counseling are their standard fare.

They make little effort to teach Latin or molecular biology because they make no money. They make little effort to teach inorganic chemistry or paleontology, because laboratories are expensive, and it is hard to push students successfully through those programs. Instead, they cherry-pick large enrollment courses with few instructional costs, where they turn a handsome profit.

In contrast, our institutions are non-profit centers of learning, discovery and service to the public. Like a family, where some earn a living for the benefit of all, we rely on some parts of our curriculum to subsidize other parts. In that way, we are able to keep alive great intellectual traditions and lightly enrolled courses, whether it be feminist writers or graduate mathematics.

We are not currently doing so in this country, but we should be having a public conversation over the wisdom of gradually pulling choice parts of the curriculum out of our colleges and universities. Market imperatives alone cannot drive academic curricula, or in the years ahead, we will be lacking intellectual integrity, and financial flexibility to drive discovery.

IV.

Accountability also chips away at liberal education.

The centerpiece has been No Child Left Behind, with its testing on key subjects for K-12 students. This pressure on public schools has driven up test scores in some locales, so it is often effective.

But interesting was the *Wall Street Journal* article about the Finns – the highest scorers in the world. The Finn's recipe for success is centered on paying teachers well and foregoing a standardized curriculum, in favor of teachers designing one that best fits their kids.

We've all heard how NCLB pressures teachers to narrow curricula, and teach to the test; how it produces scores that follow youngsters around in unhelpful ways, such as pass rates by ethnic group; how it drives out subjects that can inspire in other ways. In 2006, CNN reported a steep decline in physical and health education, noting that students can even satisfy P.E. requirements through online courses. In 2008, a study by the Center on Education Policy showed that about a quarter of schools reported a 50% reduction in arts education.

I mention the K-12 accountability issues first because we typically house the academic programs in our colleges that are going by the wayside in our high schools.

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Accountability may have started with K-12, but it now inundates us.

Here is a partial list of developments. Learning outcomes are center stage; accrediting bodies scrutinize assessment efforts; we've all hired assessment gurus, and armed them with benchmarking tools, such as the Delaware Study, National Survey of Student Engagement, Faculty Survey of Student Engagement, the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement, and the CLA, CAAP, and MAAP exams; we have hundreds of campus and system initiatives with local versions of testing, capstone courses, and electronic portfolios; we have a Voluntary System of Accountability; and yes, we have so many reports, from State Higher Education Executive Officers, the National Governor's Association, the

National Conference of State Legislatures; the Business Higher Education Forum, the Institute for Higher Education Policy, and perhaps most famously, the Spellings Commission. Finally, we have a reauthorized Higher Ed Act that *Inside Higher Ed* labeled a "huge, exacting accountability bill."

Collectively, the accountability documents aren't all that thick, but they are weighty. Here are some common threads running through most of the reports, where we must be responsive in order to partly regain the level of trust we once held.

College is expensive for the average family, and people should be able to easily compare costs. Retention isn't particularly high, and graduation takes too long. Students should be more engaged with faculty at larger institutions since that intellectual connection is the reason for existence. And employers need graduates who can communicate …better than the student writing an essay on the Russian Revolution, who inserted the letter "h" into the word peasant, and thereby wrote repeatedly of the pheasants rising up to topple the Czar.

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As for specific accountability studies, they are uneven. On one end of the spectrum is Derek Bok's thoughtful book on accountability in the arts and sciences; entitled *Our Underachieving Colleges,* it outlines a path of internal reform whose essence was affirmed earlier this week by the annual report of the National Survey of Student Engagement. Still other reports – like those from SHEEO or the governors - are often sensible and recognize the need for internal and multifaceted change. These reports may arrive at predictable conclusions, such as governors viewing accountability mostly in terms of higher education driving economic development in their states. But the intent is good, and our task is simply to enlarge their view of the university.

But then at the other end of the spectrum, there is a funny fringe, where disdain for higher ed is palpable. We might remind that group of House Speaker Sam Rayburn's observation that it takes a carpenter to build a barn, while any jackass can kick one down.

In the spirit of House rules, I invoke a point of personal privilege, and do not say who precisely is at the funny fringe.

But I will say that there are some odd ideas out there. The July report of the Institute for Higher Education Policy argued the case for colleges and universities issuing a "warrantee of an institution's programs and standards."

Yes, a warranty. It would state "the utilitarian purpose of the degree granted."

Good grief, what a myopic view of education's end. Aristotle's grand vision of the intrinsic worth of knowledge reduced to a mere customer warranty by an educational think tank preoccupied with accountability.

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Given the range of accountability activities, how should deans respond? Embrace fair criticisms, and strive mightily to do better. Derek Bok has a roadmap. At the other end, beat back the foolish ideas as vigorously as Woody Allen did the chocolate pudding in *Sleeper*.

And we must drive discussions of accountability to those places where universities are better understood. Just as you don't want Yahoo run by yahoos, you don't want accountability driven by people who have never taught college, published research, or who do not grasp liberal education or cross-subsidy. In that sense, it helps that NASULGC and AASCU have teamed up on the Voluntary System of Accountability. They understand colleges and universities.

But even as conversations drift to venues where we are understood, arts and sciences deans must play a role.

Let's see why by looking first at the Spellings Commission report – the manifesto of the higher education accountability movement that still animates most of the conversations.

The report especially focused upon access, affordability, and learning. We support those things too, and we might even endorse some specific Commission recommendations, such as financial aid for disadvantaged students, or easier aid processes, or transparency in costs.

To her credit, Secretary Spellings continues working on financial aid issues in the waning days of the Bush administration.

We are probably less enthused about other recommendations. As deans, we better understand the downside of increasing the extent of advanced placement and dual credit.

But maybe more troublesome than any specific recommendation of the Spellings Commission was its glaring sin of *omission* – the total neglect of liberal learning. This may flow from the fact that many Commission members held professional degrees, and that the private sector was so heavily represented - Microsoft, IBM, and Boeing, along with a former AT&T executive, the Chamber of Commerce, a private investor, a philanthropist in the private education loan market, and the CEO of Kaplan. Liberal education had few seats at the table.

And while that is the case, my point is not to question the motives of the individual Commission members, nor to pick on professional degrees - I explicitly mentioned their virtues earlier.

If that is the message you hear, you are hearing the wrong message.

My message is simply that as deans of arts and sciences, we are entitled, and in fact obliged, to remind educational policymakers going forward that the Spellings report did not include our mission. It did not include the historic mission of undergraduate education in this country.

To publish a report "charting the future of U.S. higher education," – the report's actual subtitle – without mentioning liberal education is a little bit like writing a culinary review of Ruth's Chris steakhouse, with no mention of meat.

Thank goodness for PBK, who observed that the Spellings Commission recommendations left out liberal education. Secretary Churchill noted

"there is not a syllable about education in the liberal arts and sciences. Not a syllable." Secretary Churchill is here today, and we thank you, sir.

And hats off to David Ward, President of the American Council on Education at the time, who was the only commission member who declined to sign the Spellings report.

And to former Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education – the honorable and courageous Diane Jones –who earlier this year left her post out of frustration with the Department of Education's indifference to the liberal arts and sciences. Her story was page one of *The Chronicle.*

Now I don't want to beat, or particularly sit atop, what is surely a dead horse. But while time has run out on the Spellings Commission, the tone of its report still drives accountability work underway. Until such time as the new administration provides a different blueprint for higher education – and we should strive to help craft one – still sitting on the table is a plan that neglects, not respects, the liberal arts and sciences.

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Earlier I mentioned places where I think accountability is on target, and we must be responsive; now for some thoughts about where it misses the mark.

In general, the accountability movement is reductionist, glossing over institutional missions. Think for a minute about the different role and resources of Portland State, Harvard, Spelman, Wheaton, Ohio State, and the University of Utah. Then think about the appropriateness of data-driven academic comparison. It is too much apples and oranges.

Sure, we can offer benchmarks that compare us, just like Morningstar ranks mutual funds on risk and reward. We can do so with cost, where a clear metric exists. But on the academic side, we must be circumspect. Education is too multidimensional, and institutions are too dissimilar, to yield much but banal comparisons. Training future world leaders might be a suitable benchmark for Harvard, while graduating first-generation students might be a touchstone for our isolated or indigent institutions.

We're frequently accused of trying to dodge accountability by saying it is simply too hard to measure. Point well taken, but in turn, our critics should give more thought to the pitfalls of driving dissimilar institutions to testing and reporting in a nation that has clearly prospered from its ethnic and educational diversity.

Reductionism shows up with the Voluntary System of Accountability. The VSA was launched by educators to take ownership, and much of it involves sensible reporting of standard data. But it also requires pilot testing of incoming and exiting students on one of three standardized exams, and reporting of an average and a value-added score. I hasten to add that NASULGC and AASCU understand the ups and downs of all this, and see the need for institutional context and disclaimers.

So they are thoughtfully turning lemons into lemonade, and guiding us toward improved assessment of student skills. And yet, I fret about the reductionism because a value-added skills score is a pretty narrow slice of college life and learning. It doesn't tell us anything about whether we instilled within our students, more appreciation for artistry, tolerance, or civic life. Standardized testing simply does not measure those parts of liberal education. We must surely think narrowly about important individual skill sets, but at least as much, we must think broadly about education of the whole person, if our collective democracy is to thrive.

NASULGC and AASCU understand this issue too, and pursue projects to reinvigorate American public life. What worries me is whether other players in higher education policy realize the reductionism at work.

Accountability is also troublesome to the extent it has become a cottage industry. Assessment academies, publishers, the tutoring and testing companies, EduMetry, OWL software, Insight…they all stand to benefit from pervasive testing. Consultants are likewise riding this wave of policymaking to lucrative arrangements. And here don't forget the proprietary institutions, which strongly prefer discussions of learning outcomes for working adults, to a focus on education's end for young people.

Accountability also requires a lot of institutional effort and positioning for something near, but not exactly at the center, of learning. Sure, we can roll students into tests; have staff analyze and post scores; speculate whether institutions are gaming their incoming or exiting test takers, or spinning their results. But that is a whole lot of effort without actually teaching the kids.

Former CCAS President Geoff Feiss passed along this rural wisdom: "if your hogs are skinny…don't weigh 'em…feed 'em." We are weighing a lot these days, and what we are doing now seems to be structuring... just what we are doing. We risk diversion from the critical educational tasks of our time, like preparing students to interface with Islam, to evaluate sound science, or operate deliberative democracy in a crossfire culture.

Related, I worry that accountability takes our eyes off the prize. Recall how W.E.B. Du Bois pushed us toward liberal education when slavery ended. He wrote movingly of the need to give the freed not a technical, but a liberal education. He argued that only then would there be a lofty respect for the human soul, and freedom for self-development. Only in liberal education would we unlock the treasures of inner lives, he said, and push new viewpoints into the world.

These noble and energizing purposes of liberal education *are* the prize. Yet, these days so much of the footrace is a mix of shallow promises and profit, careerism and credentialing, standardized testing and mandated reporting, and marketing and institutional positioning.

V.

So what can we do to bolster liberal education?

Some steps are easy and obvious. We actively promote Phi Beta Kappa. We reach out to kindred spirits, like best-selling author Tom Friedman. We educate ourselves and our faculty so that we can speak confidently about the great intellectual tradition of which we are a part.

We keep working on a modest redefinition of liberal education that acknowledges an expanding college population, as the AAC&U has proposed, and as the CCAS Board has endorsed.

We open up a more public discussion of the harmful dimensions of the proprietary institutions, using analogies that our friends in the business world intuitively grasp, such as the specialty hospital in the community that attracts the insured, while city hospital is left with the uninsured. They understand cross-subsidy better than we do.

We make a liberal education speech a part of our repertoire, discussing these issues in our own way, and in the context of our own institution.

Today I pledge to take this message to places where I am invited, and I challenge each of you to carve out a small part of your professional life to do the same.

And then maybe at this conference, we annually ask a subset of deans to propose specific ways in the coming year for CCAS to advance broader public understanding of the liberal arts and sciences.

As an organization, CCAS can do more, starting with a letter to the new Secretary of Education that informs and requests a meeting. We should petition the folks running the VSA to put an active CCAS dean on their oversight board, and the AAC&U to put a CCAS dean on their National Leadership Council for LEAP. We could ask Teagle or some other foundation to fund development of a CCAS affirmation of liberal learning. And we should weigh in when issues affect us. We only

recently tiptoed into the political arena, two months ago releasing an agenda for higher education for the next Congress and administration. The Obama campaign kindly acknowledged receipt of our work, and future CCAS presidents and Boards should push this and new messages into new places.

VI.

I close on an optimistic note, confident in our ability to structure things for the better, and mindful of the fact that liberal education refines the views of our young people, and instills good habits in their hearts. This recurrent play to the human spirit has happened for 2500 years in the western world, and it will outlast any harmful vestiges of education for profit or accountability, if we are vigilant and willing to act.

And then maybe our descendents will remember us as good ancestors, who championed liberal education at a time it faced many challenges.

Thank you for the honor of serving as your president, and let's move forward with complete confidence.