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“Setting Prairie Fires”

There is a swath of central and western New York State—where I was born, raised, and indelibly shaped—known as the Burned-over District. Here in the 19th century spawned wave after wave of religious, economic, and social reform movements that shaped American culture. Dreams led to holy revivals, and new communities were hatched . . . to be succeeded in short order by other fiercely held and zealously shared visions of the better life. The same patch of soil nurtured the Shakers, the Latter-Day Saints, spiritualists, mesmerists, abolitionists, temperance crusaders, and Millerite Adventists who planned for the Second Coming on a specific day in 1844. Radical economic and cultural experiments took root here—the Oneida community with its shared property and group marriage and utopian socialist villages. Early feminism also sprang from this ground, crystallizing in Seneca Falls.¹ So frequently and so strongly did the flames of new ideas course over the region that evangelists felt it was burned over, with no new souls left to convert. Yet still the flaming ideas came.

Such intellectual and cultural paroxysms must have been in turn exhilarating and exhausting, wrenching but ultimately progressive and illuminating. For fire brings light as well as heat. And it brings in its wake reassessment and regeneration.

Here, on what was once the border between the prairie and the forest, the cleansing and revivifying nature of fire is well understood. Fires—both naturally occurring

and man-made—are part of our environment and our cultural history. David Gibson explains in *Grasses & Grassland Ecology* that fire enriches the soil by adding nutrients, releasing native seed banks that require high temperatures to germinate, killing invasive species, and clearing land for agriculture.² In the words of author William Least Heat-Moon, fire is:

a rider with two faces because for everything taken it makes a return in equal measure. The aboriginal peoples received the gift and made it part of their harmony here and used it . . . to bring forth sweet and nutritious new grasses, or as a scythe to open a route over the prairie, or as a horse to dislodge deer or drive bison for harvesting. Indians, recognizing the bond between flame and prairie, seemed to understand in a symbolic way how fire shaped the grasses and plants, how a green beauty rose and evolved from wet clay as if the master hand of fire had turned a potter's wheel.”³

But just as was the case in the Burned-over District, fires can be intellectual as well as physical. It is no coincidence that the language we use for creating and sharing ideas is so often combustible—a professor *sparks* a student's interest, a scholar *blazes* a new path, leaders seek to *light a fire* under recalcitrant colleagues or hidebound institutions. In the academy, we are in the business of burning away older, infirm theories and explanations so new ones can thrive and be tested in turn. It would be too provocative to label ourselves

arsonists, and perhaps too self-important to claim the mantle of Prometheus. But I start today with a core assertion about our work: Great colleges and universities generate and spread knowledge, and this can be unpredictable and even destructive. We know this, and we do it anyway. We keep setting controlled—and uncontrolled—burns.

This image of flames sweeping across prairies, oak savannas, forests, and cultivated fields alike is the principal metaphor I shall evoke today as I discuss what we do at Carleton, why it is so vital, and how together we can ensure its continued vitality.

Presidents of liberal arts colleges can deliver soaring rhetoric about the enduring value of the education provided at dear old alma mater. “We don't train you for a job or a profession,” we say. “Instead, we give you a set of intellectual tools and habits of mind that will equip you for life.” Fair enough. But could it be that the most important tool in that box is actually a book of matches?

Carleton aims high, as it should. We are excellent, and we intend to be enduringly superb. We have a singular focus on the liberal arts. We believe that this kind of education is what the very best students from across the nation and around the globe deserve. We are comfortable in our own skin. But here is where it begins to get complicated—and interesting—for what constitutes a liberal arts education is fluid and changes over time. As you probably know, etymologically and historically, the *liberal* arts—from the Latin *liber*, meaning free—were initially conceived as the knowledge necessary to live as a free man, not a slave (and note the gender limitation on who required such knowledge). Such an education liberated its holder and prepared him to take a meaningful role in the polity. Today, of course, we have recast—but not fundamentally changed—this goal. A modern liberal arts education prepares women and men alike to be

fully engaged, reflective, and fulfilled citizens of their local communities and the broader world. However, the content of the requisite knowledge has moved far beyond the ancient *Trivium* of grammar, rhetoric, and logic and the *Quadrivium* of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Today we expect our graduates to:

- think independently and critically, questioning assumptions,
- write with power and clarity,
- speak cogently,
- grasp the explanatory breadth, rigor—and limits—of the scientific method,
- draw connections between disciplines and bodies of knowledge,
- understand numbers and data—and appreciate how they can be manipulated,
- reflect on the morality and consequences of one's own and others' actions, and
- experience beauty and seek inspiration.

Often we cultivate these latter habits of mind through study of the arts and literature for the need to create and share such works lies at the core of our humanity. In the words of playwright and poet Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller: “Genuine art . . . does not have as its object a mere transitory game. Its serious purpose is not merely to translate the human being into a momentary dream of freedom, but actually to make him free.”⁴

A top-flight liberal arts education today also requires that students embrace the increasingly diverse and global character of their world. We purposefully expose our students to histories, cultural formations, and values that are unfamiliar, and perhaps discordant, so

¹ Frances FitzGerald, *Cities on a Hill*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), pp. 391–407.

² David Gibson, *Grasses & Grassland Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 187–188.

³ William Least Heat-Moon, *PrairieEarth* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin: 1991), p. 77.

⁴ Friedrich von Schiller, *The Bride of Messina or the Enemy Brothers; A Tragedy with Choruses*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1967), pp. 4–5.

that they will not just be able to navigate difference, but will affirmatively pursue the knowledge, self-awareness, and shared purpose that difference can engender.

Speaking of shared purpose, our students must know how to collaborate with others as part of a team. They need to be skilled at constructing compelling arguments, and able to expose the flaws in a colleague's argument in a civil fashion. But a better test is how well our graduates accept having their *own* best arguments laid bare and learning from that experience. While opening one's self to criticism can be unnerving, the risk of feeling vulnerable brings the reward of deeper understanding and growing self-assuredness. It becomes easier to assume that risk when your peers and teachers willingly do so, too. Last—but perhaps most important—a liberal arts education should teach its recipient just how much he or she does *not* know . . . and leave her or him with an unquenchable curiosity to fill those gaps.

Such humility, says educational philosopher and Carleton alumnus Parker Palmer '61,

“means knowing I must listen to others—especially to those who seem most alien to me—in order to understand and feel at home in a diverse world. If our students are to develop this habit, we must restore our commitment to the liberal arts. We must teach them to seek out opposing viewpoints, to appreciate ambiguity, to explore contradictions without fear, to appreciate the truth of paradox, to expand their sense of who they mean when they use the word *we*.”⁵

Carls of this and past generations are indeed equipped with these essential skills and perspectives. This year we implement a wise new set of graduation requirements that feature argument and inquiry seminars, writing-rich courses, and quantitative and global citizenship requirements. Our longstanding,

intense senior comprehensive projects demonstrate our graduates' intellectual depth and independence.

But many of us smell smoke and see the glint of intellectual fires on the horizon, portending further disruption and renewal. So even as we embrace these latest admirable refinements to our curriculum, we must still wrestle with an enduring question: “What will be the elements of a great liberal arts education 50 years from now?”

We have taken up this topic before, and it should continue to remain in the sights of the Carleton community. As always, the faculty will lead us in shaping our academic profile. We have begun by making a confident intellectual wager on the need for *creative* thinking and, especially, the emerging centrality of visual discourse. Our Visuality Initiative, funded by the Mellon Foundation, will teach students how to analyze images critically. They will understand the work images do in making arguments, and in turn be able to communicate their own ideas visually. Students will also grapple with the ethical and legal issues that arise from the use of images.⁶ The physical manifestation of Carleton's focus on creativity is the Arts Union, [which] will open next fall. The best indication this wonderful facility is achieving its desired ends will be the enthusiastic use of its classrooms, studios, labs, museum, and public and performance spaces by a wide range of faculty and students, from art historians to zoologists.

In addition to creativity, I would highlight five more elements of a forward-looking liberal arts education. First, our future graduates will also need *suppleness* of mind. The world grows ever more complicated and interconnected; possible sources of guidance multiply. Wisdom thus demands nimble adaptation and a synoptic perspective that can synthesize information from disparate, even unlikely, venues. Nan Keohane, former president of Duke and Wellesley, rightly argues

that students must learn “how to pursue different parts of a complex subject, to impose the right kinds of questions on unfamiliar material in order to find the key to understanding.”⁷

Within a kaleidoscopic, cacophonous swirl of data, images, texts, opinions, impressions, and purported expertise, a liberal arts education must lead to heightened *discernment*. Making distinctions about the value of information has never been more vital. On the 21st-century threshing floor, we must be better and faster at separating intellectual wheat from chaff. Discernment begins with the timeless skill of critically analyzing whatever is presented to you, but it goes beyond that. It must include facility in gleaning additional and varied types of information. A discerning mind thinks logically, but it also considers problems through mathematical, political, cultural, and ethical prisms. Discernment especially requires the identification of independent, trustworthy experts upon whom one can also rely.

This last point—the necessity of reliance on others in making our way through life—marks another requirement for future liberally educated citizens. As technology makes it easier and ubiquitous to be connected to one another, we must educate young men and women how to maintain the depth of human *interconnectedness*. I will have more to say about this, but let me note that great residential colleges have unique opportunities to forge indissoluble relationships and communities.

Perhaps the most indissoluble and vital community of all is how humankind is enmeshed in its natural environment. Protecting and nurturing that

environment—which demands that we move swiftly towards the sustainable stewardship of our planet—is a defining issue of our time. Colleges and universities have an intellectual and moral obligation to engage deeply with this issue. Carleton has made an exceptional start. I am humbled by the foresight of those who created and safeguarded the Cowling Arboretum and the McKnight Prairie. These are incomparable sites for teaching how to live in harmony with Earth. I am proud of the wind turbine we have already constructed and eager for us to build a second. And I am inspired by the conviction of students that we must do even more to promote sustainability on our campus. We *must* partner with all levels of the educational enterprise to develop global citizens who understand just what is at stake, who appreciate the trade-offs that our policy choices necessarily entail, who care passionately about restoring Earth's health, who know how to take positive steps in this regard, and who will impel their fellows to join them in doing so. A liberally educated man or woman of the 21st century will not be a passive environmental bystander. For as the proverb teaches us, “We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.”⁸

As a final, forward-looking feature of a liberal arts education, I extrapolate from the environmental leadership I just described to leadership in general. Graduates of the best colleges should be prepared—indeed, they should be eager—to assume significant roles in the workplace, in their towns, in cultural organizations, and in the political arena. Carleton's alumni data show we have some untapped potential in this realm.⁹ So, for instance, our academic civic engagement program can help grow students'

⁵ Parker Palmer, “Humility, Chutzpah, and the Future of Democracy,” *The Chronicle Review*, August 29, 2010, pp. B10 and B13.

⁶ Visuality Initiative (VIS), “Visualizing the Liberal Arts.” Carleton College.

⁷ Nannerl Keohane, “The Role of Elite Higher Education,” in Philip Altbach, Patricia Gumport, and D. Bruce Johnstone, eds., *In Defense of American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 184.

⁸ This proverb, often attributed to Native American sages, in fact appears to have originated with environmentalist David Brower. See David Brower, *Let the Mountains Talk, Let the Rivers Run* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), pp. 1-2.

⁹ Majorities of respondents from all class eras in the 2009 Alumni Survey wanted Carleton to increase attention to the teaching of leadership skills. Carleton College Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (IRA). “Alumni Survey 2009: Summary of Results by Class Decade.” Carleton College. http://apps.carleton.edu/ira/assets/Alumni_Survey_2009_by_Class_Decade.pdf, pp. 25-26. (accessed September 12, 2010).

leadership skills. To be sure, our alumni must be equally comfortable serving as contributing followers, but it is not self-aggrandizing to assert that one of the conscious designs of the liberal arts is to prepare leaders.

Our archive of knowledge grows over time, so the characteristics of a liberally educated person show similar accretion. As new strands of expertise were added to our intellectual instrument, the seven-stringed lyre of classical Rome turned into a 12-stringed guitar, and then into a modern harp with 47 strings ranging over more than six octaves. However, as we look ahead I wonder whether our emphasis now is less about accumulating new ranks of discrete knowledge that can be plucked when needed and more about mastering chords and glissandi that draw different types of learning together.

As we wrap our arms around the shifting nature of the liberal arts, another question smolders. Even if one agrees that this is the best kind of education, can students simply acquire these skills without attending classes in person and living on a campus for four years? Can a good liberal arts education—or, more provocatively, a “good enough” version of it—be delivered online, asynchronously, on a schedule (more accelerated or more drawn out) that is better aligned with a student’s needs? In short, why does one need a *residential* liberal arts college experience? Is what we produce here simply an anachronistic indulgence?

No, it is not.

From a pedagogical perspective, something magical, alchemical, happens when a teacher and students work together in close proximity. Energy crackles as ideas fly and lasting connections and memories are made. I acknowledge that distance-learning technology grows in sophistication. The gap narrows between face-to-face instruction and what can be achieved online. We ignore this at our peril, and we must be willing to adopt

alternative modes of instruction when they are more effective.

Yet for now there is no equal for being part of a community where teachers and students directly share the discovery and transmission of knowledge. Richer learning occurs when classroom topics are connected to out-of-class experiences, reinforcing educational goals. Data from national studies confirm that when the curriculum and co-curriculum are closely integrated—for instance, through service learning, community-based research, leadership development programs, or engagement in artistic endeavors—students grow in their moral reasoning, leadership, openness to diversity, and positive attitudes toward learning for the sake of learning.¹⁰

Moreover, in a residential community like Carleton, where bright young people are purposefully put into sustained contact, tough but necessary learning takes place about differences and how to work through them. This can range from the mundane—calling out a boorish roommate—to the profound—when an atheist comes to respect how her friend’s religious faith provided genuine solace in a time of need. Seizing the educational opportunities inherent in a residential campus is neither easy nor painless; a hand stuck into the flame can burn and blister. So there is great need for the salve of mutual respect and compassion. The way we treat each other reflects our connectedness.

We fall short of our purpose when individuals or groups are disenfranchised. A recent Campus Climate survey cautions us, for instance, that we still have work to do to ensure that all minority students and students from every socioeconomic group drink fully at the cup of what Carleton can offer.

At their best, residential colleges provide students with individualized attention so that it becomes impossible to hide in class or slip between the cracks. Here, we

reject anonymity. Each student, each faculty and staff member, is exhorted and led to embrace a community that goes on after classes—and, as Carleton alums testify—extends long after one’s graduation.

It is striking how these characteristics of—and outcomes from—a residential college reinforce the very intellectual skills I have posited will be among the most important in coming years. Review that list: suppleness of mind, the ability to synthesize knowledge, discernment of value, putting one’s life in a broader context, depth of human connections, leadership. Carleton thus fills critical needs at a critical time.

However, simple affirmations that a residential liberal arts college is the wisest choice will not keep us from getting scorched—for we need to do a better job explaining and proving our worth in an era of growing skepticism. Demands for accountability will not abate. So we must marshal strong, verifiable evidence that supports our claims. We can draw links between our Comps requirement and preparation for graduate school and jobs, we can point to the disproportionate number of PhDs produced by Carleton and its peers,¹¹ we can show how the frequency with which today’s graduates will change careers places a premium on liberal arts training, we may even convince some doubtful parents and students with studies that show a high return on investment on a Carleton degree.¹² But our best hope will be longitudinal data demonstrating that, over the course of one’s life, a liberal arts education produces individually and societally important outcomes. Proving such causation will be hard, but we need to address this question through rigorous research and we need to trumpet positive results.

A brief but important aside here on this notion of trumpeting Carleton’s quality and success. To be sure, “tooting one’s own horn” can be unseemly. In the words of that paragon prairie philosopher, Garrison Keillor:

“I come from Minnesota, where it is considered shameful to be shameless, where modesty is always in fashion, where self promotion is looked at askance. Give us a gold trophy and we will have it bronzed so you won’t think that we think we’re special. . . . The basis of modesty is winter. When it is 10 below zero and the wind is whipping across the tundra, there is no such thing as stylish and smart, and everybody’s nose runs.”¹³

I have not experienced a full-throated Minnesota winter, so my acclimatization is not yet complete. But there is a difference between sharing the facts with justifiable pride and offensively naked self promotion. On our own terms, in our own honest style, I would have us tell our story enthusiastically and more widely.

When all is said and done though, the argument on behalf of Carleton goes much deeper than remuneration, other instrumental outcomes, or preparation for global citizenship. For a central purpose of a great liberal arts education is simply to lead a fulfilling life. We do well to recall the admonition of the Roman philosopher Seneca:

“You know how to measure the circle; you find the square of any shape which is set before you; you compute the distances between the stars; there is nothing which does not come within the scope of your calculations. But if you are a real master of your profession, measure me the mind of man! . . . You know what a straight line is; but how does it benefit

¹⁰ C. Blaich, A. Bost, et al., “Executive Summary: Defining Liberal Arts Education,” Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, Center for Inquiry, Wabash College. December 2, 2005. <http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/defining-liberal-education> (accessed September 9, 2010).

¹¹ Joan Burelli, Alan Rapoport, and Rolf Lehming, National Science Foundation, *Baccalaureate Origins of S&E Doctorate Recipients*, NSF 08-311, July 2008.

¹² See, e.g., Bloomberg/Businessweek, “What’s Your College Degree Worth?” http://businessweek.com/interactive_reports/bs_collegeROI_0621.html (accessed September 15, 2010). (Carleton ranked 59th among colleges and universities in 2010).

¹³ Garrison Keillor, “The Season of Letter-Perfect Families,” From the Desk of Garrison Keillor, *A Prairie Home Companion*. http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/features/deskofgk/2006_scout/12/19.shtml (accessed September 11, 2010).

you if you do not know what is straight in this life of ours?"¹⁴

The truth is we cannot know how or how well our students will use the education we provide them. We cannot know where the new ideas, performances, or discoveries of our faculty will lead. The lightning strikes, the fire ignites, it burns where it burns. But we have faith in the fiery enterprise, faith that there will be regeneration, new beauty, enduring value and meaning in what transpires. That faith has always been warranted.

In this time of pressure for change and heightened scrutiny across all of American higher education, institutions that think boldly and wisely and that convey a crisp vision in compelling terms to prospective students, their families, alumni, and benefactors will flourish. Institutions with less focus, with an ill-defined or poorly chosen niche, or just a weakly articulated message, are likely to falter. So this is an opportune moment for Carleton to bring its typical passion to bear on being—and being celebrated as—one of the tiny handful of the best colleges in the nation.

Such boldness is characteristic of Carleton's ingenuity and faith in itself—more accurately, justified faith in itself—across its history. The College's founding president, James Strong, drew on his career as a Congregational minister to "build from the poor fragments at hand an enduring institution."¹⁵ His evangelical zeal for Carleton carried him across the nation and sustained him through a near-fatal carriage accident to gain the support of our namesake benefactor William Carleton. Donald Cowling—who, perhaps more than anyone, made Carleton a significant college—had to be a bit of a plunger. Even as it made investments in quality, Cowling's Carleton was chronically in debt. Much of the funds Cowling raised

simply kept creditors from the door.¹⁶ Each successive president, and each generation of partner trustees and faculty, has had the vision and fortitude to focus on what Carleton needed most. I am the grateful beneficiary of the unstinting devotion and wise actions of all these predecessors.

The task before us is to enhance our excellence and have Carleton be a nationally and internationally acclaimed model of a liberal arts college. I am not so presumptuous as to claim that—after just a few short weeks as president—I possess the road map as to how precisely Carleton will achieve this. Besides, we need less of a road map and more of a full itinerary that addresses what key items we need to take with us, what must we do first, and how to track our progress so we know when we reach our destination. Such a shared vision can only come by tapping the wisdom of the entire Carleton community. As I have already discussed, careful attention to the best future curriculum will be an integral part of the College's profile. But there are a series of other needs to address as we begin our conversations about Carleton's excellence. We need to ensure student quality; keep Carleton affordable; nurture and benefit from student, faculty, and staff diversity in all its varieties; offer competitive salaries; address deferred maintenance; and pay more purposeful attention to our students' careers and lives after college. Because we cannot do everything that we would like (or need) to do right now, we shall have to set priorities—and then live with our choices. What must be done first? Offer more generous financial aid packages? Provide every student an international experience? Add more faculty? Achieve carbon neutrality more swiftly? Raise Carleton's visibility so we can do more of these other things? Fundamental to all discussions will be consideration of Carleton's optimal size and how we

construct a self-sustaining, more robust economy for the College.

With each tough question we raise, each additional pressing obligation we identify, another match is struck, and more heated debate—and cooling consideration—must ensue before a clear and verdant future emerges for Carleton. But as we have seen, this is necessary and natural and healthy.

Accordingly, this winter, after I've had an opportunity to meet individually with academic departments, administrative units, with student groups, trustees, alumni, and other friends, we shall construct a broadly inclusive strategic planning process to shape Carleton's future. Our last formal planning exercise led to the report of the Twenty-First Century Committee in 1998 and its 2002 update; it is time to do this again. Substantive planning conversations will begin next spring. Together, we need to evaluate a wide range of ideas to confirm our values and how they shape our goals, clarify those goals and establish priorities among them, and settle upon necessary actions and appropriate measures and safeguards. I expect that, as we develop and refine our thinking in a transparent way, a consensus will emerge. Throughout this process, I shall push myself and all of you to think harder and more creatively about how to make the College even more intellectually distinctive and superb. It is imperative that we engage in this kind of planning, not simply for Carleton's sake—critical as that trust is to all of us—but also for the sake of the liberal arts as an educational enterprise.

The need to make tough choices is not troubling, for Carleton has always had to do this. We are used to being on the horns of the dilemma presented by grand aspirations and a soberingly modest endowment. Fortunately, we are also blessed with rare assets,

starting with a broadly shared commitment to an important and singular mission. We recognize our vulnerabilities and admit where we can improve. We are inventive. Carleton draws faculty who embody the ideal of teacher-scholar, and staff who mentor students with the same passion as our faculty and whose loyalty and commitment also stretches across decades. These faculty and staff members have given us thousands of faithful alumni, whose generosity continues to ensure that Carleton has sufficient resources to deliver a mind- and world-shaking education to our students. While we may not have as many fiscal cards to play as we would like, we can and shall deploy those that are in our hand exceptionally well—including the flexibility to redeploy assets where needed. The College's new president will also work assiduously to raise new funds. If heretofore Carleton has always done more with less, surely it is time to try to do more with more!

The fundamental responsibility we have all assumed is to make certain that Carleton is even stronger and more distinguished 20, 50, and 100 years from now. Our exciting academic programs, pedagogical approaches, global initiatives, scholarly breakthroughs, and ways of guiding students—in short, our ideas about the best liberal arts education—can kindle a flame or ignite a conflagration that sweeps across the educational landscape like the social movements that rattled and reinvigorated the Burned-over District, like the natural and man-made fires that are so vital to our regional ecosystem. As we do this, serious students will continue to flock here for an education that literally transforms their lives, remarkable faculty and staff will find this College the most fulfilling place to teach and do scholarship and to work, and the world will come to admire even more what we have wrought and do here together.

¹⁴ Ben R. Schneider, Jr., trans., Lucius Annaeus Seneca. *Moral Epistles*, LXXXVIII: On Liberal and Vocational Studies. http://www.stoics.com/seneca_epistles_book_2.html#%E2%80%98LXXXVIII1 (accessed September 9, 2010).

¹⁵ Leal Headley and Merrill Jarchow, *Carleton: The First Century* (Northfield, MN: Carleton College, 1966), p. 113.

¹⁶ Merrill Jarchow, *Donald J. Cowling* (Northfield, MN: Carleton College, 1974), pp. 281, 305–309.