

“Like the Ceiling Can't Hold Us': Making Room for STEM, the Humanities, and Party Culture”

2014 Phi Beta Kappa Student Oration

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First of all, congratulations, welcome to the club. We'll do the secret handshaky bit you've all been waiting for in a second and hopefully that will help you all smile and relax a little. In all seriousness though: bravo, brava, well done, keep going, keep striving for excellence, and, whatever else you do, never forget to thank those that got you here. I trust you know who they are.

Before I start clapping anyone too eagerly on the back, let me confess a little something. When I was asked to be the student orator today, to come and orate to you, or perhaps at you, I sort of panicked --- because the truth is, I don't know Latin -- and really how can one hope to orate properly without an opening verse of incomprehensible Latin, some rich juicy line of classical wisdom. So knowing that otherwise, this speech would be doomed from the onset, I asked for some suggestions from a long-time mentor of mine and a close friend of every student on this campus: first name Wiki, last name Pedia. But the suggestions on the “list of latin aphorisms” page were not exactly apropos.... I'll give you a few examples:

“Qui me amat, amat et canem meam” (whoever loves me, loves my dog).

“Macdonaldus Senex fundum habuit. E-I-E-I-O.” (Old Macdonald had a farm. E-I-E-I-O)

“Quantum materiae materietur marmota monax si marmota monax materiam possit materiari?” (How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if...)

Long story short, the further down I scanned the Wikipage, the less those quotes seemed pertinent or eloquent. Not only did they not suit me as a speaker, they didn't suit you as an audience, didn't suit us as an era. Which only made me think a little more: how odd that most of us -- I won't say all of us, but most of us in this room cannot understand a lick of Latin. How is it that in our ferocious quest for progress, we've come to think that Latin is not worth teaching at the university, that it's 'useless'?

Worth and use are the very same concerns with which we entered the university in the first place, and with which our parents are watching us now, more avidly than ever, as we prepare to leave it. How many of you, out of curiosity, actually have default answer ready for when people ask you the dreaded question: “Oh cool, what are you going to do with that?” And sometimes, like at the cheese store in Highland Park Village where I work, people usually with large wallets get sassy and say stuff like: “So basically what you're saying is, you're just gonna read the classics until you starve in a hut somewhere in Alaska?” And then they'll start validating their claim with prognoses about the future of education: “I hear you can get those super-awesome humanities critical skills elsewhere now, yeah like online, for free, there's like an App for it or something. Oh and yeah, writing skills, those are important too I guess, but well, you know I hear that writing will be done by robots soon anyways, you won't even have to consciously think of anything, it'll just download straight from your hypothalamus and bam they'll put the commas in automatically wherever the heck they need to be; so tell me *really* why didn't you study something practical instead” -- Now I'm not a bitter or homicidal person by nature, but in those moments, it's a good thing cheese knives are designed to be blunt.

Worth and Use. We've all heard of the acronym STEM because we've all read it in the

headlines preceded by the words “more funding goes towards...” or “the future of the American economy depends on...” And although it’s seldom outrightly stated, the other half of that message, the glass-half-empty part of that message is “the economy does not depend on and could probably make do without the Humanities.”

Now let me be clear. I don’t want to present these two camps, STEM and the Humanities, as though they were at war -- that would be firstly a silly exaggeration *and* secondly, I think, a pretty disrespectful metaphor when you consider how much of the world is currently at war -- but whatever the relationship is between STEM and the Humanities, things aren’t at peace in the academy. Students who have had to pull out egregious loans to pay for both the virtues and the excesses of a college education are voting with their feet and their degree plans. Most are unwilling to suffer the low scores and the sleepless nights of tough weed-out STEM classes; and, rather than walk over to the Humanities, where they know they’ll only find some of their favorite professors scraping at the bottom of the academy’s financial barrell, trying to publish so as to not perish, these same students are coming to the sad conclusion that pre-professional is not just one of many possible tracks within college but its very definition, the *sine qua non* of their diploma.

Around the time I left Mechanical Engineering and became an English and Pure Math double major, also known as the least practical and least sexy double major ever, I started hearing more and more about a new trend in progressive universities: the buzzword was ‘interdisciplinary’ ...and actually, let’s test something, say it with me, ‘interdisciplinary,’ nice and loud, like you mean it, like you’re trying to sell it, 1-2-3 ‘interdisciplinary.’ Ok, that’s what I thought, there’s no way this became a popular term on its own merit -- that word is impossible to pronounce sensually unless you close your eyes and think of Marilyn Monroe really hard or something. But nevertheless just like that it began rolling off the tongues of practically every college dean in the Western Hemisphere, and new fields like ‘computational linguistics,’ ‘ecovangelistic studies,’ ‘evolutionary psychology,’ and the Digital Humanities have started cropping up and gaining serious traction (by the way, dear English professors, that was not a *mixed* metaphor just now; it was an interdisciplinary metaphor).

Now, why am I telling you all this. Because a lot of smart people have begun to see this catchy interdisciplinary stuff as a great way to reconcile the two cultures, STEM and the Humanities, and bring everybody back kumbaya-style under the dome of the academy. There are skeptical opinions, don’t get me wrong; some see the interdisciplinary merely as a fad; others, as a palliative but no real remedy; still others, as a catastrophe for the purity of the arts, or the purity of the sciences. Time will tell who is right, my opinion is with the optimists, but that *now* of all times should be the moment when the Humanities take a particular interest in crossing disciplinary borders -- that to me is suspicious. On the one hand, I think there is a genuine hope that new and very interesting approaches will lead to new and very interesting questions, new and very interesting insights -- and that’s wonderful, I love it. On the other hand, I’m afraid there’s a more insidious current underwriting the rise of the interdisciplinary, a current that originates from a deep insecurity within the Humanities, an insecurity that falsely encourages the less-profitable and less-practical disciplines to think that they will suddenly be able to ride the coattails of science and computation out of the foxhole they dug for themselves during the theory wars of the late 20th century and into a brave new world of public relevance, great funding, nicer facilities, and big, crunchy data.

Truth be told; It wouldn’t be the first time that the humanities have been envious enough

of the sciences to want to borrow their methods and terminology -- it is in fact precisely because of that envy that disciplines we think of today as pillars of the academy, disciplines like English and Political Science, first arose; we shouldn't be surprised nor worried that in hard times the market is making the Humanities turn once again to the juggernaut of science for momentum. My concern is that they're turning to it also for credence.

Alright, hang on to that thought and let me come back to the only truly important topic of this talk: Latin. In addition to having been the tongue of scholarly work par excellence, Latin has the great but seldom recognized distinction of having been the language of choice for some of history's wildest, booziest, trashiest parties... if there's one latin word SMU students are more familiar with than they probably even know it's got to be 'bacchanalia.' Let me quickly share with you one of my favorite vignettes from my time on campus: I was leaving a class, walking by the big seal in the middle of Dallas Hall when I overheard a student readapt the school's motto: *Veritas Liberabit Vos*, the truth will set you free. Now this student, she was standing there, intensely contemplating the words on the seal, when she turned to her friend and said in a just beautiful metaphysical way: You know, if the truth won't set you free, the party tonight totally will. And on that note, they skipped out the double doors of Dallas Hall screaming YOLO! and were probably not seen at the library that evening. We truly are a party generation, not just at SMU but everywhere, and that which cannot rise above the sound of our music, or cut through the indifference of our dancing does not scare us. But whereas the generations before us were full of rebels without a cause, we seem to be partiers without a cause. Some of you might know a rapper named Asher Roth and his hit song "I love College" -- which I don't recommend at all, by the way, but which I will cite, not rap, but cite, because I think it sums things up nicely:

I cant tell you what I learned from school,
But (nah) I could tell you a story or two, um
Yeah of course I learned some rules
Like dont pass out with your shoes on
And dont leave the house til the booze gone

And I'll skip a few lines here because I think Dr. Wheeler is legitimately pulling out an Amazonian blowgun from her pocket and inserting a poisoned dart with my name on it, but the message summarizes itself in the final line of the chorus, when Asher Roth says:

Time isn't wasted when you're getting wasted.

If the rapper is right, (and that's not a very big if) then we drink to drink, we party to party, whatever the reason, whatever the date, Tuesday as much as Friday. We put the same "X"s on our wrists when we go to bars and clubs that we're trying to put in the box next to "college degree completed," and we console ourselves with the statistical certainty that whatever we end up studying, we'll probably end up doing something completely unrelated in "real life," so we might as well live it up while we can.

Now I know this will sound odd, but I sincerely wish people would treat the Humanities the way they treat their party life, rather than the way they treat them now. Because the study of the

Humanities, unlike the study of medicine, or STEM, or anything preprofessional, has no intrinsic survival value; rather, as C.S. Lewis put it, it is one of those things, like friendships and sunsets and parties, that give meaning to our survival. To tie things back to my earlier point, if the Humanities today are caught in this phobia of being useless and therefore expendable, if they're clinging to the sciences or to the interdisciplinary for fear of suffering the same fate as the Latin language, it is because we have so sadly forgotten what their "purpose" was to begin with. Not to save lives (although they can), not to reduce global poverty and injustice (although they can), not to guarantee you a salary upon graduation for your outstanding critical skills (although they can do that too!) -- they were meant simply to revel, to party, to joyously celebrate the richness of our human existence because that is the most fascinating thing in the world. And those who choose to indulge in this vital luxury are also called to celebrate it with a seriousness of purpose that honors and makes sense of the hard work of STEM and Medicine et cetera. My father who is sitting in this room with us is a physician at UTSouthwestern; he studied medicine for many many arduous years not because it would make him money, but because he loved it and he loved the people it would help. The only certainty I can give him in return that these last four years have not been in vain is that, if I've decided I want to pursue a graduate degree in literature and eventually teach, it is because I would be doing so for the same reasons he became what he is today; because I love literature and I love the people it would help.

And I know some of you in the room are still thinking "Arnaud that's really nice and dreamy but come on, man, be reasonable; I still have to pay off loans and get a well-paying job; I want to live comfortably." And you're right, you're absolutely right, times are hard, I should be more reasonable; but then again so should you. You are already among the minority of people that have daily access to showers; to clean water; to Jimmy John's sandwiches; and to a nice warm bed; you're among the 6.7% of the world's population that ever gets the chance to spend four years at college -- you will get a job, you will earn money, have no fear. But if you choose not to spend your youth cultivating the great questions of our time (why are we here? what does it mean to be human? what is love and why does it hurt so much?) then who else can and will afford to. The real question is not what will be the purpose of your major but what will be the purpose of your wealth? I don't know about you but I can only entertain so far the objection that says: I would rather worry about the creature comforts of my life than about the nature of my very existence. Friends, I can assure you I will never make much money; I will also never be poor.

So speaking of money, will emphasizing and funding STEM make for a better economy - yes, well it had better, and I'm quite certain it will. Will supporting the Arts and the Humanities really make for better citizens and more consciously human humans - yes, if we do it right. Will pitting the two against each other in a struggle over the scarce resources of funding and student interest and classroom space and tenure and public significance spell out disaster -- yes, in the long run which is always quickly becoming the short run. The chorus of another popular song, this one by a rapper named Macklemore, asks all the partiers and merrymakers in the hizzle to throw their hands up 'like the ceiling can't hold us.' If you look at your pamphlets, that's where I drew the title of this talk. Because Macklemore and the politico-economic discourse of our time are patently wrong: the ceiling of the academy, the dome of Dallas Hall, can in fact hold us, but only if we, as scholars of Dedman College and more broadly as Scholars of the Humanities and the Sciences, decide to dance more closely with one another.

I know I've talked way too long, so let me wrap this up quickly. The word oration ultimately comes from the latin word 'orare' -- to pray, to beseech. I think at this point you all know what I'm beseeching -- I'm asking you to learn Latin, I'm asking you to question and counteract the utilitarianism that is pushing the Humanities out the door of the academy. And that would be a pretty cliché message if I weren't asking you to do so by restarting and redesigning the engines of SMU's party culture. Because I think we can all agree on this: The joy we experience when a professor like Jasper Neel recites Hamlet's soliloquys from memory with all the pathos and all the bathos that a Mississippi-man can muster while dressed in a seersucker suit waving a genuine long sword before a gaggle of 21st century kids, convincing them for a sacred three minutes that maybe, just maybe that Shakespeare guy was on to something; when Dr. Brandy Stigler makes you fall so head-over-heels in love with mathematics that at 2:00 AM you're still happy to be beating your forehead against the chalkboard because you can't remember if the derivative of cosine of x is just sine of x or minus sine of x; and when a German professor like Gordon Birrell encapsulates every precious thing you've ever learned into a single gorgeous word like 'Lebensbejahung' (the act of saying "Jawohl" to life) --- that kind of joy is more intoxicating than absynthe, it draws deeper from the wellspring of our emotions than laser lights, pulsing soundwaves, flying dollarbills, and twerking could ever hope to. And yet, since ancient Greece and Rome and the very dawn of Western civilization we have never needed an excuse to throw a party; why then are we having to apologize and compromise and interdisciplinarize today just to celebrate the love of learning?

If this talk had gone as I'd first envisioned it, there would be a disco ball coming out of the ceiling right now, and you'd be hearing the groovy strains of Kool & the Gang's top-hit "Celebrate good times!" But Dr. Fomby had three convincing counter-arguments: (1) we don't have the budget for that (2) we're not that kind of fraternity and (3) anything but that song. So instead, I want to end where I wasn't able to start -- here is your Latin proverb for the day, hopefully for life:

Celebrate duris. Studete durius. Et videte non differentia.

Party hard. Study harder. And quit seeing a difference between the two.

Congratulations once again on your induction to the nation's longest-ongoing frat party, celebrating the good times and the bad times too since 1776. Cheers!