

Toward a Thriving and Inclusive Community at Richmond: Remarks at Phi Beta Kappa Induction Ceremony

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As delivered.

Thank you, Elizabeth, for that kind introduction. And good evening! I am delighted to join you tonight to celebrate this year's Phi Beta Kappa inductees.

Our nation's oldest and most prestigious academic honor society, Phi Beta Kappa recognizes that the "curiosity and creativity cultivated by a liberal arts and sciences education are essential to making the most of life's experiences."

We will talk about curiosity, creativity, and making the most of life's experiences in a moment. But I would like to begin by celebrating liberal education itself.

A liberal education offers a foundational education in the arts and sciences, one in which students acquire broad knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world and grapple with big questions, both contemporary and enduring. This broad knowledge is complemented by deep study of a particular area of inquiry—your major—as well as the development of skills in speaking, writing, research, and analysis.

For centuries, these essential areas of inquiry—by whatever term they were known—have been recognized as the foundation for advancing the frontiers of knowledge and essential preparation for leadership.

Cardinal John Henry Newman, a 19th century theologian, described liberal education as "a broad exposure to the outlines of knowledge." As Cardinal Newman put it, liberal education "seeks to develop all the things in us that make us distinctively human."

Though the term liberal education may not resonate with everyone, employers and business leaders in the United States today, when asked about the qualities they seek in new hires, overwhelmingly focus on qualities that students receive from a liberal education—effective writing and communication skills; analytical and problem-solving skills; the capacity to create connections across disciplinary, organizational and cross-cultural boundaries; and the ability to work effectively in diverse groups.

In short, a liberal education prepares graduates to be agile learners, equipped for the rapid pace and complexity of change in today's world. It prepares them, as it has for centuries, to advance knowledge and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

You who are being honored here tonight chose Richmond for the excellence of the liberal education that we offer here, and you have taken the fullest possible advantage of it.

Through this education you have come to recognize more completely that the challenges we face—such as poverty, terrorism, climate change, economic inequality, and emerging diseases—will be addressed most effectively by those who are prepared with a strong liberal education and a desire to lead purposeful lives as socially responsible, global citizens.

While liberal education has a long history, its contours—what constitutes “the broad outlines of knowledge”—have been contested, and only recently has diversity of perspectives, in the canon and among those who have access to higher education, been important values of liberal education.

Today, at its best, liberal education enables students from all backgrounds and experiences to engage with one another on diverse and inclusive campuses like ours, where they are challenged to grapple with new ideas and build understanding in an environment that fosters collaboration and trust.

When discussing this kind of education—the contours of 21st century liberal education—I often quote from a 2015 *New York Times* article, entitled “Diversity Makes You Brighter.” The article describes the outcomes of an academic study in which participants competed in groups to find accurate answers to problems.

The researchers observed the behaviors of homogenous and diverse groups (meaning that diverse groups included at least one participant of another ethnicity or race). The results were striking.

Diverse groups were 58% more accurate than homogenous groups, and these contrasts held in separate studies conducted in the United States and in Asia.

Further, and I am now quoting, “diversity brought *cognitive friction* that enhanced deliberation.” In short, the study’s authors found that, “diversity improves the way people think. By disrupting conformity, racial and ethnic diversity prompts people to scrutinize facts, think more deeply and develop their own opinions.”

The researchers summarized their findings in this manner: “Ethnic diversity is like fresh air: It benefits everybody who experiences it.”

Using this fresh air of cognitive friction and deliberation to advance knowledge and address problems is the essence of liberal education.

Those of you who grew up in the United States came of age in a more racially diverse America than any other generation. Signs of attempted racial healing permeated your childhood—humanities curricula that were expanding to include the contributions of women and people of color, the contesting and dismantling of offensive statues and symbols. The U.S. elected its first African-American president, in an election that saw young voters of all backgrounds flocking to the polls in record numbers.

In fact, a recent MTV survey found that most people age 14 to 24 think racism is largely a “bogeyman of the past,” that no longer exists today. Nearly 70% of respondents in the MTV survey said they “don’t see people of color any differently than they do white people.”

But evidence abounds that the post-racial, inclusive community that we aspire to remains beyond our reach. And I would suggest that one reason it remains beyond our reach is that it is uncomfortable to acknowledge its existence: It is hard.

Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, former president of Spelman College, wrote a book in 1999 entitled, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Like the aforementioned, “Diversity Makes Us Brighter,” she pulled no punches with her title.

Dr. Tatum is currently updating her book to include new data collected during the past 20 years. It will be interesting to see what she uncovers. But in her original work, she stated that all people are “hard-wired to be tribalistic and seek people who remind us of ourselves. Part of this is survival, wanting to belong and find cooperation with the group. Part of the tendency is energy saving: It requires less energy to acclimate to people who share our values, likes, and struggles.”

Neuroscience is helping us to understand the way in which unconscious or implicit bias also drives these divisions. As Dr. Tatum said, we are “hard wired.” Or, as the authors of “Diversity Makes You Brighter” put it, diversity creates “cognitive friction,” and we don’t always seek out friction. We are drawn to the echo chambers that our neighborhoods and social networks have become.

Our brains want to help us understand the world, and part of that understanding comes from sorting the world into familiar groups. We simplify our encounters with one another by sorting people. Those groupings, then, come to be associated with particular traits or characteristics. And those groupings can be influenced by stereotypes of all kinds, and color our judgments and decisions.

Other recent research found that one way in which housing segregation is perpetuated—despite the fact that people *say* they want to live in diverse neighborhoods—is that people “just don’t know about [other] areas or have inaccurate preconceptions about them.”

As one author put it, “If my friends all look like me, their knowledge is about places where people like me live.” And so our narrow social networks and our tendency toward familiar pathways work to separate us, even as we espouse abstract social values that celebrate inclusivity and diversity.

So how do we create the community we want—when the problems seem solved—or are partly the result of judgments we don’t fully realize we are rendering? How does liberal education at its best help us build the communities we wish to inhabit?

I don't think there is an easy solution for the inequality and deep divisions in our society. I do think we can make important differences by using curiosity and creativity—those aforementioned Phi Beta Kappa values—to be *intentional* about the inclusive communities we want to build, and resist the well-worn paths to build them.

At Richmond, and indeed throughout the world, we know that far more unites us than divides us. To illustrate this fact, I'll ask you to complete the following sentence: I am {blank}, with as many descriptors as you can think of in 15 seconds.

[Pause here]

I'll go first. Mine would include honest, neat (well, most of the time), a son, a musician, and someone who loves to read. How many of you identified yourself with these same traits?

In her research, Dr. Tatum reminds us that we have multiple identities. But “the aspect of our identity that is the target of others’ attention ... that which sets us apart as exceptional and ‘other’” tends to be foregrounded—by others and even ourselves.

As Dr. Tatum puts it, while “there may be countless ways one might be defined as exceptional, there are at least seven categories of “otherness” experienced in U.S. society. These are: race or ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and physical or mental ability. Each of these categories has a form of oppression associated with it, and in each case there is a group considered dominant.

In addition to encouraging us to see commonalities—as musicians, as book lovers, etcetera—Dr. Tatum also encourages us to be mindful of both our dominant and our subordinate identities, because most of us share both dominant and subordinate traits.

When we foreground our *shared* characteristics and are mindful of these categories of otherness, we can embrace new ways of thinking. As Eboo Patel, who spoke at our Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration in January, put it, “people can disagree on fundamental or ultimate concerns,” such as religious and spiritual foundations, “but still work together on other” concerns. Our areas of difference or disagreement need not divide us.

But we have to seek those commonalities. We have to come to the conversation—and to our communities—willing to have our ideas and our *assumptions* challenged.

Liberal education helps us to do these things. It provides the depth of knowledge, encourages the curiosity, and enhances our appreciation of complexity. At its best, it prepares us to be persistent in difficult situations.

As I conclude my remarks, let me share a story about inclusivity and the rewards of persisting in the discomfort of getting to know one another in meaningful ways.

Nearly two decades ago, while I was Dean of the Butler School of Music at the University of Texas at Austin, I traveled to meet the CEO of a successful company to talk about funding for violin scholarships. We had barely finished shaking hands when the words came out of his mouth: “I had no idea you were black.”

I, of course, was quite aware of the fact that I was black and not sure why it was worthy of comment, so his salutation stopped me in my tracks.

This wasn't the way I expected to begin a conversation about financial aid or any other topic. I didn't respond immediately. Instead, I thought of the lessons of my father, a man who was prone to passionate and sometimes regrettable outbursts as a young man but who, as an adult and a parent, had taught my brothers and me to pause, contemplate, and listen in situations like this.

So I paused, and I listened as my host wondered aloud why there were so few black violinists, and how the classical arts community could better recruit artists of color. In reply, I spoke passionately about the Butler School, and in particular a very talented black violin student, who was studying for her master's degree.

This enthusiastic exchange of ideas quickly overshadowed my initial shock at how our conversation had begun. Had I given in to my discomfort—and responded in the way I was first inclined—I would have missed out on the chance for a remarkable partnership.

But I gave him a chance, and he gave me the same. And that chance revealed a strong shared set of commitments—a set of commonalities that was far stronger than our differences.

You have accomplished considerable things already in your young lives. Your intellect and skills will put you in situations where you will have the opportunity to raise your voices and to lead. This is what we hope for in our students. Take these lessons with you when you leave.

I would also hope that you continue to commit yourselves to listening. Commit yourselves to listening, even when what you hear knocks you off-balance; and to engaging fully, even if you fear that your perspectives may not be shared or welcomed. Embrace an energetic civility, where respect for new ideas is evident in our civil discourse, but where we make abundant room for diverse thoughts and perspectives. These conversations may not always be easy, but they will always be enriching; and they will give you the opportunity to share your wisdom and opinions with others.

As you well know, the curiosity that you have cultivated here at Richmond will not be satisfied by following worn paths. Follow your passions, explore new paths, and remain ever curious for new knowledge, people, and perspectives. Doing so will enable you to make the most of life's experiences.

As Phi Beta Kappa members, you reflect the very best of a Richmond liberal education—an education that prepares graduates to engage meaningfully, disagree respectfully, meet challenges with resilience and compassion, and discern new possibilities for the world in which we live.

Congratulations on your achievements, and may your educational explorations never end.

Thank you.