Remarks to the Phi Beta Kappa Ceremony

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Thank you, Dr. Oyewole, for those kind words. And many thanks to you and to the University for inviting me to speak here today and be part of the Phi Beta Kappa induction ceremony.

I’d like to begin by offering my congratulations to those being honored here today through induction into the Phi Beta Kappa Society. This is truly a noteworthy moment in your academic career, and you are to be commended for your achievements.

 I also want to state – right up front – that I just don’t feel old enough to be here in this capacity. When I talk to people about my time at Trinity, it doesn’t seem so long ago. However, if we’re going to be honest, I graduated from Trinity in 1994, so it’s been just about 20 years since I was hurrying down the marble corridor, racing off to the science building, or making the trek to and from Kirby Hall. But, even if I don’t feel old enough to be here – the fact that I am here suggests that folks must think I have learned something valuable enough to pass on to you, in the time since I left Trinity.

Clearly, I don’t need to speak to this audience about academic excellence. The fact that you are here, being inducted into the Nation's oldest and most widely known academic honor society, tells me - and everyone around you - that you have mastered academic excellence. Instead, what I’d like to talk to you about today is interdisciplinary excellence – a particular type of excellence rooted in the liberal arts tradition.

The first thing you should know about me is that I am a scientist. I came to Trinity as one of the first recipients of the Clare Boothe Luce scholarship for women in science and the degree I earned here was a bachelor’s of science in biology. I mention this, because, when I first arrived at Trinity, I was really ALL about the science. Initially, I wasn’t too thrilled to take classes in other disciplines. I just wanted to study biology, and get into the lab.

So it was that I begrudgingly took my first few required courses. [French, English lit. etc…] However, along the way, something interesting happened…I found that I really enjoyed some of my other classes. Who knew medieval history could be so awesome? And logic? That had to be one of my favorite non-biology-related courses. Oh – and religions of the west? Fascinating.

Now, you have likely figured that out already. You likely already understand the importance of a high-quality liberal arts education. You are likely already aware that a broad, diversified knowledge background is important.

What I’d like to share with you today, though, is that it is much more that that. This type of education is not only important – it is *essential*. It is not only an asset; it is a *requirement* for excelling in today’s interdisciplinary world.

A quality liberal arts education provides numerous benefits beyond the immediate (and obvious) one of simply experiencing and learning about other areas. It provides you with the ability to think critically and to approach multi-faceted problems in a way that others do not. This is something that you do not realize, until you leave Trinity and begin to apply it. Only then, do you notice the other, more subtle skills that you have acquired - the skills which will help you to succeed professionally. The skills that set you apart from others - skills like: the ability to learn independently, the ability to see the bigger picture, and the ability to communicate effectively.

To illustrate these points…

**“What I Did with my Liberal Arts Education”**

After leaving Trinity, I stayed in the DC area. I worked in a lab at the National Museum of Natural History during the day, waited tables at night, and generally availed myself of the myriad of opportunities for fun and mischief that exist for a single twenty-something in the DC area.

It took a few years, but my love of learning sent me back to school in 1997. This time, I went to the College of Marine Studies, which is a graduate school located in Lewes that is part of the University of Delaware. I had decided to specialize in marine biology. Here, I rode in *Alvin* (the same submersible that explored the wreck of the Titanic) a mile and a half below the ocean to study the weird and wonderful creatures that surround the hydrothermal vents on the sea floor.

After graduate school, I returned to DC and began working for the United States Environmental Protection Agency, where I am still employed today.

So far, I have spent most of my time at EPA in the Office of Research and Development (ORD).

I began my career at EPA in the part of ORD that runs EPA’s extramural grants program. I began as a junior project officer in that office, where I was responsible for managing a diverse portfolio of extramural grants, mostly focusing on aquatic ecology.

During this time, I also completed several details (temporary assignments), including, one to EPA’s Office of Water, one to EPA’s Office of Resources Management (EPA’s budget shop), and one to FEMA to aid in hurricane Katrina relief efforts. These details were fantastic opportunities to learn about operations within the other parts of my own Agency, as well as other parts of the Federal Government. Sound familiar? Medieval history, maybe? These “details” were optional. I could have stayed within ORD and not ventured out to learn about the other parts of EPA. I was not required to do them. I sought them out on my own. I knew that, in order to be more effective at my endeavors within ORD, I needed to know as much as I could about the other parts of the Agency. My time at Trinity taught me that.

Eventually, I became the Acting Division Director for the Environmental Sciences Division, the division I “grew up in” at EPA. That division included several key program areas which were outside my area of expertise - including Air, Global Climate Change and Human Health. With close to 40 employees, it was the largest division within the National Center for Environmental Research (NCER) and had an annual budget of approximately $50M – pretty small peanuts compared to NSF, but not too shabby for EPA. Again – sound familiar? Air? Human Health? How could I manage people and research in disciplines outside my own? Because I knew how to diversify. Because I knew how to learn on my own. Because I knew how to seek out information. How could I brief senior officials and talk to Congressional staff about the research I was managing? Because I could critically evaluate information and communicate effectively. My time at Trinity taught me that.

In 2009, I became the Deputy Director of the Washington Division of NCEA – The National Center for Environmental Assessment. Still within ORD, this Center houses EPA’s IRIS program. IRIS stands for Integrated Risk Information System. It is a human health assessment program that evaluates information on health effects that may result from exposure to environmental contaminants. My Division also does ecological risk assessments, including examining ecosystem effects from resource extraction techniques such as mountain top mining, hydraulic fracturing, and evaluating the potential effects on the salmon fishery of a proposed mining site in Alaska. You get the idea now, right? Risk Assessment? Mining? Energy Extraction? It doesn’t matter. I am a scientist with a broad knowledge base acquired from a lifetime of learning rooted in my liberal arts education. I can see the bigger picture. Yep. You guessed it…my time at Trinity taught me that.

The problems facing our society today – those that you will soon go out and begin to tackle - are interdisciplinary in nature and they will require interdisciplinary solutions. An example from my own field would be the challenge of Global Climate Change. We will need representatives from different professions and disciplines, including the social sciences and humanities, to tackle this issue that is so much more than a scientific problem, so much more than an environmental problem - it is a human problem. Government at all levels can develop policies, programs and procedures to protect human health and the environment, but the success of these policies ultimately depends on their reception by the public and they cannot be developed in isolation. This doesn’t mean that every scientist has to be a policy expert, but it does mean that today’s scientists must look beyond their initial collecting of data and envision the context in which it will be used. Conversely, policy-makers must also have some understanding of science, including knowledge about both its strengths and limitations – what it can and can’t do. It is those scientists and policy makers, then, who possess a broad understanding of related fields, complementary to their own, who are uniquely poised for success.

The final observation I would like to share with you is that the faculty and advisors here at Trinity are of the highest possible caliber - a point that again, is not really driven home until you leave. I have taken classes at several other excellent institutions, but the *quality* of teaching I got here at Trinity – the time and attention to detail – the time and attention given to the *individual* - is truly unparalleled.

So – in sum…You are well-prepared for the challenges you will embark upon, for you can truly do *anything* with a Liberal Arts Education. Mine took me from the halls of Trinity, to the bottom of the ocean, to the management ranks of EPA.

What will you do with yours?