***Critical Reading is THE Cornerstone***

*Remarks for DC Teachers*

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Thank you for inviting me to speak to you this morning about a topic that all of us think about constantly --- what kinds of educational experiences will help our students to be successful in school, in college, in careers and in life?

Let me start with some context. First, about Trinity: many of you may know us already. We are a small university that continues to house the oldest Catholic women’s college in America --- our College of Arts & Sciences now serving more than 1000 young women, 58% of whom are from the District of Columbia, another 30% from Prince Georges County. 95% of our students are African American and Latina; 85% are eligible for Pell Grants, and our median family income is just about $25,000. We also have coed graduate and professional programs in teaching and counseling, nursing, business and many other fields, and many adults in the DC region also have earned Trinity credits and degrees. We have a large and longstanding continuing education program for teachers that many of you may have experienced.

We are preparing students for a world that may well be unlike anything we, ourselves, experienced in the long postwar era after World War II. Most of us in this room grew up in what became known as “The American Century.” As of last Friday with the Brexit vote in England, we may well say that World War II really is over now, and the American Century long past, now replaced by a likely long era of increasing global trends toward nationalism and protectionism, the still-chronic problem of terrorism, the growing evidence of racism and xenophobia fueling world politics and social policies. Technology was supposed to increase the flatness of this world but instead the totally open global communication tools of the internet may well be bending the globe to a new era of suspicion, hostility and hatred.

Our students will be the citizen leaders of a new world order even as they have to come up with better solutions for the chronic problems of violence and poverty at home and abroad, fractured families, environmental degradation and the continuing quest to ensure essential healthcare services for all people. Here in the United States, we also see evidence that the census is driving some of the unrest: minority babies now surpass whites in the most recent census, and that proportion will grow in the next decades to produce a new non-white majority in the U.S. by mid-century, and that plain sociological fact is driving a good deal of the political turmoil.

In the midst of so many challenges, we see evidence of the imperative to improve educational levels and the problems that arise when not enough people have enough education: here in the United States, we have the spectacle of one presidential candidate exclaiming how much he loves “the uneducated” while abroad we are learning that the places in Great Britain that voted in favor of leaving the European Union are those that have the lowest educational levels. Education creates global citizens and leaders; ignorance creates fear and isolationism. Education of all citizens to the most advanced levels possible is essential for democracy to work and freedom to thrive.

So, with those happy thoughts, what are the educational experiences that our students need to be successful in college, at work, and for life? The Cornerstones Project that you have engaged certainly is ambitious and sets forth a rich and complex range of lessons and pedagogies to engage children at all grade levels in very important learning moments. With compliments for the ambition of the task before you, and mindful of the ultimate goal of preparing citizens who will be leading this city, nation and world in the next 25-50 years of great change, I’d like to suggest a few additional points for your consideration today.

I asked some of my colleagues at Trinity to share their thoughts on this topic --- faculty and deans in the School of Education where we prepare teachers, principals and counselors, and also those in our undergraduate programs that enroll a majority of students from the District of Columbia, and most of those from the DC Public Schools as well as charter schools.

The results of my quick call to colleagues for their ideas for this talk were hardly surprising, but they were adamant: learning to read well is the bedrock of all future success, and proficient reading ability has a tremendous influence on the other foundational skills in writing and numeracy. Critical reading skill is THE “cornerstone” for all academic success. Students must learn to love reading. And teaching students to love reading must start at the earliest ages. I’ll come back to reading in a minute.

Colleagues also urged me to cite:

* The critical importance of early childhood education as the bedrock of future academic, personal and professional success;
* The urgent need to bring counseling professionals into greater dialogue with classroom teachers, and to share understanding and strategies to integrate responses to the wide range of cognitive, emotional wellness and sociological issues that students bring to the learning process;
* Development of culturally competent students who are able to engage with a wide range of individuals from diverse backgrounds;
* Development of self-actualized learners --- perhaps this is where the idea of “grit” comes into play --- who are able to take responsibility for their academic life, starting with the idea of showing up for class and actively engaging in each day’s pedagogies and assignments; we see entirely too many college students who have only the most casual acquaintance with the idea of attending class, and we know that absence is one of the single greatest markers for first year failure and failure to complete college degrees.

Let me come back to reading. One of our deans wrote to me, “We are especially eager to have students who are more fluent, eager and confident readers.  Too often we hear students say they are looking for a course with less reading.”

That’s not a good sign among college students who largely aspire to go on to professional careers in nursing and healthcare, law and criminal justice, communications and journalism, teaching and business, and other professions that require high levels of critical reading proficiency. Students who say they want courses with less reading are really saying that they find reading difficult, but they don’t quite understand yet how their reading deficiencies can be a block to their future professional success. So, they want to bypass the big books while earning degrees, and that just does not work. It’s one of the great barriers to college completion --- the ability to read critically, to analyze and synthesize the material deeply, to compare and contrast different complex ideas, and as a by-product of excellence in reading, to be able to write cogently and in a compelling way to set forth research findings, critical analysis and new ideas are essential for success in college, and students who lack these skills find college increasingly difficult as the years progress, and often stop out.

We all know the literature on grit and resilience, and I do think that Paul Tough and others in that school of thought have some important insights. However, it’s one thing to salute the grit of a sixth grader who persists over great odds to move ahead into middle school and high school. It’s quite another to behold the grittiest, most determined college sophomore --- by now possibly a young mother, often living on her own, maybe occasionally homeless and hungry, dependent on Pell Grants and other financial aid, working long hours in low wage jobs, trying to figure out how to buy books and baby formula, begging the dean for yet another metro pass because she can’t afford one --- it’s quite another thing to see her finally hit the wall, breaking down because she just cannot juggle all of that and read tomorrow’s assignments in English and Psychology and History and that fervent Business professor demanding that she come to class fully prepared to discuss Brexit and the future of the European Union. And that’s just tomorrow. Grit has its limits as an educational value in college if the foundational skills are weak or missing, especially in reading.

Students don’t drop out, they fade out, overwhelmed and depressed by the consequences of academic and social deficiencies that have long festered in their lives. We do what we can at the collegiate level at Trinity to help students get on track and stay on track, to develop the necessary collegiate proficiencies, to manage their life challenges more effectively. We have revised our entire first year program to address the specific challenges students bring to us, starting with critical reading. However, there’s a limit to our ability to remediate certain deficiencies sufficiently to make it possible for a student to pursue her chosen career if she has to travel a very long pathway just to get through first year. Students who have to stay in first year for two or three years often simply stop showing up.

Let me illustrate this with nursing. More than half of the students who enroll at Trinity say they want to become nurses. Sadly, many of them will not make it into nursing because they simply are unable to master the general education and prerequisite courses, starting with their rather daunting reading challenges and also including deficiencies in math and science. Too many students come to us with little understanding of the academic pathway into nursing. They seem to have a vague idea that nursing involves caring for people, making beds and taking temperatures; most of these students have seen nurses in action and they want to be part of that wonderful profession. However, they are stunned when they encounter their first nursing math class, and chemistry, anatomy and physiology, psychology and sociology. The work is arduous, and for students who have marginal reading skills, all of the academic demands become an unbearable weight. Reading affects their math performance because reading is the gateway to the analytical skills that math requires. Reading affects their ability to write competently at the collegiate level, not just one good paragraph with no grammatical errors, but a real paper with original thoughts analyzing multiple sources with proper citations.

We see too many students who have been rewarded for plagiarism previously. Students who tell us that they always wrote papers by copying material from sources, that they always got A grades for such papers, and now they are in danger of failing out because we do not tolerate plagiarism. I am constantly explaining to students that plagiarism --- copying --- means you have not mastered the learning yourself, and I cannot allow a nurse to graduate who copied her way through school while not really learning how to read and understand medication instructions, for example. Plagiarism is, at root, a problem of critical reading --- students may be able to copy the words but they don’t know the meaning, they have not internalized the learning.

So, we college level educators beg you to attend even more to reading --- not just reading the words, but the skill of critical reading that leads the student to develop true analytical capacity, and the related skill of cogent writing and persuasive public speaking and argumentation. These are such bedrock skills not only for success in college but in careers and in life.

A few other necessary lessons for students to learn at younger ages:

a) Peacebuilding, negotiation and conflict resolution: we live in a world of great violence, and our students suffer tremendous violence every day, sadly at home, often in community, sometimes at school, certainly in the images they see on television and online. Peacemakers are portrayed as weak, as victims, as passive. Unfortunately, too many of our children learn to fight as the first response --- and sometimes when I get calls from parents full of anger and profanity, I know where that fight response comes from. We are seeing bands of young people in our city fighting on metro, roving through neighborhoods terrorizing passers-by --- what responsibility do we have for educating these children to have different responses to their sense of anger and alienation? I’m not talking about discipline, but *education* for conflict resolution.

The Cornerstones curriculum may have ways of teaching about anger management, conflict resolution and peacebuilding and I missed it, but I urge you to consider this vitally important topic for several reasons. First, of course, because it is socially vital. Second, because fighting can get a student expelled from college rather quickly, thus ending her hopes for academic advancement. Third, conflict in the workplace ultimately leads to unhappy results for employees. Fourth, carrying around all that anger and hostility, always being ready to fight, is an emotional stressor that has consequences physically, and for families and communities.

b) Truthfulness: I touched on this in referencing plagiarism, but a more consistent habit of truthfulness is also essential for excellence in learning as well as good citizenship. Yes, truly, it’s hard to uphold the idea of honor and integrity when we see leading politicians and other public figures lying shamefully every day. But teaching our students to be fearless in being truthful –- to help them to understand that the consequences of lying are far more serious than the benefits of truth --- is a life skill that will serve them well.

c) Caring for something outside of themselves: students need to see themselves as powerful enough to have a positive impact on other people, or on conditions that can improve communities. Service learning is, of course, and old and well-proven pedagogy, but sometimes we see students tired of doing the service part without understanding why it’s important. We believe it’s essential to combine the service with learning about the conditions the service is trying to address, and developing in the students the ability to analyze and express their own roles and impact on those conditions.

For example, each spring at Trinity we send a group of students to Selma where they spend a week walking those historic pathways as well as participating in projects to improve homes in impoverished neighborhoods. Many of our student participants come from similar situations. They have a required seminar all semester that leads them through learning and analysis of issues in the civil rights movement, public policy, poverty, and leadership development. Invariably, they return from the experience with entirely new perspectives on their own lives and neighborhood conditions, and determined to become more pro-active community leaders to address those situations more constructively.

Finally, we need our students to be self-actualized learners, able to take responsibility for learning well beyond the classroom structure. The most successful college students are those who understand that learning well must be their lifelong passion, that the actual facts and knowledge they gain today will, more likely than not, be challenged and perhaps completely overturned by future events. All learned professions have mandatory continuing education requirements because we know that ongoing learning is essential for professional success and the effective functioning of major institutions. Cultivating a love of learning at the earliest ages ensures that your students will have that true grit to persist in learning throughout their lives.

Thank you for being great teachers! Thanks for listening to these thoughts today….