

Colloquium Speech

Fall 2008

Institutional Quality and the Public Agenda

Dr. Jon H. Larson, President

Good morning ladies and gentlemen and welcome to the Fall 2008 Semester. It's wonderful to have everyone back together in anticipation of yet another red-letter year at Ocean County College. The barometer is steady, the winds are at our back, and all the indicators predict a smooth but exciting voyage for this new academic year.

We begin our 2008 Fall semester celebrating the opening of the new wing of the former Fine Arts Center, which we are now calling the Arts and Community Center, calling it this to signal our ongoing invitation to our entire Ocean County community to recognize the crucial significance of the arts in our culture. This new wing is an aesthetically-pleasing, well integrated architectural achievement for which we thank Dr. Richard Parrish for his organizational leadership, Ken Olsen for his engineering judgment, and the Fine Arts faculty and staff for their many productive ideas and creative contributions to the design of this marvelous new addition to our campus. If you haven't had time to tour the facility yet, be sure to stroll through and see the natural light, elevated ceilings, pleasing color schemes, and functional layout. There is no question that this building makes OCC one of the finest art learning centers in the country. With the coming completion of the theater renovations and the construction of a lecture/meeting hall, which will be started very soon, we will also have one of the finest collegiate performing centers in the east. We also welcome back to the main campus and to their new quarters in the "ACC", our non-credit, community and business outreach programs and staff, from their 150-Brick Boulevard outpost where they have been located for the past eight years.

On September 24 at 9:30 a.m., we will also commemorate the completion of the Sambol/Citta Garden on the main campus mall, with our thanks to Dick Sambol and Joe Citta, former College Trustees and continuing benefactors, and with acknowledgment of our Tau Iota chapter Phi Theta Kappa students who planned and managed the design, fundraising and construction of this unique campus beautification project. The entire college family is welcome to join this celebration.

As we begin this new academic year, you are all aware, I am certain, to one degree or another, of the current vigorous debate in the world of higher education as to three very divergent views or definitions of what a college is, and what a college education means. One perspective still envisions the traditional university as the proverbial ivory tower, pure, insulated, sacrosanct, where scholarship and the pursuit of truth survives in a protected and almost holy environment. The right to discover and teach the truth, as we know it, is the sacred ceremony that we enact daily, secure and convinced of our right and our responsibility to do so.

A very different view is one that sees the university as a major part of the world's socio-political organizations, both an originator and a responder to the demands and rapidly changing trends of the ideological superstructure. After all, as a recent study points out, social need has always been a driving force in the evolution of education. The Morrill Act and the establishment of land grant colleges, the GI bill, Sputnik and science education grants, open access, financial aid, the international curriculum, diversity, and even the establishment of the nation's community colleges—each can be understood as a direct response to public purposes.¹

¹ *Engaging Higher Education in Social Challenges of the 21st Century*, "To Optimize Learning," www.highereducation.org

A third view identifies the university as a participant in the global marketplace with products to sell, clients to engage, competition to outmaneuver, and profitability to be accrued. Clearly, the past three decades have witnessed an increase in the collegiate market mentality and the decreased capability of colleges to be responsive to public policy due to the financial necessity of serving the institution's own self interests for its very survival. The gradual shift of costs for higher education from the state to the consumer has created new burdens and new difficulties for both the university and for its students and has forced an entrepreneurial role on academic leaders.

As things now stand in the early morning hours of the 21st century, a confluence of extraordinary forces poses daunting new challenges to our nation's continued vitality and mandates the need for higher education to attempt to clarify and unify its purposes and its responsibilities: Ivory tower? Agent of sociopolitical change? Marketplace? What is it to be? Clear and coherent thinking is needed to a greater degree and in larger quantity than ever before in our planet's history—and yet, as I have remarked upon in some detail in recent Colloquium talks, American education is falling far behind other nations in providing an answer to the challenge of universal access to higher learning.

Massive sociopolitical challenges confronting contemporary society threaten the quality of life in our world. Some of the most pressing challenges are: The sustainability of natural resources and the environment, the availability of clean energy sources, the provision of adequate and available health care for an aging population, the continuing threat of nuclear holocaust in Asia and the Middle East, the creation or renewal of world-wide economic vitality, the opportunity for universal participation in the flat world, and the general

strengthening of social and political structures to ensure that future generations experience lives of justice, equality, and fulfillment.²

All of these complex challenges face us and our leaders daily, but as our speaker this morning, Mr. Richard Lee from the Hall Institute of Public Policy, will, I trust, discuss with you, our political processes are deeply shrouded in a paralyzing, obfuscating mélange of media options characterized by their bias of choice; and the fourth estate now seems light years away from providing us with the truths and revelations needed to clarify life in our democracy. As W. H. Auden noted almost a hundred years ago, “What the mass media offers is not popular art, but entertainment which is intended to be consumed like food, forgotten, and replaced by a new dish.” The population is fed slogans and sound bites when it hungers for understanding. Now, I have not read Mr. Lee’s speech, so I am operating on real trust here – trust that he will bring us some H.L. Mencken-style insights about the profound changes confronting the media today.

Indeed, clear and coherent thinking is called for; and yet new sources of competition and decreasing government resources threaten to push the university, our most important training ground for this thinking, into the economic necessity of making markets for its products, developing new products to remain competitive, placing the requisites for the public agenda lower on the priorities list and reducing the ivory tower to just a quaint memory.

What is our way out of this dilemma? And, more importantly, how do we make our contribution to the public need? How do we ensure the university’s

² *Partnerships for Public Purposes: Engaging Higher Education in Societal Challenges of the 21st Century*, The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, Report, April 2008, www.highereductaion.org/reports/wegner/index.shtml

identity as both the fountain of knowledge and a sustainable and independent institution?

For Ocean County College, we are proposing a solution that we are calling Institutional Quality. I am suggesting that the most important educational goal confronting higher education in the 21st Century is to once again accept the responsibility to optimize learning. As an academic pundit has recently observed, "It is easy to get carried away on the very swift tide of the market; its demands and its trends are insatiable and volatile. But we exist to foster learning. **Academic intelligence** is our product and it is with this that we will best serve the public agenda."³ More than ever, our definition as the place where truth resides, the place where social needs are addressed, and the place where we market the most significant product we can market all converge in the definition of our primary product as academic intelligence packaged in an academic degree. In short, we best serve the public agenda and our own needs by focusing on our primary mission as a degree granting institution of the highest quality.

This solution sounds, perhaps, somewhat oversimplified. But as community colleges get larger and richer and more complex, it is the crucial remaining idea for the sector to fix upon. It is crucial because we are, unfortunately, still too often apologetic; still viewed as only convenient and cost-effective but not quite up to the standards of the senior institutions. In the very term "senior" is the implicit sense of superiority to those of us who are "junior." In the very word "community" there is an implicit absence of elitism, a pervasive idea of the democratization of mass learning which must logically dictate "average" rather than above average or superior. It is the challenge of our time for the community college to throw off the mantle of alleged mediocrity and take

³ Ibid.

hold of the reputation for excellence that we, because of our commitment to quality, so richly deserve. And we must start by each one of us individually believing and behaving in line with this understanding. We must assume the posture of excellence in everything we do as I have spoken to you about so often.

I would like to share with you this morning some of the components of institutional quality that I think bear examination as we begin a new academic year, components that might help us focus more clearly on serving both our own and the public's agenda with our excellence.

To begin, it seems important to understand the nature and the changing nature of the students who come to us and the new challenges that they present to us so that we might better respond to them holistically. Major issues about academic quality such as the impact of technology, questions about college readiness in the requisite basic skills, defining the very nature of academic work, the constitutes of academic honesty, the paradigmatic shifts in classroom geography, the changing role of the professor, and myriad other issues must concern and challenge us as we continue to move further into the 21st century.

A recent study, "Generation 2001,"⁴ says Gen 2001 students are means connected, means career-minded, and means confident. It says college students today are 100% online, average thirteen hours/week on the web, and like to be called "the cyber generation." Fifty-seven percent turn to their computers instead of the radio or television for news; 63% prefer computers to newspapers and magazines; 90% send and receive electronic messages daily; 54% visit career-planning sites and 56% say it is likely that they will most likely start their own business. These students want success, independence, responsibility, room

⁴ "Generation 2001: The Second Study," Media Post Publications

for creativity, and flexible work hours. They are multi-taskers and reject the notion of wasting their time on “busy work”.⁵

On the other hand, as a recent Higher Education Report observes, “income disparities are increasingly being recognized as the most significant barriers to access and graduation for all students, although they clearly hit minority students the hardest.”⁶ As a result, in addition to recognizing the characteristics of the cyber generation, we must also acknowledge that the focus on low-income minority recruitment must shift to acknowledge the broader issues involved in access for these students. According to the *NY Times* (12/30/07), if we are to create the level of education that will keep the U. S. work force competitive, then bridging the socioeconomic achievement gap must be a top priority.

We are fully aware that parts of the community college sector still grapple with how “student success” can be adequately defined, since students come to us with many goals. Open enrollments and college readiness issues often cloud the picture further; but recent studies have made it clear that “the most successful community college students avoid excessive course dropping and late registration, go full-time for the majority of terms, and have the opportunity to take an orientation course to college.”⁷

More than half of our students at Ocean are full-time students; all of these and many of our part-time students indicate the desire for degree completion; and a continuously large percentage of our degree students indicate the desire to transfer. So at Ocean County College, our primary mission and our primary

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Economically and Educationally Challenged Students in Higher Education: Access to Outcomes*, 2007 ASHE Higher Education Report, v. 33, n 3.)

⁷ *Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy*, “Beyond the Open Door: Increasing Student Success in California Community Colleges, August 2007.

definition of student success mean degree completion and/or successful transfer. In this sense, our students' needs and our mission clearly align with the public agenda ... and we are aware of this alignment. Further, our courses and programs support this degree/transfer mission.

There is, however, a series of further challenges presented by our students that are statistically invisible. How do they feel about education when they come to us? Have they developed any commitment to the value of the examined life? Do they believe in learning for its own sake rather than as a means to an end? Is text messaging more important than writing to learn? Is ownership of a calculator the "*new new math*"?

Let's pause for a moment to think about present-day high school students, a topic recently explored in a segment from the PBC *Frontline* series, "Growing Up on Line." This segment considered some recent technological transformations in both the classroom and in teaching/learning practices that contribute significantly to the development of students' attitudes toward their learning.

I think I was most stunned while watching this video by the absolute confidence of one young man, a high school senior at Chatham High School, who tells us, "I never read books . . . nobody reads. . . If there were 27 hours in a day, I might read *Romeo and Juliet* . . . but there are only 24 hours in a day, so I read Sparknotes." In a college learning environment where we assume reading to be the most fundamental learning tool—whether the text is electronic or in print—what strategies must we envision to redesign this young man's belief system—the belief that one can learn without reading primary text.

Or, might our own belief system come to espouse the idea that we must modify our own expectations. A Social Science teacher on the video tells us that

the “old rules can’t apply any more.” What conversations do we need to have about the old rules or the new ones? What do we need to consider about student reading, what it means, how it is done, who does it, and how it is assigned? Old rules may or may not apply—but old assumptions surely do not. Whether or not and how well students can read, and we can test them to determine that, the more significant question might be will they read—or will they acquire a certain kind of knowledge in a different way? Does this alter the teaching-learning paradigm? Does it alter the knowledge paradigm? Who of us believes, along with a frustrated English teacher in the video, that “My time is over; this is not the educational arena I entered into; I feel like a dinosaur”?

I think we might call some of these questions the bases for some crucial conversations for institutions of quality in our time. They are conversations we must be having if we are to play a leadership role in our segment as a premier community college.

A very positive initiative we will take during the 2008-09 academic year is our engagement in a comprehensive self-study focused specifically on the totality of the beginning college experience. This study is part of the National Policy Center on the First-Year Experience, Foundations of Excellence Program, located in Asheville, North Carolina. Ocean is one of 35 colleges and universities from across the nation that will participate this year.

A research task force, led by Vice President Don Doran and comprising faculty and administrators, students and staff, will review all aspects of the first year experience for our OCC students, including recruitment, admissions, advising, counseling, the curriculum, the co-curriculum and all other components that make up the first year. The process will result in the development of a strategic action plan to be integrated into the college’s existing strategic planning and budgeting process that guides all services, programs, staff, faculty and

curriculum choices that are designed to assist our students in making a successful transition to college.

John Gardner, Director of the National Policy Center, will personally serve as the Liaison to the Ocean College study group. As noted by the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), “determining how to measure student success and how to encourage it is likely to occupy all types of institutions for the foreseeable future.”⁸

Another component of Institutional Quality that merits both our attention and a more comprehensive understanding is our learning outcomes assessment program and our intuitional effectiveness considerations. Thanks to the hard work of our deans and our faculty and to the brilliant system devised and overseen by Dr. Carolyn Lafferty, Assistant Vice President for Assessment and Curriculum, we can boast one of the most comprehensive systems for assessing student learning in the state and nation. As a result, we are now poised to develop a deeper understanding of and commitment to how assessment data can help us improve teaching and learning and thereby close the assessment circle.

In the college's *Periodic Review Report*—the PRR—due to be submitted to the Middle States Commission of Higher Education on June 1, 2009, one full chapter is devoted to how we can adopt a more sophisticated and comprehensive view of interpreting assessment data and using it for deeper pedagogical changes, and sometimes even for fundamental shifts in our teaching/learning behaviors. We are anxious to move beyond temporary fixes for learning gaps—the intensification of more of the same—and look to new and

⁸ *Trends in Higher Education*, Society for College and University Planning, “Learning,” January 2008, p. 9.

creative solutions. We look to the forty-one new faculty members who have joined us over the past five years to bring us insights and best practices and to infuse us with their energy. We look to our experienced faculty to be willing to experiment and innovate in order to meet the learning challenges presented by Gen 2001 students.

Learning assessment practices grow stale if they are merely routine collections of data. These practices must be brought to life by stimulating us to new and better ideas about learning what has sometimes been called “the new knowledge” of the information age.

In addition, our institutional effectiveness office will begin to expand our concrete and integrated institutional assessment model during 2008-2009. This will be a college-wide effort, facilitated by Janet Hubbs and assisted by consultants from SunGardHE. This initiative will eventually lead to the development of our new Strategic Plan, due to be completed by 2010.

A third component of Institutional Quality that I suggest to you this morning as deserving of our attention in 2008-2009 is a fuller and more broadly institutional response to global studies. Dr. Katherine Tietge and the Global Education Task Force have been energetic in their plans and projects—and the next academic year must see the transition of global education from a plan and a series of events to an integrated part of our curriculum. This does not simply mean that every course must be infused with some international perspective or assignment. It means, instead, that we must clearly define how we can specifically begin to train our students to participate in the process through which an ever-expanding free flow of goods, services, capital, people, and social customs leads to further integration of economies and societies worldwide.⁹ This

⁹ Sharma, Shalendra. “The Many faces of Today’s Globalization,” *New Global Studies*, July 31, 2008, Volume 2, Issue 2, Article 4, <http://www.bepress.com/ngs>

current phase is, according to scholars, the second great wave of globalization of international trade and capital flows. The first ended abruptly due to the devastations of World War I – a little nugget of historical arcana gratis of Dr. Frank Wetta (you may remember him).

But the creation of international financial institutions after the Second World War laid the foundation for the current era of globalization, developed rapidly in the 1980s and 90s by the unprecedented advances in information technology coupled with the decline in transaction costs. What marks the current phase as truly unique, however, is the participation of so many emerging market economies, driven fundamentally by cross-border trade, capital, and investment flows, producing a 1600 percent expansion over the past 50 years. Foreign investment totaled about \$160 billion in 1991; it topped \$6 trillion in 2005.

The speed and intensity of global integration raise many questions about several international economic issues such as the impact on sovereign statehood, the economic complexities of market economies, and the impact of international trade and finance on internal monetary structures. Research shows that there are risks associated with the free flow of capital—especially short-term speculative capital which can lead to an appreciation of the national currency. Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz (2002) has pointed out that surrendering to unfettered globalization entails a loss of control over monetary and exchange rate policy.¹⁰ Participating countries are particularly vulnerable to globalized economic shock factors if they do not have the right financial infrastructure in place.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Globalization does not only entail an increase in capital flow, investment and international trade, but also the worldwide circulation of peoples and cultures. This circulation also creates far-reaching issues and questions. Do the world's dominant and attractive cultures subsume and eradicate the weaker ones? Does globalization put diversity under unbearable stress? Do economically powerful nations foster cultural hegemony rather than cultural pluralism? In short, does global cultural homogeneity threaten millions with cultural exclusion—or even extinction?

In his thoughtful book, *Globalization and Culture* (1999), John Tomlinson considers many of these questions. He defines globalization as “complex connectivity” and argues that it “alters the very context of meaning construction . . . it affects people’s sense of identity, the experience of place, and of self in relation to place.”¹¹ Peter Berger and Samuel P. Huntington have evaluated the impact of globalization on ten specific countries and conclude that its impact varies widely. While many countries will adapt certain values of the dominant culture that suit their purposes, national identity and the state’s own national interests remain potent forces.¹² For other writers, the key to effective globalization is the image of human beings as citizens of the world wherein “kinfolk and community may have a past, but they have no future.”¹³ One is reminded of John Lennon’s dream in his song “Imagine” of a world without nations, states, or religions; a world without unique cultures.

As we must recognize, globalization is a complex process that requires our immediate and close attention. We must begin to bring to bear on our curriculum the significant questions it poses, in order to seek answers, and, more importantly, to expose our students to this dialogue. We must begin to work to

¹¹ Tomlinson, John. *Globalization and Culture*, 1999: The Berkeley Electronic Press, 20.

¹² Berger, Peter and Samuel P. Huntington, *Many Globalizations*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

¹³ Apiah, Kwame. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, W. W. Norton, 2007.

develop curricular imperatives that look at global trade, the environment, telecommunications, economic development, national governments, multilateral public agencies, and civil social organizations, each dedicated to creating institutions that are inclusive and responsive to multi-national cooperation. The solutions are as complex as the problems. But the globalization debate is the most significant debate of our time and one in which we must engage our students' participation.

As one writer has stated: ". . . globalization can be reversed. Even the world's staunchest supporters of globalization appear to be increasingly disillusioned. Not surprisingly, U. S. economic policy seems to be more protectionist of late. . . and there seems to be a growing separation between the 'cosmopolitans' and the 'locals'." Even our presidential candidates do not seem sure where they stand on this issue. There may be no winners in the debate, but there will be an ongoing impact on the future of the flat world.¹⁴ It is our obligation to engage our students in the conversation.

One final thought I'd like to share with you this morning in relation to developing more fully our identity as an institution of quality is the more abstract notion of institutional civility and trust. We have made enormous progress in the past several years within our campus community with the establishment of a civil environment that begins, first and foremost, with the attitude of trust. In our college statement on civility, we have said that this quality begins with and must be visible in the President and the Board of Trustees so that it may be adopted as one of our most important institutional standards. We have said that we must be an institution that keeps its promises and there is strong evidence everywhere that this is being done.

¹⁴ Sharma, 20.

We have promised our students the best programs and learning facilities that we can offer and we need only look at the new construction, the refitting of classrooms with new furniture and technology, and the continuing evaluation and refinement of our academic programs to better serve the career and transfer missions to know that this promise is being kept.

We have promised our faculty a supportive environment for teaching and scholarship and have made good on that promise in a large number of facilities upgrades and professional development opportunities as well as providing awards totaling \$15,000 to four members of our faculty for the current academic year. Our congratulations go to Dr. Maysa Hayward and Dr. David Bordelon of the English Department, Professor Karen Finberg from Mathematics, and adjunct Instructor Dean Labollitta from the Social Science, Education and Public Service Department, the first recipients of the annual Faculty Scholarship Awards Program.

And, finally, we have promised our administrators and staff a congenial workplace environment with a supportive, collaborative workforce and we have kept that promise with facilities upgrades, technology upgrades, and full representation in both college governance and in the planning and budgeting process. We have instituted new evaluation procedures that make it as clear as is possible how each and every employee can achieve excellence.

All of these promises and infinitely more, on a daily basis, are being kept.

An environment of civility and trust does not mean an environment without accountability. It is imperative that we conduct ourselves at all levels, when confidentiality is not requisite, with the most transparency possible. But we must also recognize that confidentiality sometimes is requisite and this is not a mark of conspiratorial or tyrannical leadership. It is, conversely, a mark of

responsible leadership. We must all, at the end of the day, make decisions that are defensible and we must all work ethically and well. We must never confuse a personal agenda with what is and always must be our major professional allegiance: our allegiance to the college. We should not be asking, "What's in this for me?" but, rather, "Is this in the best interests of the college?"

As you know, I think this is a great place to work and I know you all think the same. Many of you tell me this and all of you bear testimony to it by the fact that this college has a very low employee turnover rate. The single predominant reason for an employee leaving this college is retirement—and the average retirement age is going up. Professional opportunity at this college is boundless—and it is there for those who seek it. New jobs, new challenges, innovative developments, and a caring environment surround you. There is no limit to what you can do and who you can be at OCC. Let us share this spirit with our new students as we see it reflected everywhere on our campus.

And so, once again I congratulate you on your hard and good work for the College. I urge you to continue to bring your energies to us. And I wish you the very best for the coming academic year!

It now gives me great pleasure to announce the Employee of the Year Award. As you are aware, this person is an employee who exemplifies all that is good about Ocean County College, day in, day out, throughout the work year and throughout the duration of employment at the college. And so the employee of the year for 2008 is. . . . Sydney Stroman, Security Sergeant. Please come forward to receive your award, Sydney!