Phi Beta Kappa Inducts New Members

April 19th, 2012  By Katherine Gill
http://humanitiesinstitute.wfu.edu/events/humanities-institute-director-mary-foskett-gives-address-at-annual-phi-beta-kappa-awards-dinner

Mary Foskett, in her address at the annual awards dinner, underscored the values and skills new Phi Beta Kappa inductees will take with them out into the world.

“This evening I want to affirm and confirm for you the great worth of the education you have been attaining here at Wake Forest. The liberal arts education — one that asks you neither to (over)specialize in one area of inquiry nor to direct all of your energy to one specific professional goal — is as valuable today, perhaps even more valuable, than it was in the past. The liberal arts – a broad and deep education that engages and integrates the humanities, arts, social sciences, natural sciences, math and technology — enables the kind of thinking that bridges questions and navigates complex problems, unleashes creativity, fuels the imagination and inspires innovation – all qualities you and your generation will need in the years ahead as you strive to address the urgent challenges of our time. The good news is that employers, agency directors, graduate admissions officers, as well as medical, law and business schools — in other words, the people with whom you will be interacting as you move forward from Wake Forest — all know that. They know the worth of your education because they know what they, themselves, need in a world facing serious challenges like climate change and ever shifting geo-political landscapes, a global economy characterized by both new kinds of economic growth and persistent economic disparities, religious and cultural tensions at home and around the world, and more. ...
“As important as your liberal arts preparation will prove to be to your future employers, professors, directors and colleagues, your liberal arts education is of immeasurable value to society, as a whole. The liberal arts — particularly the humanities — nurture and stimulate critical thinking that, for the sake of the common good, is unafraid to query the assumptions that shape the contours of our society as well as our collective drive for innovation and progress — an impulse, which, if left unchecked, can turn into a compulsion that effaces other values we profess to hold. How can we ensure that innovation, creativity and “progress” are of real worth? And that they will benefit most, if not all, and certainly more than just a few? ....

Mary Foskett

Phi Beta Kappa Banquet

Wake Forest University

April 18, 2012

Good evening. I want to thank Professors Bernadine Barnes and Morna O’Neill, and all of Phi Beta Kappa, for inviting me to join you here this evening. It is truly an enormous pleasure to be part of such an important occasion in your lives.

Hearty congratulations to the newest members of Phi Beta Kappa! — and to your families who are gathered here with you this evening. New Phi Beta Kappans, take a good look at the faculty, students, family and friends who are with you here tonight — for not only are these your cheerleaders and prodders and the shoulders on which you have leaned — these are the people whose hopes and dreams for you have burned as intensely as your own, or nearly so. Maybe even tonight — your induction into Phi Beta Kappa — has been a part of those dreams. So give them an extra hug tonight. For these are the people who will continue walking and dreaming and hoping and celebrating right alongside of you, all the way. And that, in and of itself — good company on a bold journey — is well worth celebrating.

So here you are, three-quarters of you preparing to take your leave from Wake Forest in only a matter of weeks, and the remainder of you looking forward to that home stretch that we all call senior year. Most of you are now hitting that stage when people are beginning to ask, “So — what did you get out of college? What was it all for?,” and the oft-dreaded, “And what are you going to do now?” The juniors among you, too, will soon start thinking about how to make the most of the time that remains. So — even as we celebrate your achievement at Wake Forest and what Phi Beta Kappa affirms as your demonstrated “commitment to the liberal arts and sciences, and to
freedom of inquiry and expression” – we may ponder, what is it all for? For the question is one that seemingly everyone these days is asking — educators, employers, parents, political leaders. Assessing the value of the liberal arts for the 21st century was at the center of the national Rethinking Success conference that Wake Forest hosted just last week, as well as meetings held around the country this academic year, including the joint meeting of Phi Beta Kappa and the American Conference of Academic Deans, entitled, Are the Humanities Now a Luxury? What is the real value of a liberal arts education, and of your experience at Wake Forest, specifically?

This evening I want to affirm and confirm for you the great worth of the education you have been attaining here at Wake Forest. The liberal arts education — one that asks you neither to (over)specialize in one area of inquiry nor to direct all of your energy to one specific professional goal — is as valuable today, perhaps even more valuable, than it was in the past. The liberal arts — a broad and deep education that engages and integrates the humanities, arts, social sciences, natural sciences, math and technology — enables the kind of thinking that bridges questions and navigates complex problems, unleashes creativity, fuels the imagination and inspires innovation — all qualities you and your generation will need in the years ahead as you strive to address the urgent challenges of our time. The good news is that employers, agency directors, graduate admissions officers, as well as medical, law and business schools — in other words, the people with whom you will be interacting as you move forward from Wake Forest — all know that. They know the worth of your education because they know what they, themselves, need in a world facing serious challenges like climate change and ever shifting geo-political landscapes, a global economy characterized by both new kinds of economic growth and persistent economic disparities, religious and cultural tensions at home and around the world, and more.

Surveys of employers that the Association of American Colleges and Universities conducted in 2007, 2008 and 2010 have shown that a majority of today’s employers are less concerned that recent college graduates possess job-specific skills and are much more interested in hiring graduates with a liberal arts education. This is because they know that liberal arts students possess the critical thinking, teamwork experience, creativity and communication skills that employers of all kinds need. Moreover, they know that graduates of liberal arts institutions are likely to have greater longevity and be more apt to move up the ladder because of their multiple skills and abilities. In other words, employers see hiring liberal arts graduates as a major investment that will pay off in the long term. The most valuable and valued workers are those with the flexible and transferable skills that will be needed over a working career that could involve as many as 11 job changes. When you interview for jobs, now and in the future, be confident about the value of your education! Highlight the educational experiences and
internships that enabled you to strengthen your communication skills, your ability to apply your coursework to real world situations, your ability to work in teams, your empathy and creativity, and your ability to examine complex problems from multiple perspectives and disciplines.

Change is the landscape upon which you soon-to-be graduates will begin your careers. So no matter how we might try, we cannot even begin to prepare the road for you. But we can prepare you for the road. So if you’ve ever wondered why you had to take all those divisionals and basic requirements (and why, if you haven’t yet taken them, you still must!), know that they have been just as important for your education as the courses in your major and minor. They have extended and expanded your ways of examining the world, taught you how to think and communicate more effectively what you have discovered along the way, and helped you develop a flexible mind that can take in, interpret and analyze different kinds of information at once. Those sometimes pesky divisionals have been a good friend to you in ways you may not yet fully appreciate.

As important as your liberal arts preparation will prove to be to your future employers, professors, directors and colleagues, your liberal arts education is of immeasurable value to society, as a whole. The liberal arts — particularly the humanities — nurture and stimulate critical thinking that, for the sake of the common good, is unafraid to query the assumptions that shape the contours of our society as well as our collective drive for innovation and progress — an impulse, which, if left unchecked, can turn into a compulsion that effaces other values we profess to hold. How can we ensure that innovation, creativity and “progress” are of real worth? And that they will benefit most, if not all, and certainly more than just a few? By measuring innovation and social practices against the kinds of lessons we can only learn through attention to history; philosophical inquiry into notions of the good, the moral and the ethical; the insights we acquire through the habitation of great literature; the critical empathy we cultivate by engaging world culture, languages and literatures; the intellectual and personal transformation that takes place when we grapple with the complexity of interpreting the human experience; and the common ground we forge in the contemplation of what is truly human, in the first place.

Noted philosopher Martha Nussbaum and others have recently underscored the specific contributions of the humanities to democratic society, in particular. As she laments the recent cutting back, or even termination, of humanities programs in universities across the country and around the world, Nussbaum argues that “(t)hirsty for national profit, nations and their systems of education are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations... will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for
themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements” (Not for Profit). We simply cannot afford to relinquish our liberal arts tradition with its high regard for the humanities — something that Dr. Condoleezza Rice acknowledged here at Wake Forest one week ago tonight as one of our greatest national assets. As writer Mark Slouka (Essays from the Nick of Time) reasons, the humanities evidence and ensure the continuation of a healthy democracy. They help develop an “individual capable of humility in the face of complexity; an individual formed through questioning and therefore unlikely to cede that right; an individual resistant to coercion, to manipulation and demagoguery in all their forms.” Slouka continues, “The humanities, in short, are a superb delivery mechanism for what we might call democratic values. There is no better that I am aware of.”

You see, it is not only the marketable skills that you gain from a liberal arts education that matter. Even as we articulate the value of the humanities for the world of work, we must be careful not to reduce the importance of the humanities to a repertoire of demonstrable techniques and measurable abilities. For what you study — the content of what you engage — also really matters. The literature you read enables you to understand the range, depth and variety that is to be found in the representation of human experience. The art you engage exposes you to new forms of, and media for, human expression. The religion you study expands your grasp of how human beings organize, make sense of, and lend meaning to existence. The history you examine instills in you a sense of why and how we ended up where we are.

Together, the humanities shape and transform us in ways that go beyond the metrics. The humanities make us more conscious of who we are, where we are, from where we have come, to where we may be headed, and our responses to each. The world of work is an important concern — so important that your education should not only prepare you to enter it, it should enable you to ponder what “work” is and ought to be in the first place, and it should help you discern the work to which you may eventually want to commit yourself, as well as practices of the market work and of human industry that you may wish to critique or counter. To be self-aware and conscious in this way will enable you to be more responsive to the needs of your generation and more accountable to the next.

Newest members of Phi Beta Kappa, your liberal arts education has helped mold you into the very people you are right now. I suspect that deep down, most of you have already known this. For it is an insight, or rather a conviction, that is embedded in our collective campus psyche by way of our motto, Pro Humanitate. As WFU Classics Professor James Powell noted at last year’s Founders’ Day convocation, the Romans used the word, humanitas, to “point to human cultivation and learning: that is where
they saw real humanness. . . If Pro Humanitate is the motto of a University, it seems . . . that it is in this meaning that we are getting close to our real commitment. Pro Humanitate calls us to consider what we are as human beings and what constitutes genuine human flourishing.” The humanities, especially at Wake Forest, are of intrinsic value because Wake Forest considers what is human to be of intrinsic value. May this be a liberal arts lesson you always remember.

Congratulations, again, to every student gathered here this evening. We are very proud of you. In your faces, newest members of Phi Beta Kappa, I see the evidence of human flourishing. In you, I see the value of your liberal arts education, not just for yourselves, but for all of us.

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| Tag: Foskett, liberal arts, Phi Beta Kappa, Pro Humanitate, Rethinking Success