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Common Ground Speech, delivered on June 13, 2014

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By Arend D. Lubbers

We have gathered together as advocates for common ground in civil discourse believing that those who are liberally educated are most likely to find it. Some of us believe a commitment to liberal arts education must pervade our educational institutions. If successful in that endeavor, there is a possibility that common ground can be found and common sense decisions made about the future of our nation.

I will comment briefly on my experience and the path Grand Valley followed in its academic development. My commitment to the Liberal Arts and Sciences is not unusual for a person whose parents were liberal arts college graduates, whose father was a professor of English Literature and a president of two liberal arts colleges over a span of twenty-nine years. I suppose I have an ingrained bias for liberal arts education.

The awareness of its value first occurred when my eleventh grade literature teacher introduced our class to the intellectual and emotional wealth of 18th and 19th Century English poetry. A new world opened for me and led to the discovery and related new worlds in many fields that have penetrated my mind and uplifted my spirit. They made me who I am. Though I never pursued the science side to the degree that history, literature, economics, geography and philosophy claimed my attentions becoming the building blocks of my mentality, mathematics and its string theory and quantum physics and the universe and particles it introduces to us, are important to me. The journey never ends. Its attractions keep us asking for more and we find it in the most ancient tracts and the latest discoveries.

You are engaged in discussions at a university that fortunately, was founded as a liberal arts college. So many American comprehensive universities evolved from state teachers' colleges. I think we had the advantage as advocates and protectors of the liberal arts core in the curriculum.

Bill Seidman, our Founder, was a Dartmouth graduate and his views of higher education formed there and at Harvard and Michigan, imbued Grand Valley with its liberal arts spirit that persists. After Jim Zumberge, the first president, left for the University of Arizona and eventually presidencies at SMU and

Southern California, Bill Seidman found me, a president of a liberal arts college in Iowa, and persuaded me to come to Grand Valley.

I think many of the faculty asked, "What good can come out of a small college in Iowa?" We did share, however, a common commitment to the liberal arts, but soon after I assumed the presidency, some thought me a traitor to the cause. The only professional program when I arrived was teacher education. The Faculty would not permit a major in the field, a position I endorsed. The issue which led to some tension was whether or not to add more professional programs. Located in Michigan's second largest area of population, it was easy to discern the pent up demand for professional programs in engineering, business, graduate education, nursing, and other health sciences. To remain solely a liberal arts college or serve the community's needs was the question. I became a proponent for adding professional programs and in that advocacy I earned the mistrust of some faculty. At the same time I urged the faculty to establish a structure that would require general education requirements for all academic majors, and planned budgets so the traditional liberal arts fields could maintain and improve their curricula. I asked them to provide constant protection and surveillance of the General Education requirements and to periodically examine in depth how the liberal arts core could function and be improved to accommodate a changing institution. During my thirty-two years at Grand Valley, I think the liberal arts flourished; led by both the Provost and Faculty leaders. I am proud. I am proud, too, that the last academic unit established during my administration was the Classics Department.

The issue we faced forty years ago is similar to the one high on the higher education agenda today. Will the demand to educate for jobs lead to the diminution of the liberal arts core? Is the liberal arts core worth the cost? Here is the question: should we concentrate on educating our students for jobs in a complex, sophisticated economy or should we insist that liberal arts curriculum be central to our students' education? The answer is the same as it was forty years ago. We must do both. To achieve this is complicated and there is no simple analysis to lead the way. Yet, I point to a few considerations, not necessarily new, that are in play or should be.

1. Organize the curriculum so that a college degree can still be achieved in four years. Utilize summers L for that purpose because there is more to be taught.
2. LMost students will take more than four years to complete requirements. Communicate to students in detail how their program will work.
3. Review all professional programs and seek discussion with professionals and employers to refashion or add professional curricula. Build relationships that will help create internships for all students even in liberal arts majors. Planned mentoring like the medieval apprenticeship system will become pervasive in higher education.
4. LProfessional organizations, ACE, AAU, AACSCU, and AAC should ask their members to "take the liberal arts pledge" and lobby government representatives on the value of liberal arts education at the same time promoting professional education that is in the nation's interest.
5. LAll universities and colleges should establish within their academic structure way to oversee and protect a liberal arts core, and promote formal discussions between Arts & Sciences Faculty and Faculty in the Professional schools and colleges.
6. LTake on the failure of most K-12 education to adequately educate in the liberal arts. College and university Faculties should engage themselves on this subject with more intensity, organization and discussions with K-12 teachers and administrators.

The Los Angeles Lakers professional basketball team, most of them with college experience, went together to the film "Lincoln." Afterwards their star player Kobe Bryant said, "I don't know if the guys knew who he was.....It came as a big shock to them when he was killed." That brings a tear to the liberal artist's eye and at the same time evokes a smile.

Can we expect openness and acceptance in the practice of religion from those who have no understanding of how religions are formed?

Can we have civil discussion in politics leading to compromise and policy that sustains the democracy without knowing history and human psychology?

Can we live successfully in a global economy making sound decisions for our nation without a knowledge of geography and economics?

Can we make our environment what it should be to sustain the best life on the planet if we do not have the ability to see what science demonstrates?

Can we understand the complexities of human experience and ourselves as we should without immersing ourselves in the wealth of literature that is available to us?

We cannot expect the majority to be educated as we wish, but we can hope that enough of our citizens are to make a positive difference in the way we conduct our public life. We know, too, that some of the educated have not learned what the liberal arts teach, a healthy humility, when involved with knowledge and its discovery.

Henry Knox, General of the Army in charge of artillery in the American Revolution and Washington's first Secretary of War, wrote to a clergyman friend, "...it is part of my belief that we are responsible only for the light we possess."

If that is true, we had better be turning on as many lights as we can for our students and for ourselves so we can understand more clearly, serve more broadly, and participate more intelligibly. I will never forget when my first light of liberal learning went on in an 11th grade English class.