



HastingsCollege

**Remarks by Dr. Travis Feezell
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I was sitting with a group of students the other day, talking about first semester experiences, and was reminded of one of my most dubious college experiences. We were talking especially about our “growth experiences” in college, those moments of deep failure and deep anxiety and how we dealt with things. My moment was actually from graduate school as I turned in my first paper. This was at a British university and this paper was being turned into my tutor, a rather stern Australian who had sent me away the week before to read some 500 pages and then answer some rather arcane question in five to seven pages based on that reading.

I was a smart guy. I had just graduated with an Honors degree and I could write, right? I smugly handed him my paper and insinuated that perhaps he should try harder next time, that I was up to a more rigorous challenge. He beckoned me back the following week to review the paper. The first observation was that there seemed to be more of his words on the paper than my own. The meticulousness of his review was overwhelming. The second observation was that his words held scant praise that I surely deserved. To lapse into sport cliché ... it was a beatdown, a blowout, a decisive loss. My talent couldn't match his on the field of language and analysis.

After the anger subsided and clarity suggested perhaps I was not as talented as my ego would want, there was the move to change and to grow. I remember very clearly the next day going to the library and reading William Zinsser's "On Writing Well". I still have that book. I've continued to read it. I've given it to others who have struggled with writing. That moment of struggle and of response ... it changed me.

Perhaps more to the present moment, I sit here the middle generation of a line of Feezells that have been profoundly changed by education and the personal contact of teacher and student. A mother and father in the audience, both faculty members, both the first in their family to receive a formal higher education. Their lives powerfully different because of it. And then their four children, three of the four children educated at residential places like Hastings - one at Hastings College - me the only one to attend a larger state school but really having the intimate experience of an Honors College and a major filled with brilliant teachers and mentors. Thank you Susan Aronstein. Reading the "Name of the Rose" in your course changed my life. And then my children ... you've met them, one now graduated and into the world, the other a second-year student at Hastings College. All of these Feezell lives changed, powerfully changed by higher education and the contact of professor or mentor and student.

These personal moments and conversations with students and families and trustees and friends have been on my mind lately. It's really been a meta-question that's been gnawing at me for the last year. What's the purpose of college? What's the importance of a college like Hastings? I keep coming back to it because I know that education of

this sort has changed my life and I'm certain it is having some deep effect on my children. I thought of it the other day as one of my students from a few years ago - Matt Spivey - called me. He showed up in my classroom as an 18-year knucklehead, a loudmouth, lazy, the worst sort of student, a lacrosse player. But something in him called to me ... and through the years I called to him or rather called him out and said he could be more and better. Fast forward and he is a successful entrepreneur with an interest in sustainability and master's degree from an English university.

No, my concern around this bigger question of the purpose of college and the place of Hastings has been with the national dialogue that goes something like this ...

College is too expensive

College is not accessible

We rank and value colleges on exclusion rather than inclusion

We need more welders, not philosophers ... or the only thing you can do with an English major and a love of medieval literature is to become a barista (or a college president).

Student debt is the next housing bubble

Student debt is crushing the potential of young people

Colleges must prove their worth by how many jobs get produced

And all of this is in the context of a more complex world, one that seems to demand MORE rather than less people adept at language, analysis, compassion, and a deeper understanding of the human spirit. The national dialogue around the value of college is surrounded by an ethos of the transactional when what it seems we need most in our craziness is the relational, some more personal connection. Perhaps what I am suggesting is that our world and our time is precisely at a moment which demands a college like Hastings. WE are essential.

So much of my thinking around this value question has been around notions of citizenship and a life well lived, that higher education now is learning how we might contribute our individual good to a greater good and to grow and develop our potentials in life. It's not that I have some animus towards technical skills whether they be in accounting or scientific research or welding. These are the necessary pieces of a craft ... and indeed we need these pieces in our future.

But my proclamation is that technical skills are not enough and that those very technical skills may be desperately obsolete in the future. Moreover, they are not enough to contribute to our personal futures and they are not enough to contribute to our shared

community. We need more. We need more deeply some abilities to think, to discern, to judge, to value, to love, to influence, to motivate.

And I believe with every fiber that we do this better at small residential colleges, that we do this in community and in our personal relationships. Our content gives us a platform but our context - our community - gives this possibility. If we are to live into the lives of which all humans are worthy, if we are to indeed be the greatest society, then it is this education, this personal residential education, this Hastings education, which is so vital.

My plea here is deeper. It's also to ask ... if this is the most vital, most vibrant form of education, then why can't it be accessible to more? Why are we creating education for the masses right now that is packaged as a credential, without the personal touch and without the formational element? My instinct is this is about cost and about the broken model of higher education finance. It's broken terribly. This most powerful form of education, this thing for which I am a champion, for which WE are a champion, by its very cost is only available to a few ... and it's only going to get more painfully exclusive if we continue on the path of high ticket price, high discount, high merit to those who already have privilege and access ... we are destined to fail, failing as an institution and failing as industry ... and ultimately failing as a citizenry.

So what if we could be new? What if Hastings could be the entrepreneur? What if we could upend the current model and create an access model that was different? What if we awarded aid to those who might persist and affect the world? What if we charged

what if really cost and were transparent with those costs? What if we stopped organizing ourselves around majors and minors and instead started to organize ourselves around things like analysis and writing and rhetoric and creativity and citizenship. What then?

I know, I know ... I tie myself in knots coming at this from both ends. I want us to sustain and strengthen the very core of a Hastings College, our ability to affect and change lives in ways that are frankly beautiful, to assist so many in becoming more than they thought they could be. Yet I want us to consider our current method, this tried and true habit of higher education of which we are a part that needs examination and change. Change comes slowly and painfully for sure but I wonder if now is our moment to envision this place not just in five years or in ten years ... but in 25 or 30 years when I am no longer president and our most junior faculty members of today are wise grey-haired sages with endowed scholarships in their name ... when the world has changed so dramatically but this place, this Hastings, has made an impact on this region, this Nebraska in ways that make jaws drop. Wouldn't that be awesome?

Sometimes my blindspot is to see too dramatically into the future ... to wonder what will be different. Sometimes my strength is to see deeply into the future and wonder what must be different.

What I know at this moment is two-fold:

One, the future of higher education is changing and we cannot cling to old habit; certainly we must keep our core, but we must embrace what is to be.

And two, this Hastings has the possibility to be that change, to lead our future rather than patiently wait to see what occurs. We are that good, we are that personal ... and you are that powerful.

My last words ... how does one express the deep gratitude to so many who have put me here in this awesome moment with a future that is so motivating? How can I show my gratitude and responsibility at being called to lead this amazing place at this time? How does one thank parents, teachers, mentors who have gathered here today? How does one tell my children how proud I am of who they are as people and how much they give to me each day? How does one tell a partner of twenty-seven years thank you but those two words can't come close to covering the gratitude and emotion I feel at her support? I don't know.

Maybe it's by noticing. Maybe it's by being direct. Maybe it begins with personal education ...

Thank you.