"Liberal Arts Education and Global Citizenship"
February 5, 2010

**Moderator:**
Michael R. Halleran, Provost

**Guest Speaker:**
Martha Nussbaum, Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics, The University of Chicago Law School

**Opening Remarks**
Dr. Halleran opened the conversation by welcoming the audience, which included nearly 100 people despite the snow outside. The fourth in a series of public conversations throughout the year, this session focused on the topic, “Liberal Arts Education and Global Citizenship.” This session features a guest speaker complementing the faculty panel sessions to encourage the ongoing discussion. The series of events arises directly from the strategic plan, which states, “Promote a campus-wide conversation about the future of liberal arts education and the role of graduate and professional programs in a liberal arts university” (Challenge 1, Goal 1, Objective 1).

**Remarks from Professor Nussbaum**
Prof. Nussbaum began by describing a global crisis, not the current economic situation, but rather a worldwide crisis in education. Globally, the nature of education is changing with reduced focus on developing complete human beings and citizens. She offered the example of the U.S. Department of Education’s fall 2006 report *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of Higher Education*. This report focused on education for national economic gain while neglecting the humanities, the arts, and critical thinking. As a second example, in the fall of 2009 the British government established criteria for evaluating researchers including a 25 percent component based on the research impact (in other words, the practical or commercial application). Nussbaum submitted that too often the direction of education and of democratic society go unexamined.

In evaluating education for good citizenship, the needs of democratic society must be considered. Nussbaum stated the prerequisites of a humane democratic society include the ability to deliberate well about political issues (to examine, reflect, argue, and debate), the ability to think about the nation as a whole beyond just one group (also the nation in context of the world at large), and the ability to have concern for the lives of others.

While focusing on the development of these abilities, true education must also combat the forces acting against their development. Nussbaum went on to describe some of these forces in people, including naturally high levels of deference to authority, high subjectivity to peer influence, and situational influence to act in ways that they would not otherwise. People also inherently create subordinate groups of human beings. These forces take on greater power in combination with certain factors, including anonymity or lack of personal accountability, the absence of a critical voice (even if the voice of just one person), and the portrayal of another group in a faceless way.

Prof. Nussbaum then addressed important skills that should result from a liberal arts education. She began with the capacity for Socratic self-examination and the ability to
reason in making choices. By encouraging the development of an active critical voice through education, the ability to evaluate the actions of authority increases. Nussbaum also emphasized the ability to see oneself as a member of a complicated, heterogeneous world. She commented, “Knowledge is not a guarantee of good behavior, but ignorance virtually assures bad behavior.”

Before addressing specific components of liberal arts curriculum, Nussbaum emphasized a curriculum must be customized to the institution in consideration of the faculty, student body, and available resources. Within that institutional framework, she stated during the first two years of study undergraduates should receive at least a rudimentary knowledge of world history and some grounding in world religions and thought. Students should also learn the techniques to develop inquiry in these areas further if desired. Nussbaum stated a foreign language is critical to realize that intelligent people have described the world in different ways, which encourages the development of a global perspective. She also emphasized the need for inclusion of the arts in a curriculum.

In concluding her lecture, Prof. Nussbaum noted this kind of education may be doing well at institutions grounded in the liberal arts, but elsewhere it is not as healthy. The economic downturn is leading colleges and universities to emphasize the market value of their degree. Worldwide, liberal arts education is not the norm. Universities play a major role in developing democracies, but may have abandoned that task in focusing increasingly on economic development. Education for short-term profit leads to technically trained citizens without the tools to be humane, moral democratic citizens. The values of a liberal education must be emphasized or will wither away in the absence of an immediate economic impact.

**Audience Questions and Comments**

- Gary Defotis, Professor of Chemistry, noted the twin themes of education and ethics. He suggested perhaps ethical development lies before the baccalaureate education. He cited a national survey in which participants expressed that lying was allowable for either the encouragement of a good cause or for revenge against someone disliked.
  - Prof. Nussbaum agreed ethics should begin developing earlier than the college years. If not, the task is much more difficult later, but not impossible. People can later be captivated by the intellectual development of ethics. She does not agree with Kant that lying is never acceptable, and questioned the wording of the described survey for lacking context for the lying.

- A student in the audience asked how increased economic collaboration through globalization will affect international cultural understanding.
  - Prof. Nussbaum noted historically international trade motivated purely by profit avoided cultural exchange. If awareness occurs with the economic exchange between nations, the results can be positive. She mentioned several areas in which people could become aware through international exchange. Understanding may increase over time, but awareness can also arise for a person in a moment of epiphany.

- A student in the audience asked if firsthand experience with diversity is required as a component of a liberal arts education. If so, how should the firsthand experience be provided?
o Prof. Nussbaum responded that firsthand experience cannot simply replace the role of curriculum. There is nothing like being personally immersed in a culture, but background knowledge allows more effective understanding. She offered her experiences interacting with people in India as an example. As to the question of how, Nussbaum responded that experiences must be intelligently linked to the curriculum.

- Carl Strikwerda, Dean of Arts and Sciences, noted two apparently conflicting views of education and authority in the lecture. In the first, education was described as liberating people from blind adherence to authority through developing a critical voice, while in the second, education was described as a civilizing authority developing the ability to be good citizens. He asked for clarification on the relationship of education and authority.
  - Professor Nussbaum responded these two views go hand in hand. If a person learns to think critically, including of authority, then the person will also be able to think critically about oneself in a role of authority. She emphasized real critical thinking requires personal vulnerability.

- A student noted a liberal arts education is a luxury not afforded to everyone. How do we cross this barrier?
  - Prof. Nussbaum responded that access to liberal arts education is a problem. She cited a colleague who found the earliest educational interventions are the most effective. In noting the increasing emphasis on early childhood education, Nussbaum stated these programs should not just focus on science and math, but also include the arts and humanities. A national discussion needs to occur not only on the advantages of early programs, but what these programs should be teaching.

- Bill Cooke, Professor of Physics, described pursuit of education currently as including an economic draw without necessarily including a draw to become wise. How can we encourage students to be excited about a liberal arts education rather than just attaining wealth?
  - Prof. Nussbaum stated she is not quite as pessimistic in her outlook. She cited the example of parents visiting for humanities weekend at the University of Chicago excited about that kind of education. Those parents may not be working directly in the humanities, but consider it the most valuable part of their education. She concluded if art and literature are taught in a deadening way, no excitement is generated. The same is also true for science.

- Christopher Del Negro, Associate Professor of Applied Science, noted that in the same way as all undergraduates should have some exposure to the arts and the humanities, undergraduates should also be exposed to scientific ways of thinking. He asked what Prof. Nussbaum saw as a core curriculum incorporating the natural sciences, mathematics, and engineering.
  - Prof. Nussbaum responded that interdisciplinary courses are valuable in accomplishing this goal. She also noted that basic science courses can be taught in ways that are illuminating about the core humanity behind the science.

- A student appreciated Prof. Nussbaum’s thoughts on authority. He asked what is the best way for students, faculty, and staff to negotiate authority.
Prof. Nussbaum commented that pedagogy of a class must include the vulnerability of the faculty member. A teacher must be willing to be questioned in order to demonstrate that positions are to be taken with respect. Through this example, students see it is the quality of the argument and not simply the nature of the conclusions that matter. With regard to the institutional level, the role of authority must be specific to the institution with consideration given to the characteristics of the student body. The institution must decide the appropriate role of student participation in regard to boards and committees. Nussbaum encouraged the trusting of students in such roles.

- Keith Griffioen, Professor of Physics, inquired if a curricular conflict exists between breadth and a focus in one area.
  - Prof. Nussbaum responded that conflict does exist, particularly in the first two years of study before a student selects a major, but emphasized there should be room for electives in a curriculum. The time will not be as readily available again in life for students to pursue a broad array of interests.

- Joel Schwartz, Director of the Charles Center, stated the objectives of a liberal arts education should be expanded beyond simply the civic application emphasized in the lecture.
  - Prof. Nussbaum noted the need for developing a certain set of broadly applicable intellectual skills through a liberal arts education. Attending college cannot guarantee this, but institutions should strive for a deep enough impact to last a lifetime.

- Gary Defotis commented that science increasingly demands a practical payoff quickly.
  - Prof. Nussbaum commented on shifting priorities linked at least in part to politics. The trust of scientists seemed to decrease under the previous administration, but may increase under the new President.

- Dr. Halleran offered the final question. He asked Prof. Nussbaum to address opportunities for breadth if she were starting her own university.
  - Prof. Nussbaum began by examining Brown University, where she previously taught and which has no required curriculum. She found the Brown model worked by selecting independent, thoughtful students who could thrive with that freedom. Brown also provided strong faculty advising to it students in developing a course of study. An institution must ask, “Who are the faculty and what are they willing to do?” To find the appropriate curriculum, an institution must evaluate its students and faculty to determine the best structure. Nussbaum finds it troubling that current students do not read as much on their own, so required courses may be the best manner to expose students to excellent texts. In the end, a mix of courses may be best to offer breadth to students.

Discussion notes compiled and written by Jeremy P. Martin.