"Changing Understandings of Liberal Education"
April 2, 2010

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

**Speaker:**
Carol G. Schneider, President, Association of American Colleges and Universities

**Opening Remarks**

Dr. Halleran opened the conversation by welcoming the audience. The sixth in a series of public conversations throughout the year, this session focused on the topic, “Changing Understandings of Liberal Education.” 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).

This session featured a guest speaker complementing the faculty panel sessions to encourage the ongoing discussion. Dr. Schneider is president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), the organization most responsible for advocating liberal education in the United States. She is instrumental in the AACU’s Liberal Education and America’s Purpose (LEAP) initiative.

**Remarks from Dr. Schneider**

Dr. Schneider began by commenting on the changing definitions of a liberal education both within the academy and in the larger landscape of American priorities. The goal of the LEAP program is to change and shape public conversation regarding a liberal education. Historically, a liberal education was reserved for the elite, whereas the general populace received a technical education. This created a legacy of suspicion for some regarding liberal education. The AACU is making the case through the LEAP campaign that a liberal education is the most appropriate style to meet the challenges for higher education in the 21st century.

Dr. Schneider then discussed the enduring themes of liberal education, even as it is repositioned over the centuries. She provided three. First, “the kind of broad knowledge needed to understand the entire world.” Second, “the powers of the mind—and the practices that develop them.” Third, “examined values—civic and ethical responsibilities to self and others.” She addressed these values in the historical context of curriculum. The 19th century featured a common core curriculum with the widespread concept that all learning was liberal. The 20th century developed the modern concepts of “breadth + depth” with general studies providing the breadth and the major field providing the depth. The LEAP campaign argues that the breadth component offered in the general curriculum is as important as the major field of study, though some students approach it merely as a degree requirement.

In the 21st century, the academy has added additional layers to the curriculum, such as global emphasis and diversity, without reducing the previous components. This has led to some tensions due to the size of the curricular commitments. This tension led the AACU to enter the conversation. First, the AACU led a campaign from 2000 to 2005 called
“Greater Expectations—A National Dialogue About Goals for College Learning.” Realizing a continuing need, the AACU then made a decade-long commitment from 2005 to 2015 through the LEAP program. LEAP goals focus on essential learning outcomes, which build upon the three enduring themes described earlier. The AACU identified the following essential outcomes: “Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World,” “Intellectual and Practical Skills,” “Personal and Social Responsibility,” and “Integrative and Applied Learning.”

Dr. Schneider identified two arguments that have greatly helped the cause of modern liberal education. First, liberal education is not limited to the arts and sciences. The second is a focus on integrative and applied learning. Interestingly, when described this way, liberal education matches what employers are seeking in graduates. This matches a decreasing demand for workers with routinized skills and increasing need for workers with a complex cognitive skill set. Jobs are changing rapidly and require a workforce that can innovate.

Dr. Schneider concluded that while it is important to economically justify the case for liberal education, its value goes far beyond employment. The economic case must be made in an apprehensive world to gain a hearing, but there are also “profound connections between liberal education and democratic vitality.” She recommended that as William & Mary considers its role as a university, it should consider how to link the research being done to the problems of society. She concluded by quoting a statement made by Martha Nussbaum, who served as a guest speaker earlier in this series of events, “a flourishing economy requires the same skills that support citizenship.”

Audience Questions and Comments

- Eric Jensen, Professor of Economics and Director of the Public Policy Program, appreciated the economic justification for liberal education. He thinks there is a difference between what businesses said in AACU surveys and the reality of hiring practices. He commented on the ability of the MPP degree, which he believes is the MBA of the 21st century, in preparing students for leadership. He asked for thoughts on bridging this disconnect.
  - Schneider responded that she does hear that the business leaders asking for these skills are often executives, not recruiters. There is still some screening that occurs based on major/degree. After that initial process, liberal education skills do come to bear. However, she noted that she has been involved with business forums across the country in which the conversation is changing toward a wider awareness of these desired skills. She encouraged continuing the efforts as this shift continues to impact hiring practices.

- Bill Cooke, Professor of Physics, finds that W&M students often pursue double majors. He asked if majors are being discussed as a thing of the past in favor of liberal education.
  - Schneider responded that was not the case. The emphasis was on integrating multiple fields, such as a physics and religion double major. Students are voting with their feet for integrated learning by choosing diverse fields for major and minor combinations. Conscientious departments will focus on finding ways to provide this integrative learning. William & Mary departments may already be doing this, and if so should continue.
Cooke asked how much was done within a department versus across departments.

- Schneider responded that some institutions seek to address this through general education reform, but her view is that it goes beyond general education. She added that entering students often come with credit earned through Advanced Placement courses, exempting them from general requirements. Research has found that integrative upper level general courses serve to aid learning for these students.

- David Kranbuehl, Professor of Chemistry, suggested departments need to give specific attention to integrative study. He describes the depth requirements of his department limiting student ability to get breadth, such as a study abroad experience. He suggests that departments need to review major requirements for the ability of students to engage in liberal learning.
  - Schneider responded those conversations are what she is advocating, though it must be within the context of institutional learning outcomes. Each department should consider its programming in light of those institutional goals. Students must also gain the vocabulary to describe a liberal education experience, which has been lacking.
  - Kranbuehl responded that conversation regarding the liberal arts does occur at William & Mary, but it is focused on the first two years and not during the major course of study.

- Arthur Knight, Associate Professor of American Studies, English, Film, and Literary and Cultural Studies, asked how Schneider saw liberal education connecting with local application. He asked how much of civic engagement is reliant upon stability and connectedness, which is not generally present among students. Often he finds that the focus is global and not upon local applications.
  - Schneider had lunch with a group of William & Mary students. She found these students were involved in the Williamsburg community. Higher education cannot provide everything within the allotted four or five years. It can provide exposure and the idea that engagement is necessary, not optional.
  - Knight finds that stability is an issue. Students often reinvent the wheel without knowledge of what has been done before. This is to the detriment of meeting the needs of the community.
    - Schneider agreed this can be a problem. She gave some examples of successful programs. The community's needs do need to be paramount.
    - Knight added that faculty must view themselves as community members.

- Silvia Tandeciarz, Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies, asked if there are particular institutional structures necessary to encourage these integrative learning activities. There are a number of projects she is aware of at William & Mary, but the obstacles are immense. She asked for advice as the College considers its programming.
Schneider responded that strategic planning, which is currently happening at William & Mary, is key so that the entire institution establishes a priority. The structures must provide incentives and not just disincentives to programming. She mentioned a specific program at Harvard and the development of centers of excellence on numerous campuses. Pulling together the rewards system with the structure is key.

- Anne-Marie McCartan, Executive Director of the Council of Colleges of Arts & Sciences, asked if liberal education is realistic. Are institutions actually making the described curricular suggestions?
  - Schneider responded her work is important, but campus action is paramount. Some states (she mentioned Wisconsin specifically) have been very proactive. Wisconsin had already formed an organization across institutions out of concern for the marginalization of the liberal arts before partnering with the AACU. As result, a number of campuses adapted shared goals and reorganized structures around LEAP initiatives. Total curricular transformation is admittedly limited. (Wagner University has done this through a series of integrative undergraduate experiences.) Mostly pockets within institutions are changing, but those pockets are enlarging.

- Carl Strikwerda, Dean of Arts & Sciences, believes that William & Mary is often its own worse enemy in embracing these changes. Territorialism in defending required departmental courses limits the student experience. He suggests the GER system could be opened up to allow students to pursue diverse studies at the upper levels. Interdisciplinary course offerings are currently limited in the general curriculum.
  - Schneider agreed with his thoughts and provided the example of Bates College in evaluating the general curriculum. Bates requires students to choose clusters of four linked courses (from a group of course offerings) that provide interdisciplinary learning. The University of Rochester has adopted a similar program, believing that a principle for organizing breadth is impossible to establish. It requires freedom of choice for students, which is provided in these clusters.

- Greg Smith, Associate Professor of Applied Science, thinks the organizing principle should not be breadth but the application of a major field of study to diverse fields. He offered the example of neuroscience and viewing the brain across disciplines. He believes it important to teach students to think about a problem from various perspectives, which is difficult for faculty. Faculty development is necessary to provide the ability to break out of a faculty member’s specialization into a broader perspective.
  - Schneider suggests creating a community of different faculty experiences rather than attempting to retrain faculty. She is aware of several programs applying this strategy to provide integrative learning.

- Laurie Sanderson, Professor of Biology, sees an alarming disconnect between the learning occurring in high schools and the LEAP goals (and those of William & Mary). She asked if there is a way to address this institutionally or within LEAP?
  - Schneider acknowledged that this is an issue. AACU has 1,200 members, so it is not a small organization, and has grown during the LEAP program. Institutions are concerned that students do not come with integrative
learning experience. She noted that the best predictor of success at many institutions are writing samples, and suggested that students could be “placed” in freshman seminars according to an evaluation of writing samples in the senior year of high school. She noted encouraging integrative learning in high schools requires the ambition to advocate even more vigorously to suggest this change in partner states.

Dr. Halleran thanked the audience for attending before encouraging the conversation to continue over refreshments and beyond the event.

Discussion notes compiled and written by Jeremy P. Martin.