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Integration, Inquiry, and the Hopeful Search for Truth

Thomas S. Hibbs

Thank you for this opportunity to be with you today. I cannot think of any topics more important at this time and place in American history and in the history of Christian higher education than those we will be dealing with today. This is a time of great and dramatic opportunity for faith-based institutions, an opportunity we need to seize with equal parts gusto and prudence.

Over the past five to ten years, a strange discontent has bubbled up out of the nation's leading universities. If I had to put my finger on the source of this discontent—and this is out of Harvard, Yale, Princeton—I'd say that leading administrators at many institutions are confronting the perplexing realization that universities seem unable to be universities. Universities seem unable to gain and implement the self-understanding of what they are as an institution, the purpose of what they do in the classroom with their students, and what they hope to form in their students and to produce as graduates.

Harry R. Lewis, former dean at Harvard University, published a book a few years back called *Excellence without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education*. Derek Bok, former and more recently again interim president at Harvard, wrote a book entitled *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More*. Anthony T. Konman, a former law school dean at Yale, wrote *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*. The double entendre in the title reflects the author's laments that while liberal education seems to be losing its sense of purpose, he wants to focus not on the question of its demise but on reviving the question of its goal or purpose. David Brooks, who writes for the

New York Times, has famously written about Ivy League students in a 2001 *Atlantic Monthly* article titled “The Organization Kid.” He has also written a couple of books about education.

Two other fascinating books to note: Andrew Delbanco, whom *Time Magazine* has called America’s best social critic, is planning to publish *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*; and Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the premier Christian philosophers, has written *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition*.

Why is it that the university today cannot seem to be a university? Running through all of these analyses are certain common diagnoses. Certain focuses on certain kinds of symptoms reveal a libertarianism among faculty and students: You do your thing, I’ll do mine. Leave me alone to do my research.

Students say leave me alone to get my grades—and to do whatever I want to do when I am not in the classroom. Hence the fanciful and lurid descriptions of college life in Tom Wolfe’s *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. A *Rolling Stone* article a couple of years back contrasted day Duke and night Duke and noted how completely separate they are from one another.

Faculty express concern about overly specialized scholarship, isolation of faculty from students, and isolation of faculty from one another. As Brooks explains eloquently, today’s students are hardworking, tolerant, and easygoing but often do not find anywhere in university life anything that helps them think about the whole of their lives, or even a long-term vision of ten, fifteen, or twenty years. Instead, students say they tend to think in only very immediate terms about putting another notch on the résumé. No one is helping students articulate in a serious way the questions that comprise the arc of their whole life, what we used to call the question of vocation. There seems everywhere a loss of common purpose, decline and erosion of shared communal life, and absence of any serious attention to the notion of vocation.

No matter if it is secular or faith-based, education has to be about integration. In order to correct these problems that seem increasingly prominent in higher education across this nation, we need integration. We need various kinds of integration. We need a greater integration of faculty and students. From the faculty side, we need an integration of scholarship and teaching. Faculty want to see their scholarship connect with their teaching, and their teaching feed their scholarship. Students need a greater integration of what occurs in the classroom and the dorm.

Even before I became a dean, I believed the two main things that especially faith-based institutions have to be serious about are hiring and curriculum. If you ask administrators at faith-based institutions what it means to be a faith-based institution and they do not mention hiring and

curriculum in a serious way, they are not serious. The third thing I would add—and this reflects my experience as an administrator with responsibility for running dorms as we do at Baylor—is student life.

You simply cannot let student life go on in a way that is, at worst, hostile to what is going on in the classroom or, at best, indifferent to it. You have to find a way of bridging these artificial gaps between what students are doing in the classroom and what they do outside of the classroom. Can you do all this and also integrate faith into what you are doing? Wouldn't it just be enough to say, "We are working really hard at having faculty make connections between scholarship and their teaching, and we are working really hard to bridge the gap between what goes on in the classroom and what goes on in the dorm"? Isn't it too much of a burden to try to integrate this other thing called faith? I think, in fact, faith is what makes the other two or three kinds of integration easier and more feasible.

A few years back, Pope John Paul II issued an encyclical regarding Catholic universities called *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (From the Heart of the Church). Historically in the West, in the Middle Ages and even in the modern world, universities arose out of the hearts of churches. This is something we are too apt today to forget. It is a historical question that is and will continue to be answered over the next fifty to one hundred years, whether without that impetus, that inspiration, that source of integration, universities can remain universities. Not whether they can remain faith-based universities, but having lost their faith-based foundations, can they remain universities at all? There is significant doubt today about the future of the university from leading higher education figures, as I mentioned at the outset.

I want to talk briefly about three areas of integration. I think they map nicely onto the three areas I have already mentioned of student life, hiring and faculty development, and curriculum.

The first is that, out of our faith-based resources, we have ways of thinking about the connection between the life of the mind and the rest of human life, or between the intellect and character. For instance, in the Honors College at Baylor, we run two dorms, one for men and one for women. Faculty members live in the dorms. Other faculty have offices in the dorms. Classes are based in the dorms. We have a chapel in the dorms where students can engage in morning and evening prayer. In this context, and when students eat together, this connection between the life of the mind and the rest of human life is also there. I like to say the greatest thing about having dorms is that they are a way of scheduling spontaneous conversations between interesting, bright, eager-to-learn young people. That makes our job in the classroom more interesting and more likely to be successful.

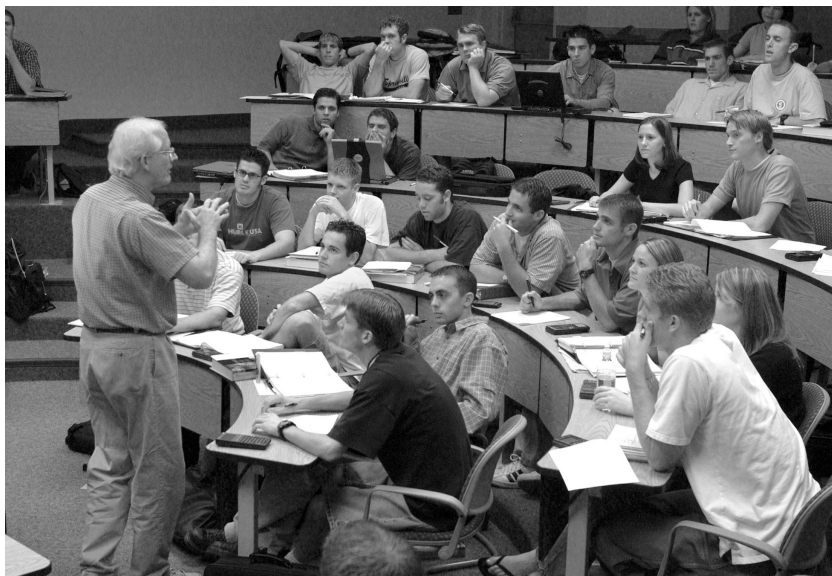
We want to create spaces that integrate the academic, the social, and the spiritual. In part, this has to do with the geography of our campuses and with the kinds of public gathering spaces we have, but especially it has to do with the ways students interact with one another, the ways in which study, social life, and worship can be seamlessly combined. This way students not only hear about but experience the integration of academic life, social life, spiritual life.

Next I want to talk briefly about inquiry and hope. There seems to be a lot of despair in the country about inquiry, about whether inquiry can ever really get us to the truth, and a hopelessness that can invade especially the hearts and minds of young people. As teachers we have all experienced the mindless, unreflective relativism that students can bring to the classroom. You probably have less of that feeling here at BYU than in many places, but it is amazing how pervasive are the themes “Who knows what the truth is?” and “This opinion is as good as that opinion.”

Of course, if you press the argument, students are unclear about what they really think or believe. Typically, they do not have cogent reasons to support this or that point. But whether as cause, symptom, or effect, this kind of unreflective relativism denotes a kind of despair. There is a sense that even if I worked at it, I could not get to the truth. This is where teachers of Christian faith are absolutely crucial in our classrooms: to exemplify the belief that truth will come to us, one way or another; that inquiry can lead somewhere; and that hope in inquiry will be fruitful.

Whatever the link in content between faith and learning, there ought to be a link that pervades Christian campuses between inquiry and the hope for the attainment of truth. This makes hope and attainment possible. It makes the experience of wonder deep and rich. And it is that experience of wonder that characterizes our life on this journey from birth to death and beyond. It is wonder at the glory of creation, which science can lead us to see. It is wonder at the beauty of art and literature, at the probing of the great questions in philosophy.

Our faculty and our communities ought to embody this wonder. Wonder is a marvelous thing. It recognizes our status between having absolute certitude about the final truth of all things and being mired in paralyzing doubt and despair. To be in wonder, as Josef Pieper says at one point, is to be *en via*, on the way, on a quest. W. E. B. Du Bois, writing in his marvelous works about higher education and the souls of black folk, says the true purpose of education is to consider the riddle of human existence. It is not to earn meat but to examine the end and goal of that life that meat nourishes. And yet wonder, if it is not inspired by hope, can easily lead to despair and a sacrifice of the intellectual life. It is absolutely crucial that we have faculty who embody wonder. And they are more likely to embody



Teachers of Christian faith are absolutely crucial in our classrooms: to exemplify the belief that truth will come to us, one way or another; that inquiry can lead somewhere; and that hope in inquiry will be fruitful. Courtesy Brigham Young University Photography.

wonder if they have active faith commitments in their lives and in the activity of their intellects.

Connected is the notion of the unity of truth. This is really a starting point for thinking about curriculum. As believers, we have a faith in the unity of truth. My great mentor Thomas Aquinas says at one point the truths of faith and truths of reason cannot contradict one another. He does not say it is going to be easy. It is not that we can wake up and sense a contradiction and ten minutes later we will have resolved it simply by invoking faith. But Aquinas does say in the final analysis there cannot be a conflict.

We believe in the unity of truth. Students see the unity of truth in part by seeing how the parts of their education fit together. This is one of the great laments coming out of the Ivy League schools currently. Students and faculty do not see how the parts of education are really a whole. And you cannot have a university unless administrators, faculty, and students see, at least in some partial way, how the parts complement one another and constitute a whole. That is a matter of curriculum: unity of truth comes from beginning to see how the parts overlap and complement one another.

Let me end with some brief observations. I have taught at two very different Catholic schools. I am now at a Baptist institution. After I came out of the University of Notre Dame, my first teaching job was at Thomas

Aquinas College, a small Catholic St. John's–great–books sort of school. When I got to Thomas Aquinas in 1987, we drove to a plot of land and got out of the car. I asked the fellow who had driven, “Where’s the campus?” At that point, they had one permanent building and fifteen trailers. Now if you go to the Thomas Aquinas website, the entire campus plan, including the church, has been built. It is a gorgeous campus. It has three or four times the number of students it had in 1987 and double the number of faculty. In my faculty interview there, it was not just expected I would take Catholic education seriously. It was not just expected I would take certain Catholic authors like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas seriously. In the interview, I was asked whether I considered myself a disciple of Thomas Aquinas. So there was a very focused notion of what the institution was about. Yet the institution actively discouraged faculty research and publication because it wanted us to focus on the lives of students, on the classroom, and on the communal interaction among the faculty. There are many virtues to that model.

I left Thomas Aquinas to go to the other coast—to Boston College. (Probably I should have said I was going from “right coast” to “left coast.” In essence, I was going from what the Catholic spectrum would consider one of the most conservative Catholic institutions in Southern California to one of the more liberal Catholic institutions in New England.) At Boston College, there is a serious commitment to research. It is so serious that some worry—and they should worry—whether faculty take teaching seriously enough. It is as though teaching evaluations matter only if they are really stellar or really bad. Otherwise, it seems faculty teaching evaluations are set aside, while publications are emphasized.

Partly because of where it is located, Boston College is also a place where faculty do not see one another or see students very much. Although Boston College is trying to make changes, student life was for the most part left to go its own way. For example, it struck me that students I taught in their junior and senior year were those who, almost by fortunate accident, had good roommates in their freshman and sophomore years. These students developed friendships with people who enabled them to be good students and avoid the toxic parts of the wider culture that surrounds Boston College.

Baylor, where I am now, is of course a Baptist institution. We are trying to pull off the integration of all these things. We require faculty to be active participants in a church, to be able to describe their faith journey, and to tell how it informs their research and what they do in the classroom. These are open-ended queries. There is no single answer regarding how to integrate these areas. Some people at certain points in their career are more articulate than others. Yet if you have a community that as a whole is committed

to this integration, you can bring in some people who are not yet articulate in these areas, but who can grow by being part of a community.

We are attempting to make connections between scholarship and teaching. We encourage faculty to broaden their publications on the basis of their teaching beyond areas of specialization. As I mentioned about dorms, we do not want to frighten students when we are recruiting them that they will have faculty following them around campus. Yet we want them to know they will see a lot of faculty from day to day. This is good for students and good for faculty.

The real danger for Christian higher education in America today is success. We all want to do better. We take what we do seriously. Much of what *U.S. News and World Report* measures is real. We have to, we ought to, take those things seriously. But the real danger is success. If we become obsessed with the external signs that what we are doing is succeeding, we lose the goods, the purposes without which education cannot continue to exist. In the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's phrase, "We substitute external goods for internal goods." The internal goods of education are the growth and formation of young minds; the external goods are bigger endowments, rankings, numbers of publications in peer-reviewed journals. Those things help, and we cannot discount them, but when we focus more on those things than on the internal goods, we become corrupt as an institution. We will fail not just as believers, but also as members of the guild of the university.

And so I leave you with this challenge and this paradox. It may be, in this time and place, that the only places where universities can really be universities are places that have a source of faith, a transcendent framework within which we understand the activities of integration, inquiry, and the hopeful search for truth. These are the sources that help the university better to be a university.

Thomas S. Hibbs is currently Distinguished Professor of Ethics and Culture and Dean of the Honors College at Baylor University, where he oversees a number of interdisciplinary programs, including the Honors Program, the Great Texts major, and the Baylor Interdisciplinary Core. As dean, Hibbs is involved with student recruitment, enrollment management, development of curricula, and faculty recruitment and development. With degrees from the University of Dallas and the University of Notre Dame, Hibbs taught at Boston College for thirteen years, where he was full professor and department chair in philosophy. At Baylor, he has been involved in ecumenical discussions of the work of John Courtney Murray and John Paul II. In addition to teaching a variety of interdisciplinary courses, Hibbs teaches in the fields of medieval philosophy, contemporary virtue ethics, and philosophy and popular culture. He speaks regularly at American high schools and universities and also at conferences in Europe.