

The Aims of Education

William D. Fenn*

Information, skills, vision, concern and faith—these are the goals a student should seek in a university, the author says.

I am deeply sensitive to the honor that has been given me this afternoon. Though never truly part of Silliman, during 16 years of growing familiarity with its nature and its development, I have come to have for it both admiration and affection. I assume the status of alumnus with pleasure and shall wear it with pride.

It is also an honor to be asked to address you this afternoon. I last spoke from this platform seven years ago. That was at another commencement, the commencement of Dr. Cicero D. Calderon's term as president of Silliman. On that occasion I spoke of some of the characteristics of a Christian university. Today I would like to share with you some of the hopes I have for you as its graduates, and, by implication, for this great institution itself.

First Aim: Information

As I look over this gathering of young people, drawn to Silliman by some attraction, facing ultimate departure from it into the larger world, I find myself wondering what they are looking for here, what they are finding, and what they are going to do with what they find. What they find is going to shape their lives, and the use they make of it is going to shape the world of tomorrow.

Were they to be asked what they are looking for, I suspect that the vast majority of students would answer that they are seeking more

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This speech was read by Dr. Fenn at Silliman University, Nov. 18, 1969, at a special commencement during which he was conferred the honorary degree of doctor of education.

information. I use that word rather than "knowledge" because knowledge includes so much more than mere facts. To be sure, facts learned from books and lectures is desirable, sometimes essential. But mere information is quickly out of date, often useless, and always available later when needed. The important thing is not to have it but to know how to find it and, above all, how to use it when found.

Second Aim: Basic Skills

I also suspect that students are looking for skills. Basic skills are essential. But specific techniques may not be. You can never hope to prepare for every situation that arise. Trade and technical schools--not universities--are the places to which to go for specific skills. The important thing is to acquire the basic skills that will enable you to develop more particular skills when you need them.

We are living in the first age in history in which we shall die in a world which will have little resemblance to that into which we were born. As Dr. Robert Oppenheimer said some years ago, when he was Director of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, "Nearly everything that is now known was not in any book when most of us went to school; we cannot know it unless we have learned it since." Furthermore, long before the present generation of students reaches the age of retirement, the scientific and technological knowledge they gain on this campus--and much of the social and economic and political as well--will have become obsolete.

Third Aim: Vision

The task of the college is not merely to provide facts and skills for immediate use but to endow the men and women who look to it for keys to the future with an intellectual capital free from danger of depreciation, always able to adjust to new conditions, to respond to new demands.

No education of today will be worth much for tomorrow unless it is a continuing education, the basis for ever-renewed, ever-new education. The graduate of tomorrow must know, not the facts of tomorrow but how to secure and evaluate the needed facts when tomorrow comes. This education must be a never-ending thing, not only from outer necessity but from inner compulsion.

These living, ever-renewable, always useful tools are essential. But more important than information or skills is vision--a willingness

and an ability to look ahead and visualize what may be needed, what may be done. Seeing problems in all their breadth and complexity, visualizing exciting new possibilities. "Where there is no vision, the people perish" is as true today as it was in Solomon's time 3,000 years ago. And vision comes only by trying to see beyond the present and the here, through letting the mind roam imaginatively outside oneself and beyond today, creating a better world.

The Path of Humanity

A lifetime ago a popular English poet wrote a poem called "The Explorer," which tells of a man who was never satisfied with the new lands he discovered but was always drawn on to renewed search by an inner voice whispering:

"Something hidden, go and find it,
Go and look behind the ranges.
Something lost behind the ranges,
Lost and waiting for you. Go."

This is the way in which humanity moves. This is the power behind the search for answers to the great questions of existence; the solutions to its endless problems. Men and women climbing difficult ranges of ignorance and prejudice and hate and fear, finding new valleys of knowledge and cooperation and love.

We are inclined to think that the days of exploration and discovery have ended—at least so far as the earth is concerned. It has all been thoroughly explored and we are off to look at the moon. True there is little room for new Columbuses or Magellans finding old New Worlds. But the depths of the oceans and the interior of the earth still remain largely unknown. The make-up of the atom still eludes final delineation. These are well-known and accepted areas of exploration.

Man's Problems

There is also much yet to learn about man's relation to his environment. Indeed, man's destruction of that environment ranks with his overpopulation of the world as one of the looming catastrophes of tomorrow. In the United States, we must climb great ranges of refuse and abandoned automobiles in the search for valleys with unpolluted streams. Fortunately not all countries are as supposedly "advanced" as that!

But even here in the Philippines, you face serious problems of ecology.

But there is another even more critical area of exploration and discovery where new answers must be found if the new valleys are to be discovered at all, and if their freshness is not to be destroyed as soon as found. This is the area of man's relation to man—social, political, economic, spiritual. Can all men have enough to eat? Can neighbors be neighborly? Can black and white and yellow and brown live together? Can communist and free co-exist? Can nations live together in peace?

These are such tremendous questions that you may feel that they have nothing to say to you, that there is nothing that you can do about them. Yet there is no way of evading these questions.

Fourth Aim: Concern

To information, skills, and vision I would add an important fourth: concern. Dissatisfaction with what is wrong, determination to bring about change—not for any advantage to yourself but because you want a better world, a better life, for all. This is what gives purpose and direction to your use of the other things you find—information, skills, vision. It will determine whether you seek wealth, power, position for their own sake and the benefits they bring you personally, or whether you use them, in whatever degree you achieve them, to find answers to the great questions that must be answered if the world is to be anything you want to live in or to leave to your children. How much you are worth will be determined, not by what you know but by what you love. You and your generation hold the future in your hands. Already two-thirds of the population of Asia is under 25, and half of those are under 17. You cannot clearly know the shape of things to come, but you are going to help to determine that shape. If you are self-centered and do nothing, you will only be hastening inevitable disaster. You will most certainly shape the future—for better or for worse.

What role you will play in that shaping will depend in part on what you look for here at Silliman and what you find, whether, in addition to the tools you acquire, you carry with you a concern for your fellow men and a commitment to contributing your share to making this world a better place for him and for you.

Fifth Aim: Moral and Religious Values

Finally, in addition to information and skills, in addition even to vision and concern, you will need the compass of moral values and re-

religious faith to guide you in the search for new valleys and the building of a new world.

I have already quoted one explorer—an imaginary one. Now let me quote another—a real one.

Thirty years ago, Admiral Richard Byrd spent a long Antarctic winter alone at the South Pole. There for six months the sun never rises and it is always night. His home was under the ice, where he could be safe and warm regardless of the bitter cold and fierce storms on the surface. But it was necessary for him to get some exercise. So, on the ice above, he marked out with poles stuck in the snow a path in which to walk. So long as he kept one of those poles in sight, he could always find his way back to his home under the ice.

One night—or rather, one time, for there it was always night—he lost himself in thought and walked too far. When he looked up, no pole was to be seen. He was lost. If he were to move in the wrong direction, nothing but hundred of miles of snow and ice would lie before him. He said later, "I was horribly afraid."

As he stood there, not daring to move, there came a sudden break in the clouds. Looking up, he saw a star which he recognized. Using this as a fixed point, he moved first in one direction and then in another until finally he again saw one of his poles. From there he was able to return to warmth and safety.

In life, as in exploring, it is essential to have some fixed point to guide you if you are not to be lost but are to find your way to where you wish to go. The truth that sets men free is not simply a matter of facts, discovered in the laboratory or the study and passed on in the classroom. It consists also—and primarily—of moral values and religious faith. An education which trains scientist or policy-makers in the absence of moral guidance is tragically irresponsible.

Have you been seeking not only information and skills, so useful but so limited, but a vision of a new world, a commitment to the achieving of better life for all, and a faith to guide you in the quest? Have you found these here at Silliman? Without such values, you will have little to contribute to the solution of the problems that vex us now and that will vex you even more in the years ahead. With these, you will have secured an education which will both be valid for and give meaning to life tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and the day after that.

It is my hope that you have sought these things and that Silliman has helped you find them.