

James L. Edwards  
Faculty Session  
President's Remarks  
Tuesday, 28 August 2007

## **THE ANDERSON UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE AS CULTURE**

As we begin another year we have these hours to talk with one another about the work we hold in common. I recognize that much of our work is quite individual and specific to a department or even to a major or course of study. However, we have been drawn into this common life in which we share some things that are "...more than the sum of the parts." Such things as our passion for being educators needing the protection and support we find in community both for our enduring traditions and some things that are a bit more fragile, like our creativity, our commitments to a particular world view, our confidence to teach.

All of this is special to being in a community that for these ninety years has seen its work as giving voice and action to a higher calling, the call of Christ. We share in this call for our own work; we amplify this call for one another and for our students; we reflect on helps and hindrances that are a part of the atmosphere in which we do this work.

Our service within the academy has made us aware that we can commit to the creation of a certain culture that is pervasive for those of us who teach and for our students. I do not presume to be the one to stir issues about teaching. But I do want you to know of my commitment, through all the work I do, to be a part of the teaching and learning community, to give voice wherever I can to our highest virtues, and to support you, the primary actors on the stage of the classroom.

Across the years we have spoken about "THE ANDERSON EXPERIENCE." It defined a certain kind of learning that was holistic, that included what we now speak of as service-learning and that linked curricular and co-curricular elements. It was the thing our graduates would describe as "SPECIAL." They would say of Anderson University, "That is a very special place..."

I want to join with you and others in setting the Anderson Experience into a more universal context by referring to the CULTURE of this place. For a number of years we have tried to understand and commit to the idea of a "Christ-Centered Culture." This pervasive commitment is at the very center of our mission which is "...to educate persons for a life of faith and service in the church and society." Such a commitment is a part of the very weather and topography of this university. It is the test of appropriateness for every activity, every course of study, every supporting project.

Today we want to think of two other cultures that are at the very core of our commitments as a special learning community of Christian higher education of the highest order. I think of them as two dimensions of our community's pervasive spirit. The first is A CULTURE OF ASSESSMENT.

## **A CULTURE OF ASSESSMENT**

We are committed to the placement of our life and work, and in particular, our academic efforts within a CULTURE OF ASSESSMENT. By that we mean that we want to bring to every aspect of our most important work to which we attach evaluation, like grades, majors and degrees, this notion that our work must not only meet specific learning objectives but must also be capable of thoughtful evaluation. We must know if we are achieving our learning goals and if we are doing so in ways that will make the difference we intend for that aspect of our work.

Every program, including the newest of ideas that is begging for a place in our collective work comes with the requirement that it can be evaluated, and that we can learn from this evaluation to adjust our expectations, approaches and intentions by that which we learn. We want to assume the kind of ACCOUNTABILITY that can be subjected to this kind of goal-setting evaluative reflection specific enough to be dynamic, that is, living, ever-green, changing as our work progresses through whatever stages might be designed.

Within a CULTURE OF ASSESSMENT, we can become comfortable with the question put to one of our administrators some years ago by visiting lecturer, the educational philosopher PARKER PALMER, who asked of his host "Just what is Anderson University all about?" When told that we are a community that values teaching and learning as among our highest virtues, he responded, "Prove it." Not confrontational in spirit, but certainly in intent, we have thought how we make good on the claim that we truly value being a teaching-learning community of the highest order.

In last year's opening remarks to the whole community, I invoked the work of George Kuh of Indiana University who is dedicated to STUDENT SUCCESS as a measure of the quality of work on any campus. I challenged all of us to contribute to the ways of working and relating to our students that could be measured for them as student success. The research is providing hints of those things that add to a Culture of Student Success. Kuh's list looks like this:

**They are:**

- **“Living Mission and “Lived” educational philosophy**
- **Unshakeable focus on student learning**
- **Environments adapted for educational enrichment**
- **Clear pathways to Student Success**
- **Improvement-oriented ethos**
- **Shared responsibility for Educational Quality and Student Success**

**(GEORGE D. KUH directs the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University. His recent publication is titled, *STUDENT SUCCESS IN COLLEGE: CREATING CONDITIONS THAT MATTER*. His research is particularly encouraging to those of us serving in the independent and church-related sector with smaller institutions.)**

Kuh's work on student success is a useful way to think about a Culture of Assessment. What is required is to measure and reflect on our student learning experiences and then evaluate our effectiveness with the commitment and practice of making the changes in our work that are necessary to accomplish our goals. As this activity, in its completeness becomes common practice for more and more of the various programs and units of the university, we might begin to claim that THE ANDERSON EXPERIENCE does indeed have a CULTURE OF ASSESSMENT.

## **A CULTURE OF DISCOVERY**

The other cultural about which I would like to speak is represented in the word DISCOVERY. This notion has found a place in our vocabulary of distinction. It is in our tag line (Academic and Christian Discovery) and is a core idea in our capital campaign. We have, in the view of Brenda Salter McNeil, seized upon a tag line unique among Christian universities when we claim that Anderson is a place of ACADEMIC AND CHRISTIAN DISCOVERY. I can again hear the tones of Parker Palmer who would surely want us to "Prove it."

Discovery is an idea comfortable within the academy that claims teaching, research and service as their guiding mission. While we certainly celebrate the research that is being pursued both through scientific inquiry and teaching on this campus, our mission does not require this research/publish element in our expectations for the faculty. We are blessed when research is a part of the academic work for any of our teaching colleagues. We are certainly encouraged that The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and in particular, Ernest Boyer, lifted before the academy the valued work of teaching and learning as a form of discovery that goes on in campuses not fueled by the generator of funded research.

But DISCOVERY carries with it another meaning on the Anderson University campus. We are in the business of changing lives. By that we mean, and with sincere humility, that what is going on here is the kind of discovery that happens in the "Aha moments" for a student in a classroom, or in the classroom of a Chicago weekend for a Social Work student, or more dramatically, what happens for a student in an orphanage or hospice in Calcutta or Kampala, under our title TRI-S or AU-EA.

We see discovery as that maturing and becoming process that involves our intellect, our physical nature and our spiritual growth. For us, THE CULTURE OF DISCOVERY is that additional step we want to provide for our students that will shape choices, ways of looking at the world and the future, and most importantly, how they look at themselves.

Our hopes for these ideas, this virtuous work, must also be measured against the barriers we find within any community made up of people of limitations in resources, intellectual aptitude, teachable spirits and all the other things we confront in this amazing and challenging student community of 2007.

In his most recent book DERIC BOK, retired president, now retired interim-president of Harvard speaks of the problems we face as reluctant adaptors to the research educators generate about their own work and their limited propensity for change. He confesses that we often learn about effective methods only to recline back into our own comfortable ways of doing things (my words), quite unlike the research responses of others in the scientific part of the academy who are eager to retest, replicate, reflect on and publish findings, then adapt to the new information.

His illustration is one out of the observations of “Qualitative Methodology”. He writes about an observation made by a professor about two distinctly and culturally different groups of students encouraged to engage in group learning exercises. One adapted readily and achieved considerable advances in learning. The other was not so inclined and remained determined to pursue the learning objectives individually. Their performance lagged the learning accomplishments of the former group. And so he formed a group of similar characteristics to the second under-achieving group but persuaded them to adopt the group learn methods of the first group and observed the same positive achievements.

Bok’s observation is that if this experiment had been conducted around hard sciences, say Pharmacy, the work would have been replicated elsewhere, and the results published for wider conversation in the Academy. More importantly, the methods may have been adopted as advancement. Bok’s criticism for his fellow educators is that we reflect on such experimentation but are reluctant to change the methods that have changed us, that have been a part of our work, the script, if you will, of our own way of acting in this drama of discovery (*Universities In the Marketplace*, Princeton University Press, 2003, pp. 26-27).

One practical issue related to our situation this year might bring to our attention our need to learn more about the persistence of our students to graduation. Retaining our students is a concern we all share. It is only reasonable that we look to those who are achieving these goals at a high level to provide for us some clues to our own improvement. We look for “best practices” to provide encouragement in this important work. CENTRE COLLEGE in

Kentucky was recently cited in the press for achieving a high retention rate for freshmen to sophomores, and they have an enviable graduation rate, not in five or six years, but in four.

Centre College officials speak of their commitment to make class attendance a cornerstone of their efforts. It is their reported practice that after two absences, a student is asked to visit with a dean about any issues that may be contributing to these absences. They are highly complimentary about a particular dean who has the gifts to relate with encouragement and who is not one to condemn students in these conversations. This is a culture of expectation that they believe to be among the most important elements in their student success assessments.

Should we want to consider best practices in this area, we might want to replicate such an approach, study other related elements that may be involved that are unique to Centre College. What many in our field of endeavor are inclined to do is to rationalize why such an approach works at Centre and is not given much of a chance for success on this campus.

My point here is to say it really is up to us to look at all we are learning about the things that matter here at Anderson University and to commitment to constant improvement. I would hope that we could create and sustain the Culture of Assessment that would improve student success. And I believe we can claim to have a culture of discovery that deserves to be sustained through all we have come to claim as The Anderson Experience.

And so, as we begin another year with this wonderful community of persons so gifted and committed to the highest levels of our work for the sake of our students, we may add to our many responsibilities this notion that there is needed within the ANDERSON EXPERIENCE, a commitment both to A CULTURE OF ASSESSMENT, and A CULTURE OF DISCOVERY.