

REMARKS OF WELCOME TO NEW STUDENTS AND PARENTS MATRICULATION CEREMONY

Daniel F. Sullivan – Monday, August 25, 2008

Members of the Class of 2012, other new students, and your parents and families—a warm welcome to St. Lawrence University. We have been looking forward to your arrival for months. You are the 153rd class to enter St. Lawrence since our founding in 1856! We are ready for you and anxious to get to know you. You new students are a remarkable group—expansive of mind, serious of purpose, generous in spirit, curious, creative, and warm-hearted. What fun we will have together in your time at St. Lawrence.

This matriculation ceremony marks the formal beginning of the Class of 2012's St. Lawrence experience. In our program, Teresa Cowdrey, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid and the person who leads the group who selected you from **by far** the largest applicant pool in the history of the University, presents the new class to the faculty and staff. Dean Lehr will accept you on behalf of the University and introduce and recognize two key colleagues: Prof. Catherine Crosby-Currie, Associate Dean of the First Year, and Dr. Joseph Tolliver, Vice President and Dean, who with his staff is responsible for student life. At the conclusion of this ceremony, you will be in their hands. They will teach you, learn with you, and help you discover how to live together in a learning community. John Pontius, President of the Thelomothesian Society, St. Lawrence's student government, will also give words of greeting.

If you came to campus last spring for one of our admitted student visit days you heard me say that “the education you would receive at St. Lawrence is ‘in the liberal arts.’ It is not professional education, or technical education, or vocational education—it is education for a life, education that inspires students to be lifelong learners, education that prepares students to make a difference in a wide array of careers, education that encourages students to find meaning in what they do, and to better understand the great issues and questions that are at the center of the quest to be a learned, educated person.” I told you that only 3% of American colleges and universities have education

in the liberal arts as their primary mission, so you would become part of a very special tradition—and now you have! A warm congratulations! It's terrific to see you here with us on this great day.

But I'd like to say some more to you about liberal education as you get ready to begin your time at St. Lawrence. Recently, Ann and I viewed an hour-long PBS program on dyslexia, and one of the points it made has a clear parallel to liberal education: “Until universal literacy became a requirement for even minimal participation in American society, dyslexia—a learning disability of neurological origin which causes difficulty with reading and writing—remained undiscovered.” When it became critical for everyone to be able to read, the incentive grew to understand why a substantial group—some say as many as 10% of the population—of otherwise intelligent persons had enormous difficulties in learning to read.

In many respects an analogous situation applies to our need for liberal education in the world of today. Industrial societies need vast numbers of factory workers to do routine, repetitive tasks that do not involve such things as analysis, synthesis, teamwork and problem-solving, high-level written and communication skills, critical and creative thinking, intercultural knowledge and competence, quantitative literacy and information literacy. Managers, leaders and professionals need such skills in industrial society, but they are a relatively small fraction of the workforce. As manufacturing evolves from “mass production” technology to “continuous process” technology, where much of product creation and assembly are done by machines and robots that workers monitor, adjust and repair, and where labor costs are a smaller fraction of overall production costs, factory workers **also** increasingly need the advanced skills I note above. Manufacturing that is still best done in a “mass production” way, as we know, moves to less developed societies. In manufacturing involving continuous process technology, the fraction of employment that is managerial and technical grows while the fraction devoted directly to production declines.

As the manufacturing sector of an advanced economy becomes smaller in terms numbers of workers employed and the services sector grows, those

high-level skills are in even greater demand. This is so even in traditional blue-collar service jobs—the complexity of today’s plumbing and electrical systems, for example, also requires plumbers and electricians who can analyze, synthesize, problem-solve and communicate.

In short, just as dyslexia was “discovered” when universal literacy became a basic societal necessity, liberal education is being “discovered” in new ways as the skills, habits of mind and personal attributes we associate with a liberally educated person become more and more necessary for almost any kind of work and life in a modern society like ours—indeed, an almost universal necessity.

That is the basic premise of “Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP),” an exciting decade-long initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) begun in 2005, its 90th anniversary year. For several years I have been on the board of AAC&U, and this year I am chair. AAC&U, with over 1,100 colleges and universities of every type and size in its membership, is “the only major higher education association whose sole focus is the quality of student learning in the college years,” and the only association devoted to fostering liberal education. LEAP’s core principle is that not only should liberal education be the central focus of post-secondary education of all types, but that it should also be the primary focus of K-12 education—our “education for all”—as well. It is not just for students planning to go to college. To repeat, today’s “vocational” education must also be liberal education, for success in what we have historically called “blue-collar work” is also dependent on acquiring the skills, habits of mind and forms of personal commitment of the liberally educated person.

There is growing evidence that the American public gets this—**you have, obviously**. At our January AAC&U meeting we released the results of a major survey of American business leaders—mostly chief executive officers

of companies of a variety of sizes—and recent college graduates.¹ Let me quote from the report to summarize the findings:

Employers and recent college graduates reject a higher education approach that focuses narrowly on providing knowledge and skills in a specific field; majorities instead believe that an undergraduate college education should provide a balance of a well-rounded education **and** knowledge and skills in a specific field.² They particularly emphasize the importance of providing students withexperience putting [their] knowledge and skills to practical use in “real-world” settings.³

Large majorities of employers think that colleges and universities should place more emphasis on:⁴

- Integrative learning, including the ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings through internships or other hands-on experiences.
- Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, including concepts and new developments in science and technology; global issues and developments and their implications for the future; the role of the United States in the world; and cultural values and traditions in America and other countries.
- Intellectual and practical skills, such as teamwork skills and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings; the ability to communicate effectively orally and in writing; critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills; the ability to locate, organize and evaluate information from multiple sources; the ability to be innovative and think creatively; the ability to solve complex problems; and quantitative reasoning.

¹ Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., “How Should Colleges Prepare Students to Succeed in Today’s Global Economy?” Conducted on behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, December 28, 2006.

² Ibid., 3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

- Personal and social responsibility, including knowledge of global issues and developments and their implications for the future; and a sense of integrity and ethics.

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The survey also indicates that there is an increasing national recognition of the importance of science and mathematics education, both as a key element of liberal education and because of the critical contribution science and mathematics education plays and will play in making possible the technological and other innovations necessary to produce a growing world economy that is also environmentally sustainable. Of course, St. Lawrence and the rest of the nation's selective liberal arts colleges got this long ago. Selective liberal arts colleges, for over a half-century, have produced 2.5 to 3 times as many baccalaureate degrees in science and mathematics as research universities and other kinds of undergraduate institutions on a proportional basis: typically from 25-40% of their graduates. The only problem is that the total enrollments of the top 60 American liberal arts colleges can fit comfortably in the University of Michigan's football stadium! We are way out ahead, we are too few to change the big picture by ourselves, but we can be a beacon of leadership to help the rest of the nation catch up.

The kind of education we have in mind for you is the kind of education I want those who are tackling the world's toughest issues on my behalf to have: the diplomat who seeks to contribute to peace in the Middle East, the physician who is going to diagnose and treat not just my illness but me as a valued person, the parents who are going to bring children into the world and help them grow, the lawyer who is an advocate but also knows and pursues justice, the novelist whose insight will help me understand the human condition better, the manufacturer who is not just good at making things but who also cares about the lives of his or her workers and the environmental impact of his or her manufacturing processes and products, and, most importantly, the person who can use the global market economy to help produce greater overall world wealth and standard of living in an environmentally sustainable way and in a way that also preserves and enhances our ultimate humanity. The kind of education we're about at St. Lawrence is not just important—it is absolutely essential and totally practical:

it is a means to the end of making a powerful and positive difference in a world that has never been more challenging or complex.

It is also not easily won, if it is truly going to stand you well. We are the most affluent society in the history of the world. Affluence really does breed a feeling of entitlement, but you are not entitled to the kind of education I've been discussing. You have to earn it; you have to work hard for it. I am not being hyperbolic when I say that the future of America and the world depends on you not feeling entitled, on your willingness and commitment to absorb all you can and grow as far and as fast as you can—to use the rich resources of this university in the most transforming way possible.

We are ready to do our very best for you. We're going to be academically demanding and provide you with a rich array of academic opportunities, but we're also going to give you hundreds of opportunities to develop yourselves in ways other than just the intellectual. It is my deepest hope that you will be challenged powerfully here, and that you will have met the challenge. If everything works the way we intend it, you will also leave St. Lawrence loving this place in a way that will last a lifetime. You will have been affected profoundly, and your attachment to St. Lawrence will be permanent and deeply meaningful.

So we welcome you, the Class of 2012, with the greatest enthusiasm. You are well prepared. We know you can do what is necessary to succeed here, and of course we know that you have chosen a marvelous university. You have my best and most heartfelt wishes as you begin your journey! Thank you!

Dean Cowdrey, you may now present the class to the faculty!