Being a Part of an Intellectual Community: The Value of a Liberal Arts Education
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This is the beginning of a critically-important intellectual and personal journey for you, and I am delighted to be able to talk with you this morning about the value of a liberal arts education, and how such an education promotes your intellectual development and preparation for life after Spelman College. I say that this journey is critically-important because in one way or another, it will shape the rest of your life. Our intention, and I know your intention, too, is to make sure that the experience is the best that it can be. What you can look forward to is four years of experiences that will be challenging, but affirming of your intelligence.

It may seem a bit odd that we are beginning your intellectual journey in college by talking about the end of the experience—what we expect you to be like at graduation. We do so because one of the prime tenets of achieving complex goals is to “begin with the end in mind.” We want to focus on where you should be at the end of four years to help you create a map for yourself of how to get to that goal. The map may include, perhaps should include, some twists and turns as part of the learning experience, but the primary concern for us, and I hope for you, is to know that envisioning your goals and making steady progress toward achieving them is a tried and true method for success.

Undertaking the college experience here—in a residential liberal arts college environment—is one of the wisest, yet most complex activities you could be engaged in for the next four years of your life. You will have ample opportunity to experience all that Spelman has to offer; and in fact, that is the precise purpose of my talking with you today—to encourage you to make the most of your college experience.

If you wonder why I am taking this time to convey this message to you, it is because, regrettably, at the end of their college experience, too many college graduates have not achieved the goals that they intended. Make sure that you are not one of those people. What do you want to get from your Spelman experience—just a degree or an outstanding liberal arts education? There can be quite a distinction between the two.

Recent research on the undergraduate experience shows that about one-third of college graduates do not have the knowledge or skills expected of a college-educated person. This is shocking by itself, but becomes even more concerning when the details are examined. Two years after graduation, the underperforming college graduate is more likely to be unemployed and living at home with parents than those who benefit from a more challenging course of study. I know you do not want that outcome for yourself.

The choices you make course by course, semester by semester determine whether you are becoming a liberally-educated person, or maybe just a college graduate.
First, let’s consider the liberal arts perspective on education. What does “liberal arts” mean, anyway? A liberal arts education is generally understood to be a broad education covering a variety of disciplines in the arts, humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. It may be useful to think of it as “general education,” as it is often described. Here, we call that array of broad learning the “core curriculum.” By whatever name it is called, the liberal arts education is distinguished from more specialized learning that is directed toward readiness for a specific job or career. A liberal arts education also includes focused study in a particular disciplinary or interdisciplinary area, which we call your “major.” So, think of your education here as having a foundation of broad exposure to a number of disciplines in the arts, humanities, social sciences and natural sciences—the core curriculum—combined with more specialized education in an area of concentration—your major.

There is another aspect of “liberal arts” that is important for you to understand, and that is the history of how this approach to education came to be in recent times. The type of education that I just described was intended for people of means (exclusively men of wealth initially), who were free from the mundane requirements of making a living. They were able to take up the “free arts,” in contrast to those who had to take up the “mechanistic arts” to learn a trade or skill for the sake of survival.

Let’s review a bit of history, which you may already know well, but which is worth reconsidering, as you begin your college education at this historic institution. The issue of liberal arts versus industrial training became central to how the United States was to resolve what came to be known as “The Negro Problem.” After the Civil War, the South wrestled with the question of what to do about the 3.9 million former slaves who needed some means of independent survival. This “Negro Problem” led to the founding of many training schools across the South, such as Spelman Seminary, Augusta Theological Seminary (now Morehouse College), and Negro Normal School in Tuskegee (now Tuskegee University), and so many others—all of which we know today as historically-black colleges and universities.

The need for such schools was clear. Former slaves who had been forbidden to educate themselves needed a means of learning basic skills. But the question soon arose whether basic skills alone were enough for full participation in American society.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, a furious debate ensued between W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington about which of the two types of education was the right one for newly-freed Africans in the United States. Washington argued for vocational and industrial education that would give Negro people the means to develop practical skills. In contrast, DuBois argued for “intellectual education” that would free the mind, as well as provide the capacity to earn a living. He felt that Black people should be educated according to their abilities, not just their inferior social position.

This debate was intensified right here in Atlanta at the Cotton States and International Exposition on September 18, 1895—120 years ago. On that date, Booker T. Washington gave a
speech to the Exposition that was intended to resolve the question of whether freed slaves in the South had rights equal to all other Americans, or whether they occupied a different status. In his speech, Washington argued that the Negro would not press for equal rights with whites because they had other needs and concerns that were more pressing. He advocated for free basic education, as well as a system of vocational training, that would prepare the Negro to make a living, and in so doing, gain respect as a contributing member of American society. Although well-intended, and in fact celebrated by many as a reasonable approach to the question of “The Negro Problem,” the speech came to be known disparagingly as “The Atlanta Compromise” because it promised acceptance of second-class citizenship in exchange for free education.

W.E. B. DuBois, and other Black intellectuals strongly protested Washington’s solution, arguing that such an approach would merely slow the progress of African Americans and relegate them to menial occupations and lives without higher purpose. After The Atlanta Compromise was issued, DuBois intensified his argument that progress for the Negro must include full civil liberties and education in the liberal arts. His vision was that the fate of the Negro lie with its intellectual leadership—the “talented tenth” of the population. DuBois’ position was, to be sure, an elitist one—he felt that people of high intellect should represent the interests of all, and serve as the leadership group for future progress.

Women were also engaged in this debate, along with engaging in parallel debates about acquisition of voting rights for African American men and women. Anna J. Cooper, from whom we have taken our “When and Where I Enter” theme, took a slightly different perspective than either Washington or DuBois on the question of education. While she did not oppose industrial education, Vivian May describes Cooper as less concerned about the type of education one might undertake, and more concerned that education of whatever type was a “site of liberation” for the individual—a place where ideas were engaged freely and enthusiastically; where learning to question is more important than learning an answer.

In a more pointed manner, Ida B. Wells-Barnett the noted anti-lynching campaigner, addressed the limitations of the Atlanta Compromise by writing about its restrictions on full participation in American life. In response to strong criticism of The Atlanta Compromise, Ida B. Wells-Barnett wrote:
Although this debate occurred over a century ago, the topic is as current as any could possibly be. We hear many arguments these days that juxtapose a liberal arts education with a career-ready education—as though the two are incompatible. That is a specious argument; wholly without merit, as evidence from various quarters will show.

In 2008, Google produced a video called “Did You Know?” that presents data on the fast pace of change in the world. The video has been update as recently as 2014, but it still contains the same essential message: Because of the pace of technological innovation, technical skills acquired soon become obsolete. In fact, as the video claims, if the technology that you learn in the first year of college is obsolete by the third year, clearly that approach is severely limiting on career options.

Even occupations that for decades were “fall-back” options for people with little or no education beyond high school—auto mechanics, building maintenance, etc., have become highly technical occupations that require certification and continuing education. This “disruption” in our industrial economy is occurring worldwide, as noted by author Thomas Friedman in his influential book, The World is Flat. By that, Friedman means that technology is equalizing opportunity around the world. The internet and cell phones are everywhere, bringing diverse world communities into virtual, if not actual, contact with each other. In a highly-interactive, fast-changing environment such as this, one must surely value the ability to apply one’s learning to different issues and circumstances, as is taught in liberal arts environments.

Here are some perspectives from liberal arts students on what it means to learn this way: There are two reasons that I like the metaphor of our brains as muscles that must be exercised. The first reason is that what we are learning from neuroscience seems to support the notion that from birth to about age 30, the brain continues to grow in its complexity. We suspect that the more one engages complex thoughts—learning languages, solving complex problems, and the like— the more one is able to do such things. A simplified way of describing this

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phenomenon is that complex thinking enables more complex thinking. Thus, the muscle metaphor seems appropriate.

The second reason that I like the brain-as-muscle metaphor is that it helps to clarify the roles and responsibilities that you and your professors have in your education. I once read that different from a high school teacher, a college professor should be thought of not so much as one who is conveying knowledge to you, but as one who is enabling you to gain knowledge and wisdom. The metaphor in this example was that of a personal fitness coach. In the same way that a fitness coach guides and encourages, but does not do the work for you, a college professor is a guide and consultant to your intellectual development. They can show you how it’s done and encourage you to undertake the exercise for yourself—they cannot do it for you. To support your exercising your intellect, you will find that more and more of your courses will be organized as active learning spaces, instead of lecture style. This means that you will be expected to participate in the class discussions and projects, typically after having read some preparatory material before coming to class. It’s a new approach to education that we know makes sense because by being an active learner, you will retain much more of the information from class than if you just listen and take notes.

Another student perspective speaks to how a liberal arts education broadens your thinking. We expect that you will become adept at considering matters not just from your own perspective, but from other perspectives that may be vastly different from your personal opinion. Your ability to consider other perspectives is not a mere exercise in developing empathy. It is an intellectual skill that can and should be cultivated to open your mind to new ideas and new ways of seeing and understanding. I would argue that this is one of the most important aspects of a liberal arts education—the appreciation for complexities and acknowledgement that there is more than one way to see an issue, more than one way to solve a problem, no absolute right or wrong.

Yet another source of data is from employers themselves....employers are looking for liberal arts graduates who have strong abilities for problem-solving, written and verbal communication, and critical thinking—the ability to analyze and evaluate issues using sound reasoning.

And yes, they are looking for people who are career-ready, but career-ready means more than just having specific job skills. It means having an attitude of creativity, tolerance for ambiguity, ability to sort through issues and come forward with strategies, multiple strategies for how to approach the tasks at hand. These are desirable abilities that are cultivated in liberal arts environments. At Spelman, we pay special attention to helping you develop your self-presentation, whether that be in written form, spoken, or in the form of a creative project. You will have many opportunities to strengthen and showcase your talents over the next four years.

The data show that the investment in your education here is likely to reap practical, as well as intellectual, benefits. The Council of Economic Advisers produced “15 Economic Facts about
Millennials” in October 2014. Here is Fact 10: Investments in human capital are likely to have a substantial payoff. To quote: “Recent college graduates continue to out-earn individuals with only a high school diploma, a gap that has been increasing over time. Holding a college degree results in a much lower probability of having earnings in the lowest income tax bracket—16 to 28 percent for college degree holders versus 37 to 41 percent for those with no college degree (Figure 18). Bachelor’s degree holders are also 6 times more likely to have earnings in the top income tax bracket than those with only a high school degree. In addition to earning higher wages on average, individuals with a college degree are less likely to be unemployed. As of September 2014, the unemployment rate for those with a bachelor’s degree is around 3 percent, compared with over 5 percent for high school graduates.” I’ll say more on that unemployment issue later.

So, our aim for you is that you have the education that Anna J. Cooper described and that employers and graduate and professional schools seek—one where you free your mind to take on the issues of the day with new perspectives that are desperately needed to address the complexities of our present and future world. Your choice of a liberal arts college education will enable you to bring to your later work or post-baccalaureate education a perspective that is informed by your experience and your history as a woman of African descent.

You must learn to teach yourself **how to learn** complex skills and material, but more importantly, to go beyond that to evaluate what you read and hear and see. And beyond that to use what you know to create what does not already exist. That is what the world requires of you—a problem-solving approach that reconciles what has not been reconciled before, that develops solutions to problems that we are yet to discover, that imagines what has not been seen or done before. We call that **innovation**.

Innovation—it is most certainly a buzzword these days, but it is definitely more than just a buzzword. Innovation is the foundation of creativity and progress. I want to share with you an excellent example of innovation and creativity that also speaks to issues of identity. Let’s watch this clip:

[TEDSalon Video of Dr. Jamila Lyiscott]

The woman in the video is Dr. Jamila Lyiscott, who recently received her doctoral degree from Teachers College at Columbia University. She calls herself a “PHDiva,” by the way. In this video, she is illustrating simultaneously a series of important points for us to consider today. She “deconstructs” what may appear to be a compliment—“You are so articulate!”—and reinterprets the comment—with critique—from her vantage point. What we see is a woman who knows who she is, claims her identity, pushes back on other peoples’ interpretation of who she is, and how she should behave—all while demonstrating in the most creative manner that she IS most certainly and most powerfully **articulate**!
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She is articulate intellectually, conversationally, visually, psychologically, as she moves in and out of her linguistic styles smoothly—always manifesting her unified, proud, and complex identity. She is innovating through the use of language and using her own perspective on speech as a means of self-presentation. I enjoy hearing Dr. Lyiscott because in her presentation, she is manifesting clearly the characteristics we value most in liberally-educated people. I suspect that she has come to this intellectual position through years of study and analysis, embracing an ongoing transformation of herself into the woman that she is today.

I believe she represents what we wish for all of you (and ourselves). She has found the formula for success and it is both powerful and authentic. She is unapologetically a smart and self-assured African American woman. We wish a similar outcome for you. In fact, I hope that is why you chose Spelman College. There are many higher education institutions where you can develop intellectually, but there are not many places where you can develop intellectually and feel affirmed in your identity as a woman of African descent. That is what we do here. That is why we exist and why we must continue to thrive.

So as you journey through Spelman, I hope that it will be a marvelously transformative experience for you. Here is an exercise that might help that to happen:

I’d like you to take a moment to think about who you were four years ago. Most of you were entering high school. Some of you who are older or younger may have been in different circumstances. But I want each of you to consider for a few minutes how different you are now from how you were four years ago.

Have you changed the way you look?
Have you changed the way you think about issues that are important to you?
Have you changed your primary group of friends?
Have you changed your mind about what you want to do in your life?

If the answers to most of these questions is “Yes,” I would not be at all surprised. You are in a phase of life where change is expected, perhaps more than any other developmental phase. What is most intriguing to consider today is how different you will be four years from now. I assure you that as much as you feel you have changed in the last four years, you will change even more in the next four. That also is one of the keen advantages of being in a liberal arts college environment where transformation is the order of the day. Each one of us, in our own way, is reinventing ourselves as intellectuals and, often, as advocates for social justice.

In coming to Spelman, you have made an important investment in yourself. Make sure you get a worthwhile return on that investment. Here are some of the ways to help make that happen. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) asserts the following features of high quality undergraduate experiences:

- First-Year Seminars and Experiences
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- Common Intellectual Experiences
- Learning Communities
- Writing-Intensive Courses
- Collaborative Assignments and Projects
- Undergraduate Research
- Diversity/Global Learning
- Service Learning, Community-Based Learning
- Internships
- Capstone Courses and Projects

Spelman has almost all of these types of experiences in place. Some of them are structured into your core curriculum or major; others you will have to discover for yourself. The important point is to engage as much of what we have to offer as you possibly can.

Here’s why: The studies on undergraduate education that I mentioned earlier, The Wabash College Study and a book entitled *Academically Adrift*, report that many college students are not gaining much from their experience. One of the main concerns raised by these publications is that college students are just not studying very much. College students used to study about 25 hours per week outside of class. That figure has dropped to an average of 15 hours per week today, but some students report studying only 5 hours per week outside of class—about 1 hour per day. Given that most learning in college occurs outside of the classroom, it perhaps is not surprising that little is gained from so little investment of time.

What is worse, the grade point averages of today’s students are higher than those of students from years ago. Grade inflation and students’ ability to avoid difficult courses and professors contribute to high GPAs that are unrelated to students’ knowledge and skills. In fact, in some regard GPAs as virtually meaningless today, as they may be more a reflection of strategic course selection and negotiation than an indication of learning.

Students at elite colleges in the U.S. spend about 29 hours per week studying outside of class. Those are the students who you will compete with for jobs, graduate school, and professional school placements. How many hours per week do you plan to study outside of class? You must ask yourself:

Is taking an easy course with low demands something to celebrate, or are you being cheated out of the education that you've paid for, deserve, and need?

Are you going to take the easiest path through college that you can find, or will you challenge yourself to grow and stretch intellectually?

Your college experience will be what you make it. Make it all that it can and should be. Commit to yourself here and now that you will take advantage of everything that Spelman has to offer. There is a huge array of opportunity laid out for you here. That is what you have
bought into—not the guarantee that you will have a certain experience, but the opportunity to fulfill your highest ambitions.

As you join the intellectual tradition of W.E.B. DuBois, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Jamila Lyiscott, consider these approaches to the college experience that will enrich your experience:

- Embracing new challenges and ideas
- Asking Why? and sometimes, Why Not?
- Preparing for class. Reading ahead of time. This is a must-do for “flipped” classrooms, but an excellent idea for all.
- Taking advantage of study groups.
- Over-preparing for important events
- Keeping an appropriate balance of activities. First things first. And what is first? Academics.

And a final thought: I want you to reconsider the saying that we hear sometimes: “You can be whatever you want.” I believe that to be an incorrect statement because “wanting” is just not enough. Wanting does not get the job done.

I do believe, however, that you can have whatever you are willing to work for. Let’s affirm that together. Please say it with me. “I can have whatever I am willing to work for.” That is a true statement.

I wish you great success in your Spelman journey. Get to work right away on making it the best time of your life!

References


