

To Reweave the Helices:  
Trinity's DNA by Our  
Two-Hundredth Birthday

---



*A White Paper Written for the Faculty Retreat*

Trinity College

October 2011

James F. Jones, Jr.

President and Trinity College Professor in the Humanities

To Reweave the Helices:  
Trinity's DNA by Our Two-Hundredth Birthday

*A White Paper Written for the Faculty Retreat*

Trinity College

October 2011

James F. Jones, Jr.

President and Trinity College Professor in the Humanities

## Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Foreword .....  | 1  |
| On the Nature of Institutional Transformation.....  | 3  |
| The Cliché Rings True:<br>Where There Is a Will, There Is a Way .....                                     | 7  |
| Sources .....   | 9  |
| Everything Changes Except the Need for Change:<br>A Critical Lesson from the History of the Academy ..... | 10 |
| Imperiled: The Liberal Arts College Today .....   | 12 |
| Transformational DNA: the Academic Helix.....   | 19 |
| Transformational DNA: the Social Helix .....  | 27 |
| With a Nod to Sterne, Diderot, and Pirandello:<br>A Conclusion in Which Little Is Perhaps Concluded.....  | 35 |

# To Reweave the Helices: Trinity's DNA by Our Two-Hundredth Birthday

## Foreword

Had it not been for the quite unexpected request from the faculty committee planning the retreat sponsored by the Mellon Foundation in October of 2011, in my sixteenth year of trying my best to be an effective college president, I would never have undertaken this exercise, for to do so on my own and then to presume to thrust this document upon the Trinity community as some sort of modern-day Moses bringing the sacred tablets down from Mount Sinai would indeed smack of intellectual presumption in the extreme on my part.

The theses that have governed my thinking about what Trinity might ideally look like in 2023 are several. First, true institutional transformations are rare across the history of American higher education. Second, I offer one example of how a liberal arts college can change to cement its place in the panoply of such colleges in the U.S., one whose transformational consequences have been profound for the past half of a century. Third, I offer a section on the one commonality that ensues from the history of the academy: that everything changes except the need for change. Fourth, I try to articulate the fact that traditional liberal arts colleges such as Trinity are today losing their place of historical pre-eminence in American higher education, while those liberal arts colleges with less-than-robust endowments like our College will face challenges in the next several years. Our educational model, as expensive as it is to sustain as I write this white paper, is today imperiled. If steps are not taken at Trinity, and in the not-too-distant future, I fervently believe that Trinity will be at risk in the years to come. I shall then propose two helices, one academic the other social, neither of which can be separated from the other if a true transformation of Trinity were to occur to insure our College's future.

The Trinity of my ideal dream by our two-hundredth birthday would be founded upon the following:

Proposed: the Trinity Covenant

The Covenant will apply equally to faculty members and staff as well as to our students.

The Covenant will bind all members of the College into an academic village, a community of learners young and old. The Covenant will allow individual students to grow into responsible adults. The Covenant will insure that students respect the ethical values of diversity and difference and of bringing ethics into decision-making in their adult lives because of their undergraduate experiences at Trinity.

The Covenant will inform that special conversation between a faculty member devoted to the calling of teacher and each student here. The ideal of Raphael's *School of Athens* will be Trinity's daily reality. Trinity will offer exceptional pedagogical experiences in each and every classroom and laboratory within the small, residential setting of a liberal arts institution. The lifelong, irreplaceable bond between faculty mentor and student will mirror that of the best physician and that physician's every patient. The Covenant will stress individual research opportunities for every student, working closely with that student's faculty mentors. The Covenant will offer unparalleled opportunities for learning experiences abroad and for internship experiences through the Trinity alumni network.

Because of the Covenant, Trinity will be the school of choice at which faculty and staff will personally choose to devote large segments of their adult lives for the noble aim of offering the best holistic undergraduate education conceivable for our students. Serving our students' futures at Trinity will not be work or a job but will be a high calling.

Because of the inherent strength of the Covenant, a Trinity student:

- Will have a solid grounding in the liberal arts as the cornerstone for that individual's adult life, understanding intimately the culture and language of at least one foreign country;
- Will have ethical considerations firmly inculcated in that individual's critical thinking;
- Will have compositional and oral presentation skills acutely honed for whatever career path that individual might choose;

- Will have personal experiences linking academics to one's career path prepared through carefully mentored study on campus, abroad, and by internships;
- Will have respect for others different than him- or herself, recognizing the intrinsic merits of the diversity of humankind in the broadest possible connotations of the word;
- Will have spent four of the most pivotal years of that individual's entire life as an integral, contributing member of a small, tightly-knit college community founded upon shared meritocratic values.

And the Covenant will forever enjoin the individual student to Trinity for the rest of that graduate's life as a consequence of the inestimable value of the education she or he had been privileged to receive in this place.

What follows will seek to provide a context for change within the academy, for change within the liberal arts world in particular, and will advance a suggested roadmap that I offer the Trinity community as one possible way of providing true distinctiveness to our College in order to protect its future.

### **On the Nature of Institutional Transformation**

Many years back, when I was president of Kalamazoo College, I was invited to spend an afternoon with the fabled Peter Drucker, among the most prescient of intellects in his generation, not only in this country but also in the world.<sup>1</sup> I had been told by his amanuensis that I would be allowed no more than two hours with the then infirm luminary and that I should submit in writing two major issues I would like to discuss with him. I thought how perplexed John Milton must have been in 1638 when contemplating his audience with the elderly and blind Galileo, then under house-arrest by the Catholic Church during the Holy Inquisition in Florence for having advanced what he knew to be scientific truth. After grappling for some time with what I would most wish to discuss with Dr. Drucker, confined himself to his home in California by his declining health and advanced age, I settled

---

<sup>1</sup> Because of his people-oriented approach to management, Dr. Drucker viewed his own specialty as a "liberal art." Cf. among his many other books *The New Realities* (Transactions Publishers, 1989, and then available in several reprintings).

on two major concerns that had long perplexed me: how academic institutions evolve over time in the best possible fashion and how postmodern society was to cope with the multifaceted landscape of information technology. The two hours I had been allotted with the great mind, enveloped in his failing body covered in warm blankets, morphed into a longer period, while I just sat transfixed, watching him wander from one aspect of the two issues to others, passing effortlessly and seamlessly from one idea to the next.

Dr. Drucker explained that there were basically two types of college or university presidents: those whom he labeled managers and those whom he labeled transformers. (He summarily discarded presidents who were failures for one reason or the other and spoke only of those who were to some degree successful.) Most schools, he related, are historically fortunate if they have good managers over decades, president after president, for the job of being a college or university president had become one of the most demanding positions in modern times. As the late Bart Giamatti was wont to state when president of Yale, serving as the president of a school is “no way for an adult to make a living. Which is why so few adults actually attempt to do so.”<sup>2</sup> Being a president in our time requires coping simultaneously with students, faculty, staff, myriad external constituencies around the institution, alumni, parents, governmental and foundation entities of all kinds, fundraising, building maintenance, societal problems, and all the rest. Perhaps too often thought a dour old Presbyterian, Woodrow Wilson was once asked by a newspaper reporter why he would leave the presidency of Princeton University, of all places, to run for governor of New Jersey, to which the great intellect famously replied that he thought at his age it was high time for him to get out of politics.

Dr. Drucker said that all one had to do was to examine the historic tenures of yesteryear—the presidencies of Nicholas Murray Butler at Columbia (1902-1945), Charles William Eliot at Harvard (1869-1909), Robert Maynard Hutchins at the University of Chicago (1929-1945, followed by his chancellorship from 1945-1951), or more recently William Danforth at Washington University (chancellor there for over a quarter of a century)—and to compare those long, decisive tenures with the far shorter, and far less

---

<sup>2</sup> A. Bartlett Giamatti, *A Free and Ordered Space* (Norton, 1990), p. 17. Cf. Steven B. Sample, *The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership* (Jossey-Bass, 2001). Steve was for almost twenty years one of the most successful academic leaders in the U.S. (at USC from 1991-2010). This particular study of the American academic presidency is a memoir of his long and transformative tenure.

decisive, tenures of presidents of more recent vintage. Dr. Drucker held that transformational presidents were so few in number in the last fifty years of the twentieth century because a variety of interrelated aspects had to converge at one and the same time in order for a president to be truly transformative for an institution of higher learning. He used Hutchins at the University of Chicago as a prime example from the first half of the twentieth century. The Depression had caused considerable problems at the university. Coffers were nearly empty, the endowment woefully substandard, and student applications were declining in both number and in quality. Hutchins, then remarkably only in his thirties, and the philosopher Mortimer Adler dreamt of a different place: a common set of books each undergraduate would be required to read (these would eventually be published by Encyclopedia Britannica as *Great Books of the Western World*), a faculty willing to tackle collaborative interdisciplinarity before the term was even coined, a set of graduate programs second to none in the U.S., a feeder secondary school attached to the university, etc. John D. Rockefeller became so entranced by what Hutchins and Adler were modeling that he began pouring significant amounts of money (recall that this was during the Great Depression) into their dream. Hutchins and Adler strove to create a modern-day intellectual ethos on the campus of the University of Chicago resonant with the *School of Athens* idealized by Raphael in his famous painting by that name hanging today in the Vatican's Stanza della Segnatura.<sup>3</sup>

I asked Dr. Drucker to cite examples of transformations in this country closer to our own time. He cited Duke's evolution from a good regional university into one of the nation's best, following the strategic plan written by A. Kenneth Pye, when the latter was chancellor there (1970-1983), Emory's evolution from a similarly regional stature to worldwide intellectual

---

<sup>3</sup> When at Washington University from 1975 until we left in 1991, I spent hours talking to colleagues who had studied at the University of Chicago in the decades during and after the Hutchins transformation, marveling at their accounts of what a stunning intellectual ethos must have reigned there and at how their own adult lives had been influenced by their undergraduate years. One distinguished mathematician told me that even the graffiti bespoke erudition of the highest order; the example he loved to cite was a line apparently carved on the wooden door of a bathroom stall in the men's room of the library that read "Would the individual who checked out the Second Book of Aristotle's *Poetics* please return same to the library." Legend holds that the purported Second Book of the *Poetics* had not of course been seen since Cæsar's accidental burning of the Royal Library at Alexandria in 48 BC. In my opinion, the best book on Hutchins is by William H. McNeill, *Hutchins' University: A Memoir of the University of Chicago, 1929-1950* (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

recognition under Presidents Atwood and Laney as this transformation was underwritten by Robert Woodruff (in an all but identical fashion to what Rockefeller did for Chicago decades before), and Washington University's meteoric evolution under Chancellor Danforth. Dr. Drucker asked me if I knew any of these individuals, to which I was humbled to say that I knew all but President Atwood and that I had worked for only two presidents in my life before becoming a president myself, for sixteen years at Washington University under Chancellor Danforth and for four of my five years at SMU as dean of humanities and sciences and vice provost of the university under President Pye. Dr. Drucker told me that I had been very fortunate just to have known such transformational leaders. This was the only understatement of any merit I can recall from that wondrous afternoon spent listening to him.

In the main, vast institutional transformations occur only when a variety of alignments coincide. Just the right set of individuals has to serve at one school over the course of several years to dream a different vision and then to effect that vision. Just the right individual has to be chair of the board at exactly the same time as the central leaders converge, in almost every case either by predetermination or by utter serendipity.<sup>4</sup> The faculty have to be willing to undertake significant revisions in pedagogy and in requirements for graduation, since from the founding of the modern academy in the thirteenth century, the two most important roles in any school (certifying both the curriculum and those who have met that curriculum's requirements) rest in the hands of the faculty. And in every case, some benefactor realizes the potential for transformation and steps to the fore with the dollars the transformation would need to begin altering in some systemic manner the

---

<sup>4</sup> In Duke's case, while Ken Pye was chancellor, he recruited Phillip Griffiths, a distinguished mathematician at Harvard, to be provost and the James B. Duke Professor of Mathematics. The duo managed the noteworthy internationalization of Duke while they worked together at this remarkable time at the university. Phil went to Princeton, after his distinguished provostship at Duke, to head the Center for Advanced Study. In Washington University's case, during Chancellor Danforth's tenure, W. Maxwell Cowan, who by all rights should have won a Nobel years before, served for an important time as provost. In the case of board chairs being remarkably chosen as the proverbial stars converge in a particular academic firmament, one need only look at Ben Johnson, who has chaired the Emory board for a very long while and who has worked side-by-side with the last three eminent individuals to hold the presidency there. In my personal experience, I have known only one other board chair of such unparalleled dedication to alma mater, and that is Trinity's Paul E. Raether, the longest-serving chair of the board in Trinity history and by some measure the greatest benefactor Trinity has ever seen.

helices forming the DNA of an academic institution: Rockefeller underwrote what Hutchins and Adler dreamt of doing at Chicago, Woodruff underwrote what Atwood and Laney dreamt of doing for Emory, the federal government underwrote what Ken Pye and Phil Griffiths dreamt of doing for Duke with the Research Triangle, to say nothing of the expansion of the Duke endowment at the time, and the four Danforth heirs underwrote their common dream of turning a “streetcar university” in the Midwest into one of the world’s greatest research universities. The great ideas spawned at these institutions brought forth the capital required to turn the ideas into realities.

**The Cliché Rings True:  
Where There Is a Will, There Is a Way**

Dr. Drucker then asked me how the K Plan had come into being at Kalamazoo College, where I was then president. The K Plan has a fascinating history. By the late 1950s, Kalamazoo was struggling. The college did not have much of an endowment. Students were thought to be moderately talented, but there was nothing distinctive about the college. Lawrence Barrett, a professor of English, was then serving as provost under President Weimar Hicks. Larry Barrett was a visionary, and I learned an immense amount in the time I spent visiting him both in his office on campus and later in his nursing home before his death. He had envisioned an undergraduate experience unlike any other in the U.S. He wanted to use the campus year-round by having four quarters of ten weeks each. He designed a curriculum that would be based upon the traditional training found at most liberal arts colleges in the country, but he wanted streams of intellectual excellence, especially in the natural sciences and mathematics, coupled to study-abroad experiences for every student, coupled to internships for every student, and all culminating in a Senior Individualized Project required of every student as a capstone to that student’s intellectual experiences. He dreamt of a Chicago-like intellectual ethos, and he invented the Liberal Arts Colloquium by which every student had to attend twenty public lectures, concerts, art exhibitions, and the like over the course of that student’s four

years on campus.<sup>5</sup> (The faculty's Academic Standards Committee held to the graduation requirement with unbending rigor. When I was president there, I watched every spring as the committee refused to budge when some wayward student had not completed her or his LAC requirement: if one had not met the requirement, one did not graduate with one's class.) Then chair of the board Richard Light, one of the heirs to the Upjohn fortune, underwrote the initial phases of the K Plan's transformation of the college that began at the end of the 1950's.<sup>6</sup> The intellectual ethos at Kalamazoo College since the K Plan went into effect has continued to be exceptional in every sense of the word. Students do not even apply for admission there unless they are prepared to enter such an ethos of intellectual and experiential expectations. I have never before witnessed firsthand any undergraduate program so demanding or a faculty more dedicated to a holistic common enterprise. And the consequences have been remarkable. When Jan and I left there for Trinity in 2004, forty-seven percent of all students were majoring in the natural sciences and in mathematics. For more than half a century, Kalamazoo has annually sent larger percentages of the student body abroad than any school in the country. The college has produced students headed for prestigious graduate programs in astonishing numbers (while we were still in Michigan, for example, Kalamazoo had more women undergraduates going on to complete doctoral degrees in chemistry than most any other institution in the country). I have never met an academic anywhere in the country who did not extol the intellectual reputation of Kalamazoo.

---

<sup>5</sup> Before I even arrived at Kalamazoo in 1996, I was immediately struck by the faculty's historic dedication to the K Plan and by the faculty's attendance at college-wide, extra-curricular LAC events. In fact, the individual charged with overseeing the LAC program was the most eminent member of the faculty, Professor Gary Dorrien, one of the most distinguished theologians in the world, now the Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary as well as a professor in the graduate school at Columbia University and the Raether Distinguished Scholar in Residence each spring term at Trinity. That the most eminent member of the college faculty oversaw the LAC program each year spoke volumes about the primacy of the LAC program to the intellectual DNA of the institution.

<sup>6</sup> In an example of one's being heralded too late, we gave an honorary degree to Larry Barrett posthumously since I could never persuade the luminary to accept an honorary degree during his lifetime for his remarkable contributions to Kalamazoo College, and thus I awarded the honorary degree at his funeral, the only time I know of such a belated recognition. Cf. Marlene Crandell Francis, *A Fellowship In Learning: Kalamazoo College, 1833-2008* (Kalamazoo College, 2008), and especially her discussions of the Hicks presidency, chapter fourteen, "The College Recovers" (pp. 230-242), and the formulation by Provost Barrett of the K Plan, chapter fifteen, "Creating the K Plan" (pp. 243-256).

I came to understand that being an undergraduate at Kalamazoo must have approached what being an undergraduate at Hutchins' University of Chicago must have been.

### Sources

This white paper stems from many sources. As far back as I can recall, I have been fascinated by schools and by their own evolutions. Thus what follows has been informed not only by my seven-plus years at Trinity but also by my sixteen years at Washington University under Chancellor Danforth, by my four years at SMU under President Pye before his untimely death the year before we left there for Michigan, and certainly by my eight years as president at Kalamazoo. This white paper has also been informed by my incessant reading across the decades about higher education: from Mr. Jefferson's theorizing in the early years of the nineteenth century about an "academic village" that evolved into the University of Virginia and from John Henry Cardinal Newman's wonderful little book, written but a few decades later, on the modern university (aimed primarily at Oxford in the mid nineteenth century), from the various books written about Hutchins' University of Chicago, and from Jonathan Cole's important recent book on the American higher education system.<sup>7</sup> This paper has likewise been informed by the documents in Kalamazoo's archives about Barrett's founding of the K Plan, by the long and distinguished history of the Contemporary Civilization program at Columbia, by the collegial sense of the campus one feels from the "speaking tradition" at Washington and Lee and by the parallel "passing hello" tradition at Sewanee, and by the scores of other studies I have read over the decades. Of those mentors from whom I have learned so much, other than those cited above, I would have to add William Richardson (Trinity '62, trustee of his alma mater, and honorary degree recipient in 2003), one of the most distinguished academic leaders of his generation and former president of Johns Hopkins, who has spent innumerable hours discussing higher education with me over the course of our long friendship.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Perseus Academic: The Great American University* (Columbia University Press, 2010). Cole's fine study came out as the rhetoric concerning the American academy began to become overheated in political and media circles. I wish every member of the present Congress could somehow be required to read Cole's study before any further harsh rhetoric is expended against us and before any further retreats from public support for higher education are even entertained.

Before being asked to write this white paper by the faculty committee planning the fall 2011 retreat at Trinity, I had previously been told only once that I should try my own hand at such a statement, and that one time was as I was taking my leave of the aged and infirm Peter Drucker. He suggested to me as we were saying our goodbyes that I should one day take enough time from the incessant demands of my normal presidential duties to dream what should be an ideal undergraduate experience. Had the planning committee at Trinity not asked that I write this paper, I am confident I would never have had the personal courage, or the unbridled brazenness, to undertake such a daunting task. I can only hope that the shade of Dr. Drucker would think this white paper at least acceptable. It now remains to the future to see what the Trinity community might think of my project.

**Everything Changes Except the Need for Change:  
A Critical Lesson from the History of the Academy**

Modern historiography dates from Voltaire and Gibbon (the former's first history, *L'Histoire de Charles XII*, dates from 1731 and the latter's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* from the first volume's publication in 1776 through the final and sixth volume in 1789). Formulating modern historiography at much the same point in the evolution of Western civilization, they both taught that history is of little value except to teach us important lessons so that the mistakes of the past might not be so prone to repeat themselves needlessly in the future. And of all the lessons Voltaire and Gibbon taught, the most pivotal to be remembered is that everything changes except the need for change.

The American liberal arts college finds its roots in the English clerical model. When Oxford and Cambridge first entered the modern era around the middle of the nineteenth century, the older established norms of immersion in Greek and Latin letters, the history of science, physical geography, rhetoric, and elocution started to give way to modern languages rather than the historical reliance upon the ancients (Matthew Arnold's appointment at Oxford marks the juncture in that particular evolution), experiential science replacing the history of science, and the birth of the modern social sciences like anthropology, psychology, sociology, and what later came to be political science. The goal of a college or university education then shifted from

forming clerics to providing a far broader and more sweeping education for those white Christian males who almost uniformly constituted the student bodies of academic institutions.

But religious affiliation still proved important. Thus, once the colonial Congregational clergy founded Yale, the Episcopalians in Connecticut decided to found Trinity (then Washington College) in 1823, and Bishop Brownell effected that first vision. Colleges and universities were residentially based (again, the English model prevailed). Once the Oxbridge academic revolutions began in pedagogy and curricula, the American liberal arts colleges took notice and started to evolve. The historic lesson is clear: everything changes except the need for change.

When my father went off to Washington and Lee in 1929, six weeks before the Great Depression began, more than fifty percent of the college-bound prospective students in the U.S. attended some sort of liberal arts school: either a stand-alone liberal arts college like Trinity or a liberal arts college within the then-growing larger university setting. The number of students entering stand-alone liberal arts colleges today is, depending upon the demographic expert doing the analysis, somewhere around six percent.<sup>8</sup> To give some context to this startling decrease, David Breneman concluded that of 212 colleges enrolling over 260,000 students, forty percent or more majored in a liberal arts discipline as defined by the Carnegie Foundation in 1988.<sup>9</sup>

There are many reasons for this unsettling state of affairs as I write this white paper in the summer of 2011. In historical terms, the greatest single transformation in American higher education occurred with the GI Bill, which FDR had started planning in the darkest moments of the Second World War, in early 1943. Veterans, he assumed, were one day going to return to the U.S. from their military service abroad. In modest recompense for their heroic service to their country, FDR dreamt of having the federal government provide basically a free education to those veterans, with a living

---

<sup>8</sup> In my personal opinion, the best recent demographic study is *College Access: Opportunity or Privilege?* (The College Board, 2006) by the economists Morton O. Shapiro (formerly dean of the College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences at USC under Steve Sample before being named president at Williams, after which he was named president of Northwestern) and Michael S. McPherson (formerly president of Macalester before being named president of the Spencer Foundation).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. David Breneman, *Liberal Arts Colleges: Thriving, Surviving, or Endangered?* (The Brookings Institution Press, 1994). Dr. Breneman was one of my predecessors as president at Kalamazoo College. Cited by Ferrall, pp. 14-15. See p. 14.

allowance to support them while studying for a college or university degree. (It is today humbling to recall that, after the enormous expenses in every sense of the word occasioned by the Second World War, the United States did effect the GI Bill and the Marshall Plan to rebuild Germany and Japan simultaneously.) Colleges and universities across America mushroomed overnight to accommodate these veterans, basically males from families that had never before imagined that their scions would ever reap the benefits of a college or university education. The socio-economics of the academy then began to change at a radical pace: post-secondary education was no longer the province of the white, the male, the Christian, and the wealthy, and other massive transformations began to follow suit as American higher education became further democratized: leading ultimately to desegregation and co-education in the 1960s and early 1970s (following which there would be only two all-male colleges left in the entire country, Wabash and Hampton-Sydney, while those women's colleges that did not co-educate continued to attract excellent students) and to colleges and universities opening their doors to larger numbers of students from far different backgrounds (the "Jewish quotas" mercifully disappeared for one prominent example), and colleges and universities began to recruit minorities in ever-increasing numbers.<sup>10</sup> Again, the lessons learned from our first modern historians ring true for American higher education and for Trinity College, especially in the summer of 2011 as it looks to the College's bicentennial in 2023: everything changes except the need for change.

### **Imperiled: The Liberal Arts College Today**

Later competition for the stand-alone liberal arts colleges came in the form of wolves in sheep's clothing. The larger research universities began adopting the rhetoric of the liberal arts college, and honors colleges began springing up ubiquitously all over the U.S. Today, the honors colleges at the University of Michigan, the University of Virginia, and the University of North Carolina (to cite only three of the most prominent) recruit students who in past generations would have probably not considered a public

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admissions and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005) for the best study of the vast changes in admissions policies across the U.S. in the last fifty or so years.

university. Closer to home, the University of Connecticut is today recruiting students who in past times would have more often than not chosen to attend a private institute such as our College. And here, the comparisons are noteworthy: even the most cursory of glances at the communications vehicles used to recruit students to the best public honors colleges today will underscore time and again the much more affordable tuition costs, the availability of scholarships, that students in the honors colleges are housed in “special” residential environments that stress academics in social settings, that students will not be taught by graduate assistants but by faculty, and all the rest. In short, the rhetoric of unique distinction upon which liberal arts colleges such as Trinity must stand has been widely appropriated across the landscape of American higher education.

Interestingly from an evolutionary point of view, these honors colleges seek to inculcate a return to what small, liberal arts colleges once were assumed best equipped to provide: a broad, holistic education that one might label a “college-centered” experience as opposed to a “discipline-centered” experience as generally characterized within the research university environment before the changes in various undergraduate programs were enacted. Conversely, some decades ago on liberal arts campuses such as Trinity, the traditional “college-centered” experience evolved into a more “discipline-centered” experience mirroring that of the research university whereby one’s major became more primary to a student’s education than a more holistic ideal of a broadly educated student. The two poles largely reversed themselves across the country, and Trinity was no exception as this change took effect. As my readers will come to understand, I shall argue here for a return to a broader, shared, more holistic “college-centered” education in what follows for Trinity’s future, but one that certainly has the “discipline-centered” focus at its root.

One does not have to be a prescient visionary like Peter Drucker to conclude that the context and character of the small, residential, liberal arts college in the twenty-first century are vastly different from the liberal arts environment my father knew and came to cherish in 1929 at Washington and Lee.

Everything changes except the need for change.

Gradually, the leaders of American higher education in our part of the academic world came to realize that significant change would have to occur, or the proverbial playing field was going to change without our even know-

ing that the ground had shifted beneath our feet and that the liberal arts college world might well lose its historic place of pre-eminence in American higher education. Some forty or so years ago, most liberal arts colleges of merit began doing two significant things simultaneously: drastically increasing development activity to include annual gifts, capital campaigns, and especially legacy giving and improving admissions strategies to broaden the sweep of prospective candidates for admission. And in more recent times, we tried to broadcast the intrinsic value of a liberal arts education in a small, residential setting to a wider national constituency.

Before being asked in 1996 to serve as president in Michigan, I had never really thought how imperiled liberal arts colleges might be as the new millennium loomed ahead until it became incumbent upon me to do so in order to protect the institution I had been called to lead. Many of us then began to discuss at some length things that we might do in a series of attempts to get the liberal arts story out to a broader segment of the American populace.

The fact that the liberal arts colleges as historically recognized are in danger of losing their pre-eminence has been underscored in the number of books and articles now appearing on the subject. Witness, among many others that one might cite, Victor E. Ferrall's first-rate *Liberal Arts at the Brink* (Harvard University Press, 2011) and for a counterpoint a recent article in *Investment News* by Bill Gross entitled "How To Fix the Fractured U.S. Job Market" that begins: "A mind is a precious thing to waste, so why are millions of America's students wasting theirs by going to college?"<sup>11</sup> Dr. Ferrall's *bona fides* are noteworthy; he served as president of Beloit College from 1991 to 2000 and was one of the promoters of the Annapolis Group from its inception. His most important contention is that the liberal arts college "sells" the services we proffer (undergraduate education) while we fund some of the recipients of what we are "selling" (students in financial need). While the demand for bachelor degrees continues to grow nationally, he notes time and again, the demand for liberal arts education continues to decline, being replaced by vocational institutions, to say nothing of the for-profit schools that are today both burgeoning and coming under review for their vast and unsupported claims as to career preparation.

Mr. Gross argues that the traditional liberal arts do not provide the educa-

---

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.investmentnews.com/article/20110705/FREE/110709990?template=printart>  
I am indebted to Trinity trustee Edward C. Rorer for this reference.

tion that American students most need. He deems the four baccalaureate years spent studying the traditional liberal arts a waste and insists that the U.S. would be better served by drastically increasing the number of students in natural science (I assume he would include both theoretical and applied mathematics and engineering) and jettisoning those broader educational norms in the traditional liberal arts that have undergirded American society since the founding of the country. Also, coinciding with moves on the political front about the cost of American higher education has been a spate of articles on the financing models, first in our sector of higher education and now increasingly in more public venues spawned by the harsh financial consequences of the economic crisis in 2008. Of the scores of recent articles, perhaps the best and most timely is “Colleges in Crisis,” published in the July-August issue of the *Harvard Magazine*.<sup>12</sup> The authors argue decisively for a total rethinking of the financial models that have evolved for higher education—a daunting task indeed.

In an attempt to make our case more forcefully, leaders of American liberal arts colleges have tried a variety of different ploys, most notably in a special edition of *Dædalus*, the historically important journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, brought out in 1999. All of us involved with the project were sorely disappointed that this special edition entitled “Distinctively American, the Residential Liberal Arts Colleges” drew scant attention from the public, the only formal acknowledgement I know being an article in *The New York Times*.<sup>13</sup> That we in the liberal arts universe must continue trying to make our case for the intrinsic values of a liberal arts

---

<sup>12</sup> Clayton M. Christensen and Michael B. Horn, “Colleges in Crisis: Disruptive Change Comes to American Higher Education,” *Harvard Magazine*, July-August 2011, pp. 40-43. I am indebted to Thomas S. Johnson (former trustee, former chair of the board at Trinity, and an honorary degree recipient in 2005 at his alma mater) for this reference. The authors argue persuasively for new technologies undermining the status quo, and they use as pertinent examples what happened especially to the American automobile industry and to IBM when the latter’s prominence in the technological marketplace was completely eclipsed by the personal computer. The authors do admit that there will always be entities that fill a particular niche in the proverbial marketplace, as Rolex might be said to do for watches for example. I would argue that Trinity must position itself in the academic marketplace as a niche school with particular aspects to our undergraduate experience not found ubiquitously elsewhere in the country.

<sup>13</sup> *Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts Colleges*, ed. Steven Koblik, special edition of *Dædalus*, Vol. 128 (January 1999). Former Trinity president Richard H. Hersh contributed one of the articles included in the special edition. For a more recent plea for the liberal arts in a residential setting, see also Mark W. Roche, *Why Choose The Liberal Arts?* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

education was again brought to the attention of the presidents of the liberal arts institutions in the U.S. in a letter to all of us (May 16, 2011) by Victor Ferrall in which he argued strongly for the Annapolis Group undertaking a new initiative on the PR front to broadcast the “messaging” necessary for our essential role in the American higher education system, another of his cogent suggestions with which I am in complete accord.

The best recent, decisive argument that I have seen for the primacy of higher education in the United States, specifically liberal arts undergraduate education, appeared in print while this white paper was in one of its previous drafts. Louis Menand’s “Live and Learn, Why We Have College” is one of the most cogent arguments in favor of the liberal arts undergraduate experience I have ever read; in but a few pages, he argues persuasively for the specific reasons one’s four undergraduate years in a broadly designed college experience are even more critical today for students in the twenty-first century.<sup>14</sup> And his reasoning centers on the undeniable fact that our students today will face change at a bewildering pace in all aspects of their adult lives and that the only decisive way to prepare our students for their uncertain futures is to provide them with the broadest possible educational experience as undergraduates. He argues decisively that what liberal arts education provides—a broad, engaging intellectual experience across the disciplines with learned expertise in one’s major and possibly minor—is the best possible defense against parochialism and small-mindedness that have no place in an educated person’s critical thinking in the twentieth-first century. I wish I had been smart enough to have written the article itself, for Menand speaks to the essence of an education such as Trinity College should offer our students in our time.

Ironically, against this brutal reality, in which we in the liberal arts world today appear to be losing the primacy of our educational model in the U.S., stands the undeniable fact that others abroad are moving to formulate new schools based upon the American ideal of the liberal arts college in a residential setting. Witness the recent overtures to Trinity to assist Fudan University in Shanghai with their president’s idealistic dream of starting a residential liberal arts college in China based upon the older American models as well as the startling, indeed daring, initiative announced in London this past June by the eminent British philosopher A.C. Grayling (an heir in this regard

---

<sup>14</sup> *The New Yorker*, June 6, 2011, pp. 74-79.

to Chicago's Mortimer Adler decades ago) and the equally eminent natural scientist Richard Dawkins to start a new college in London, purportedly to compete with Oxbridge, based upon "academic excellence" in a postmodern residential setting.

Data gathered by the Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges show the following:

- 1) In Connecticut alone, we in the private sector account for forty-two percent of all Connecticut higher education students enrolled in the state.
- 2) We in the private sector award forty-seven percent of all bachelor's degrees and fifty-seven percent of four-year degrees received by minority students.
- 3) Our students are likely to earn degrees in four years as against six years in public institutions.
- 4) Both state and federal support for private schools is falling off the financial cliff because of the economic downturn post 2008.
- 5) Prospective student populations are falling in the Northeast (down 12%) and growing nationally only in the South (up 39%) and in the West (up an even more startling 49%).

The wealthy liberal arts colleges have little to fear, in my personal opinion, because still today a significant number of well-educated families in America understand the intrinsic value of the liberal arts as traditionally wrought in small, residential settings such as Trinity. Williams, Amherst, Swarthmore, Haverford, Macalester, Pomona, Middlebury, and Grinnell do not face the same challenges Trinity must confront, since the endowments of the wealthier institutions can support increasingly high percentages of operating budget expenses even if tuition cannot continue to rise annually as it has in the past. Of those institutions, only Macalester is located in a major urban setting and is in fact the only stand-alone liberal arts college other than Trinity to be located in a major capital city in this country.

I steadfastly believe that liberal arts colleges in our time have no choice but to offer some clearly defined mark of unique distinction. Merely repeating over and again that one provides a liberal arts education and leaving it at that will not suffice for those schools such as Trinity that do not have the advantage of substantial endowment dollars per student to undergird the

education offered. Middlebury and Oberlin, for two prominent examples, have a decided advantage in that both institutions are well to do financially (Middlebury has as of July 1, 2011 over \$900m in its endowment and Oberlin over \$700m as contrasted with Trinity's endowment as of the same date being just shy of \$441m), and these two schools have marks of unique distinction inherent from their pasts: Middlebury has Bread Loaf and the language houses, now complemented by the Monterey Language Academy on the West Coast, and Oberlin has its impressive, if costly, conservatory.

So the ultimate question before us in 2011 as Trinity looks to its bicentennial in 2023 is how best to situate the College both academically and socially, given the fact that our endowment is far from what it ideally should be, that the demographics for prospective students are changing rapidly as I write this white paper, that those of us with smaller endowments are now witnessing grave difficulties recruiting middle-class students for financial reasons, and that Trinity has just in the last few years started winning for itself a reputation for some unique value added to the traditional liberal arts education through our urban-global focus.

The reputation of a first-rate institution of higher learning rests solely at the end of the day upon one thing and one thing only: **academic excellence**. No amount of athletic wins, or shining new buildings, or Norman Rockwellian pristine settings nestled in the countryside can ever compensate for academic excellence. So if one were to dream of a different DNA for Trinity by its two-hundredth birthday, one should, I respectfully submit, ponder what academic excellence might resemble, in an urban setting such as Hartford with our fine array of global sites around the world. Here we might hearken to the model of DNA whereby two helices must intertwine acutely if a common vision of a Jeffersonian "academic village" for the twenty-first century were to be insured at Trinity—one academic, the other social—neither of which can ever be separated from the other since their interstices form the DNA of the ethos of the baccalaureate experience one might envision, were one only to dream as Grayling and Dawkins are now dreaming in England, or as Hutchins and Adler once dreamt at the University of Chicago, or as the much less heralded Larry Barrett once dreamt at Kalamazoo.

Schools evolve most often slowly over time, but in historical terms, 2023 is closer than we might think. I submit to all those members of the College community that time is indeed fleeting and that concerted action to transform Trinity's DNA must be seriously undertaken in the next few years if

Trinity's future is to be insured by our having several arrows of unique distinction in our quiver.

### **Transformational DNA: The Academic Helix**

If academic rigor were to be improved at Trinity, we might start at the beginning: before students even arrive on campus. We started the summer common reading in 2005 for the class of 2009. A faculty committee selected a book, and I wrote in July 2005 to the members of the entering class telling them that we were all going to read one book that summer and that we would discuss the book during orientation. We made a change in this plan for the summer of 2006, and Trinity started having a book written by a living author be the choice for our summer common reading, and we began inviting the author to address the entering class during orientation, with the expectation that the author would return as the class graduated four short years later to receive an honorary degree with his or her class.

I here respectfully submit that of all the critically important tools we need to place in our students' various tool boxes, coping with the ever-shifting ethical problems confronting critical thinking before humanity in the twenty-first century might be the single most important tool of them all. Former Dean of Harvard College Harry R. Lewis underscores that we must teach our students ethical considerations in his *Excellence Without A Soul: How A Great University Forgot Education* (PublicAffairs, 2006). If we do not address this issue straightforwardly, we at Trinity run the risk of forsaking what may well be our most critical task, and that is inculcating ethical "souls" (to borrow from Lewis) into our students' thinking for the rest of their adult lives.

What if our present summer reading choice were to be the first of fifteen or so works read by every student in every first-year seminar, with the list of works evolving every two or three years, chosen by a faculty committee with wide-spread representation (including certainly faculty in philosophy and in the natural sciences) and dealing with ethical dilemmas concomitant with our students' experiences at Trinity? One might envision a list of texts that could include timeless works such as Aristotle on ethics, *Candide*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the "Book of Exodus" and the "Sermon on the Mount,"

certainly one of the myriad books on the Holocaust,<sup>15</sup> etc. but that would also include, for example and depending upon then-current world events, a study of 9/11, Woodward's *State of Denial*, or a book on the Madoff scandal, or a study of the ethical dimensions to the global economic crisis of 2008, or white privilege, or global warming, or the imperatives of learning to live in a diverse world, or immigration, or abortion, or same-sex marriage, or stem-cell research as only one facet of the ethical problems stemming from present-day scientific/medical research, or the ethical dilemmas posed by the leaking oil eruption in the Gulf of Mexico, or the vast ethical problems posed by the Internet and information technology,<sup>16</sup> and the like: some admixture of the theoretical and the actual as ethics and postmodern events in real time coincide and collide. One book a week, in each first-year seminar, with the faculty constantly leading class discussions as to the interface of the theoretical with the real, as a common initiative spearheaded by faculty and then driving the first-year seminar required of every student. One might label this list of works to be read in every first-year seminar, indeed one might label the first-year seminars themselves, *Understandings In Common*, an ever-changing list of seminal works that would provide each first-year student a common set of readings, all of which would demonstrate that knowledge and wisdom flow over the borders of any one academic discipline, to which the first-year seminar faculty would be dedicated: a Trinity-specific Contemporary Civilization program as at Columbia or our own equivalent of the Great Books as had once been taught at Hutchins' Chicago. The faculty committee charged with overseeing *Understandings In Common* might develop a list of proposed discussion topics seminar faculty might wish to undertake.

---

<sup>15</sup> Each fall, in my senior seminar when we are discussing Professor Samuel Kassow's magisterial *Who Will Write Our History?*, his book on the Warsaw ghetto (Indiana University Press, 2007), the only time silence ever falls upon class discussion is when I tell my students that those who planned and then built the concentration camps had advanced degrees from some of the oldest and most distinguished universities in Germany, that *physicians* with equally prominent degrees willingly contributed their medical knowledge of the human body to the plans for the construction of the gas chambers, and that those attending the Wannsee conference (1942) that formulated the heinous Final Solution were to a person highly educated men.

<sup>16</sup> The ethical dilemmas posed by the Internet and by postmodern information technology are among the most perplexing of all those our current and future students will have to face in their adult lives. In my personal opinion, by some measure the best recent study is Jaron Lanier's very troubling *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (Knopf, 2010). Lanier made *Time's* list of 100 people "who most affect our world." Cf. "The Visionary: A Digital Pioneer Questions What Technology Has Wrought," by Jennifer Kahn, *The New Yorker*, July 11 & 18, 2011, pp. 46-53.

*Understandings In Common* might be *the* initial, shared conversation, reminiscent of Raphael's *School of Athens* painting, at Trinity in the years prior to the College's two-hundredth birthday.

And *Understandings In Common* would be heavily writing intensive. Along with many of my peers, I am growing increasingly alarmed at the compositional skills (actually the lack of same) of our students nationally. And Google has wreaked havoc with any semblance of proper referencing for compositions and theses. This state of affairs is probably the consequence of a number of things: the appalling lack of writing preparation in secondary schools across the country, the ever-present, instantaneous "communication" wrought by the Internet and texting (*e.g.* "RU2hr?" sent me as a text message by a student last year meaning "Are you two here?"), and all the rest. One might look at the excellent writing programs at Bates and at the College of Wooster, where concerted efforts have been made over the last several decades to address this problem in our present student bodies.<sup>17</sup>

Every department at Trinity might undertake a rigorous re-examination of course requirements to see how critical thinking as expressed in writing and in oral presentations could be improved. The English Department and the Writing Center might be asked to prepare a short, easy-to-understand commentary on writing and proper referencing in the technological age to be used by every student in every class during that individual's four years at Trinity to provide some standardization across the disciplines in order to better inculcate proper writing standards in every class across the entire College. (I for one would certainly appreciate having some common document to provide my own seminar participants.) And such a document would highlight the imminent dangers of proper referencing in the technological age as another dimension of ethics and critical thinking.

During the departmental curricular re-examinations, special attention would be paid to our having more courses taught on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, with Friday being singled out on campus as test or quiz day, or the day upon which papers might be due. We should aim for far more MWF classes and fewer Tuesday-Thursday classes. This initiative would begin to break Vernon Street's stranglehold on the weekends beginning on Thursday

---

<sup>17</sup> Jill Reich has been dean of the faculty for some time now at Bates after unfortunately leaving that position at Trinity. The talented biologist Carolyn Newton is now provost at the College of Wooster. Both Bates and the College of Wooster have as well rigorous senior projects required for graduation.

nights and would send powerful messages as to the academic expectations of the College. I learned a mighty lesson in this regard from a retired member of the Chemistry Department at SMU when I was dean and vice provost there. Harold Jeskey was an SMU legend, a scientist version of a Trinity George Cooper or of a Jack Chatfield if I might be allowed the comparisons. Generations of SMU alumni spoke of Professor Jeskey in awe. He taught organic chemistry for decades and historically had been the single most important person in the entire university when it came to pre-med advice and recommendations. Lore held that a supporting letter from Professor Jeskey was tantamount to being admitted to the best medical schools in the Southwest. His students respectfully called themselves "Jeskey's kids."

Professor Jeskey unfailingly gave a quiz every Friday morning. He taught organic chemistry from 8:00 to 9:00 and from 9:00 to 10:00 a.m. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, semester after semester, year after year, decade after decade. SMU is perhaps, not happily, not always recognized as a significant academic institution, but "Jeskey's kids" never participated in any of the Thursday night fraternity ribaldry at that heavily fraternity-prone school: they were too busy in the library preparing for the notoriously difficult, inevitable Friday quiz. Professor Jeskey even habitually wore a black tie (supposedly signifying "mourning on Friday morning" for his students) to class each week; his students long after graduating from SMU would speak of "black-tie Fridays."

Additionally, during a student's four years at Trinity, some version of the Liberal Arts Colloquium at Kalamazoo might be envisioned. We are already somewhat down that particular path with the Common Hours each week. I shall always be grateful to the Campus Climate Committee that envisioned the Common Hour some years back. Once we overcame the too-often-repeated "it cannot be done schedule-wise at Trinity" argument, the Common Hour has been expanded from once a week to twice. Some of the Common Hour events are crowded. Some of the Common Hour events draw scant attention.<sup>18</sup> Would it be too radical a departure (as a faculty colleague alleged in 2004) to ask that the current graduation requirements be examined and that a one-credit requirement be based upon some commonly understood presence by each student at lectures, concerts, art exhib-

---

<sup>18</sup> One that embarrassed me mightily this past spring term occurred when we had a lecture by an eminent intellectual, only to find not a single student present, three faculty, one visiting academic who is a colleague president at a neighboring institution, Jan, and me.

its, presentations of one form or the other and that our Academic Standards Committee not flinch in demanding that attendance requirements be met for graduation? Is there some member of the faculty who, in Gary Dorrien fashion, might step up to lead such an initiative to enhance the academic ethos of the entire campus, to show that intellectual discourse is at root our common enterprise, and to insure that such discourse can and does occur outside the normal confines of the classroom?

Might we push our study-abroad programs to afford every Trinity undergraduate the opportunity to go abroad? Two-thirds of our present student body go abroad at some point during their undergraduate years. With the ever-growing number of first-rate international students now coming to our campus, the impact of having broader representation of the entire study body go abroad would be considerable. Trinity's place in the proverbial liberal arts sun rests on our urban-global focus, since this is the unique card we have to play at the present time. Tom Friedman's contention that the world is flat is borne out every day on every conceivable plane of consideration. Our global sites are functioning well indeed, with some, like Paris, now competing for numbers with the Rome Campus, Trinity's historic flagship program. Our summer programs (environmental science, Asia, etc.) are growing every year. The summer programs, which we continue to strengthen, will offer easier and more realistic opportunities for our science students who are more constrained in their ability to study away during the semester because of their more rigid curricular requirements on campus. But we must do far more, before students actually arrive on campus, to stress the intrinsic value of study-abroad experiences, and we must do whatever is necessary to see that more and more students at Trinity have at least one study-abroad experience before they graduate. One way to think about stressing our study-abroad opportunities might be to require each student to have in hand a passport when he or she matriculates.

In like manner, we should push our internship programs to afford a similar opportunity for every Trinity undergraduate. One of Trinity's great strengths lies squarely in the dedication of our alumni, many of whom are recognized leaders in all walks of life, and this fact has been true for some decades now. Years ago, we ran an alumni survey (we have only some 20,000 living alumni) and found to my amazement that more than fifty percent were willing to help Trinity students in their career choices: an astonishing number by any measure. We need to do far more to help Trinity students along

their paths to successful adult careers; and our first-rate Bantam Sophomore Success program is but one example of evidence that we are on the right path. But we need to make it an experiential expectation (“if you come to Trinity, of course you are going to study abroad at least once, and of course you are going to have at least one internship”) of as many of our students as possible. Trinity has no choice but to use the remarkable alumni network to help our students—early on in their four years—develop marketable skill sets to enable them to find significant employment post-Trinity. In their critically important role as mentors, members of our faculty who might have had a willing alumnus or alumna as a student should work side-by-side with Career Services to identify qualified undergraduates for an internship.

And, should we add additional staff where finances might allow so that internships might be made available at our various study-abroad sites around the world, linking experiential education in the broadest sense not only to our students while studying on campus in Hartford but also to our students while they are studying abroad? We have such opportunities in some of our global sites already, but I would urge us to make it a requisite part of all our study-abroad programs. And I would urge Trinity to tighten the academic expectations of all our study-abroad programs, to stress facility in languages other than English, in order to confront the reputation that some of our programs abroad are more play and less work. Our Barcelona program might be used as a model of intense academic rigor with language facility required since our courses there are in Spanish. In the mid-1980s when I was still at Washington University, our department launched yet another study-abroad program linking our students to the Ecole Européenne des Affaires (with sites in France, Germany, and England) whereby our students were required to do an internship while abroad; the consequences were remarkable and led many of the program's graduates to careers in some of the most prestigious American business firms with international foci. Would it be conceivable to inculcate something similar into our study-abroad programs at Trinity?

Might we also consider a senior project as a capstone to one's four years? Bates requires a senior project, as does Wooster, as does Kalamazoo, etc. The intellectual ethos of the senior year is a much different animal when every student is required to produce a senior project in his or her major. There is evidence already on campus that research involvement can significantly alter a student's undergraduate years. The Chemistry Department offers but one important example. Our second year at Trinity, I received a telephone call

in August from an irate mother who told me that I had to see that her son, a good friend of mine, came home at least one weekend his sophomore summer. He was living on campus, working night and day in one of our labs under the dedicated direction of a member of the faculty, and was so heavily engaged in his laboratory research that he was neglecting to contact his mother (a single parent) on a regular basis. “He has disappeared into chemistry,” the mother said to me, in what I shall always remember as one of the best single lines from our Trinity years. I did suggest that he might go home for a visit, but all he wanted to do was to continue his research, which then was to lead to his senior project. What if all our students “disappeared” into their academics at some concerted times during their four years at Trinity?

To charge one of the highest tuitions in the United States, Trinity simply must deliver on the primacy of our pedagogy: which includes, as exemplified in the case of our chemistry faculty and this one student, having our faculty be mentors in the truest sense of our students. We should have an academic mentoring reputation second to none of the best liberal arts colleges in the country.

And since this white paper is about dreams, what if we were to require each senior to do a public presentation of that student’s capstone project, say by the first day of Senior Week? Over the past seven years at Trinity, I have watched with deep admiration the late-spring poster presentations in the sciences as well as in economics. Students are always justly proud of their presentations, and each spring I get invitation after invitation from students to attend their poster presentations of research in economics and in the natural sciences. What if every senior followed suit, and what if there were some significant social event marking the end of the senior presentations of their projects? The College of Wooster has long had a spirited procession around campus marking the end of the final day upon which the senior projects have to be delivered to the faculty mentors. Might one think of some similar event at Trinity marking a common experience shared by every student as the first event of Senior Week preceding Commencement each May? A procession along the Long Walk, ending in the Washington Room or on the Quad itself where dinner with the faculty mentors would be given our seniors? Too much of Senior Week is today purely social; what if there were a celebratory dinner with the faculty mentors, paid for by the College, marking the conclusion of the senior project on the part of every student headed five or six days later to Commencement on the Quad? We

might consider having this accomplished along clusters of departments and programs as another aspect of trying to have such a celebratory event each year highlighting the academic achievements of the senior class via their respective senior research projects.

I realize full well that there would be some project chaff among the project wheat, but again as an academic expectation of intellectual rigor, a research project required of and shared by all students, as a senior-year bookend to a shared first-year *Understandings In Common*, might be at least one way of thinking about improving academic rigor at Trinity as long as we all understood that the academic whole is far greater than the sum of its many parts, that an academic ethos is at root amorphous, but that a changed academic ethos would depend upon the dedication to a much broader sense of an holistic intellectual "village," to borrow again from Mr. Jefferson, than one narrowly defined solely by one's particular academic major.

Critical thinking in the broadest possible sense would undergird all the possibilities above: writing prowess across the disciplines, a commonly read set of works discussed in every first-year seminar linking ethics to world events in real time, study abroad, internships, a senior project, some sort of Liberal Arts Colloquium graduation requirement, all intimately interrelated aspects defining Trinity's DNA, binding every student intellectually to Trinity College by its two-hundredth birthday.

And along with critical thinking, we must continue to enhance the one significant card we hold: the urban-global focus that came from the Cornerstone Plan in the 2004-2005 academic year. Trinity must have some unique card to play, especially since the demographics of prospective students are evolving radically as I write this white paper, and our one card is that we are situated in Hartford and that we have global sites abroad. The students who come to Trinity today will not spend their adult lives in some hamlet lost like idyllic Brigadoon but will spend their adult lives in major urban environments all over the globe. We have made significant progress on the global front (in faculty hires and in the first-rate work internationally done by our Center for Urban and Global Studies). We have far more to do right here in our own city of Hartford, expanding the involvements of every student and working hard on experiential opportunities for learning how to cope with living in a diverse environment such as ours, given that our

students will spend their adult lives in complicated, urban environments.<sup>19</sup>

Everything changes except the need for change.

### **Transformational DNA: The Social Helix**

The second helix to a different DNA for Trinity by its two-hundredth birthday would have to be an altered campus climate. From my fifteen-plus years as president both at Kalamazoo and at Trinity, I have come to understand that small, residential colleges provide their most lasting value in a student's having some sense of place, four years spent belonging to a small, special, interrelated community, all of which explains the historic dedication of Trinity's alumni to their alma mater. As hard as it is for me to admit as someone who has loved being a teacher for all these decades more than anything in my life except for my family, simply *belonging* for four years to a college like Trinity may be far more important to my seminar students in their adult lives than any lecture I might give or class discussion I might attempt to lead.

Back to Peter Drucker. When we were discussing the unparalleled wonders of the information technological age, he noted that postmodern technology would revolutionize humanity in ways greater even than Gutenberg's printing press had after 1436, and he cited the role of the photocopier in the fall of the former Soviet Union as his most prominent example. (I can only imagine his commentaries on the role of the cell phone in the recent political revolutions in the Middle East.) But he had a serious warning, one that goes to the heart of an ideal campus ethos at Trinity. Dr. Drucker insisted without hesitation that "knowledge workers" (he had coined the term in 1959) would have, thanks to postmodern technology, universal access to information but that such universal access would come at two primal costs: the complete loss of an individual's privacy and, most ironically given that

---

<sup>19</sup> Several years ago, when our Fulbright numbers started to climb, I spent some time reading the materials presented by our Fulbright winners and found, to my amazement, that of the four Fulbrights Trinity students had won that particular year, three were won by Hispanic Studies majors. When I read our students' essays, I found that each essay dealt with that student's experiences meeting the faculty's requirement that students conduct an experiential research project in one of Hartford's many different Hispanic neighborhoods: proof that being physically located in Hartford has some important, and concrete, advantages that most every other liberal arts college would lack and would indeed envy.

complete loss of individual privacy, the private isolation in the postmodern world of those “knowledge workers.” When visiting a recent alumnus friend of mine at his place of employment in New York City last year, I was poignantly reminded of Dr. Drucker’s warning (that “knowledge workers” in the information technological age were going to be as isolated as had been medieval monks alone for countless hours in their cells copying the Bible or doing illuminations) when I found this young man sitting in a mindless cubicle staring at his computer screen. Totally isolated with his screen he was indeed, cut off from all human contact.

It is against the stark isolation of the individual human being in the post-modern technological age that Trinity must stand firmly grounded upon a sense of community in a small, residential academic village based on meritocratic values and standards. And spaces are the essential key to a sense of shared community.

Here too, we are somewhat down a changed path already, thanks to the initial Campus Climate Advisory Committee’s work several years ago. The Common Hours referred to above, the theme houses, the focus on commonly shared spaces all over campus, and the like have been significant improvements.

Before being appointed the Senior Visitor to Oxford University for the Hilary Term in 1988, I had never really thought much about the intrinsic value of common spaces. The most important common space for me at Washington University, where I was then a professor, was the library, as it was for the faculty and members of the student body. The excellent renovations that resulted in the Raether Library at Trinity point to the critical importance of the most commonly shared space on any campus—the library—as the heart of a school. But at Linacre College at Oxford, after lunch, all the fellows and the masters left the Refectory for the Common Room, where people just talked quietly over coffee each day. I shall always recall thinking how valuable the space was as a common ground, apart from Oxford’s extraordinary libraries, where differences in background, rank, age, appointment, and all the rest did not matter at all.

Proof that common spaces can be vital needs no more evidence than the popularity of the theme houses spawned from the initial Campus Climate

Advisory Committee's first-rate work at Trinity several years ago.<sup>20</sup> When the International House last academic year sponsored a dance presentation in Austin, every seat was taken. When the Mill announces some event or the other, students attend *en masse*. What the theme houses, together with other common spaces on campus such as our Chapel or the Zachs Hillel House, have provided is an alternative to the prevailing fraternity culture on Vernon Street.

Before the global economic crisis of 2008, we had in place a well-designed plan to renovate the basement of Mather Hall in order to install a pub there similar to what is found on other campuses. In the bluntest of terms, the unique aspect to Trinity's location is that there is no off-campus environment accessible to our students. There is no Corner as at the University of Virginia, no Square as at Harvard, no set of bookstores, music stores, coffee shops, bars, or even restaurants (save for the Trinity Restaurant on Zion Street, now very popular with faculty, staff, and students and almost entirely dependent upon the College for its clientele) within walking distance of campus; in short there is nowhere for our students to walk to, and what none of us would ever wish is for our students to get in their cars to drive off campus to bars or restaurants and then to drive back inebriated. I continue to submit that the pub initiative in Mather, one that received significant enthusiasm from the Student Government Association at the time, would be a significant improvement over the social status quo as it now exists.

With the exception of our theme houses and those rare physical sites on campus such as the Chapel or the Zachs Hillel House, there is no alternative to the prevailing fraternity-sorority culture at Trinity. The problem is, at root, simply arithmetic. Students need social venues. Trinity has far too few on campus, and the surrounding neighborhood has none but the Trinity Restaurant. Thus the only real social outlet is to be found in the fraternity-sorority scene. I suggest that a really first-rate pub in the basement of Mather Hall would be a significant step in offering our students an alternative to the prevailing culture that is today all but completely grounded on Vernon Street, starting each week on Thursday evening. What if Trinity were to have a well-done pub, along the lines of the considerably improved Mather Hall dining facility we renovated six summers ago, that would be an

---

<sup>20</sup> I shall always be grateful to trustee Cornie Thornburgh and her husband Dick for the funds that allowed Trinity, despite what happened to our endowment occasioned by the global financial crisis after July of 2008, to open the four theme houses on campus.

inviting place for students, faculty, and staff to gather? Is it too far-fetched to think of conversations like those in the *School of Athens* taking place at Trinity outside the classroom, laboratory, and faculty office? Over a beer or a glass of wine and some popcorn or simple snacks in the basement of Mather?

The social ethos at Trinity has changed more than some of my readers might assume. The Fred in Summit is but another example to add to the theme houses. Students wish to live in two different places most commonly: in Jarvis and in The Fred. Both places are social venues of a different sort. The Fred is highly sought after and sponsors social gatherings different from the prevailing norms of Vernon Street. In our facilities planning for Crescent Street, might we think deeply about extensions of The Fred as further alternatives to the prevailing student culture on Vernon Street?

And now to dare to tread upon the thinnest of ice.

What would happen if, by Trinity's two-hundredth birthday, the remaining fraternities and sororities were transformed into additional theme houses, governed by students, faculty, and staff constituting theme house councils?<sup>21</sup> Only three NESCAC schools still allow fraternities and sororities in the traditional sense on campus: Tufts, Wesleyan, and Trinity, and Trinity has today only a fraction of the number of fraternities it once had before co-education.

Perhaps too ironically, given the questionable reputation of fraternities on American campuses today, the first fraternity in this country was founded in 1776 at William and Mary as Phi Beta Kappa, for over two centuries now the most prestigious of all awards given to deserving undergraduates for their intellectual prowess. Fraternities then took on more cultural importance on college campuses in this country as sites to enable students to eat. There were few common dining areas on college and university campuses in the early half of the nineteenth century, and Trinity was no exception. Students always belong to the larger and more amorphous entity of a college or a university by belonging to one or more constitutive parts: an academic major, a religious organization such as Hillel or the Newman Club, an ath-

---

<sup>21</sup> Given my desire to be as transparent as possible in this exercise, I should state here that, much to my family's surprise and undoubtedly chagrin on the part of the older generation, I did not accept a bid from what is one of the oldest and supposedly most prestigious fraternities at the largely fraternity-oriented University of Virginia. I did not accept the bid for purely personal reasons. One of my best friends in college was an African American from Massachusetts who did not feel particularly welcome at that fraternity, and so my other friends and I decided that we did not wish to belong ourselves. Jan and I have three children: and all three went Greek in college, two of whom (both sons) were elected presidents of their respective fraternities.

letic team, a musical association such as the Chapel Singers, a social group such as a sorority or a fraternity. However, fraternities and sororities are the only anti-meritocratic entity that may today exist on those college campuses where they still are allowed (the list of peer schools that closed fraternities and sororities, largely starting with co-education in the late 1960s and early 1970s, is a long and distinguished one indeed). I was flummoxed, not long after we had first arrived at Trinity, when I was asked by a very distinguished presidential colleague if Trinity still had a fraternity whereby one had to present one's parents' financials for approval in order even to be considered for acceptance. William Bowen, former president at Princeton after a long and very distinguished career as an academic and more recently president of the Mellon Foundation, has written some of the most seminal works in the last three decades on American higher education, and all of them are centered in the main around one truth he continues to expound at every turn: that schools in our time must, at root, be meritocratic sites—centered not upon a student's family background or the size of one's parental monthly allowance but rather upon one's personal merit, whether represented in the classroom or the laboratory, the athletic field, or the musical stage.

If schools should be based primarily upon merit and individual value, then social entities based upon economic privilege or physical appearance or gender or prep school affiliation or whatever anti-meritocratic basis one might envision should not be permitted on campus. If only I had Harry Potter's wand, I would wave it over Vernon Street and change all the fraternities and sororities into theme houses, with their themes chosen by the students and with their governance structures based on the above-mentioned model.

And I would allow all our theme houses to serve alcohol, under College-controlled regulations and adhering to the laws with all due care. The theme houses would have temporal lives. Like the list of books chosen by the proposed faculty committee for *Understandings In Common*, the theme houses would have reviews in order to get their charter (I use the word deliberately) periodically renewed by the Office of Campus Life. I would hope that the proposed governance structure would allow far more participation in the theme houses by members of the faculty and staff (similarly to what now occurs at the Mill). The value of self-governance of the theme houses would be intrinsic. Given enough time, serving on a governing council might be the equivalent of being elected captain of an athletic team or being chosen as the leader of one of Trinity's many *a cappella* groups, or being elected to the

Student Government Association, or landing a housing slot for The Fred: something of individual merit, understood by the members of the student body, a radical change in the prevailing student culture from what it was before the theme houses were unveiled at Trinity in 2008. Instead of an associate dean of students being assigned responsibility for our fraternities and sororities, an associate dean would be assigned to our theme houses.

Given the transparency I have tried to inculcate throughout this document, I should signal here that I do not believe that simply changing the present fraternity-sorority scene on Vernon Street will magically somehow rid Trinity of any last vestiges of social prejudice on the part of the entire student body as some members of our community apparently assume. Were that the case, the more recent histories of those many institutions that closed fraternities in the last several decades would so demonstrate, and to my knowledge that has not been in the case. When students purposefully hurt others, by physical or non-physical means, our judicial system has correctly responded in every case since I have been president at Trinity. But we must not lose our perspective: students may well bring prejudices with them from whatever their own personal backgrounds may be. Our primordial task should ideally be to provide our students four years in their early adult lives in which prejudice, when it appears, is appropriately countered because our community's expectations of each member's value and merit do not allow prejudiced behavior to go unchallenged and where necessary unpunished. What changing the current social ethos by transforming the fraternities and sororities into theme houses would accomplish at the end of the day would be to remove from Trinity's DNA the last remaining vestige of an anti-meritocratic structure on campus.

But it may well be that I am directionally off the mark. What would have to be carefully examined by the board's Institutional Planning Committee is whether or not transforming the fraternities and sororities into Trinity-specific theme houses is viable financially. I for one do not know if our serious dependence upon tuition dollars would allow such a change, and expert advice would have to be sought from those schools that have altered their fraternity involvements in the last several years (*e.g.* Colby, and most recently the changes wrought at Colgate) to see what impact a change in the fraternity-sorority status quo at Trinity might have both upon development and upon admissions.

What I do believe steadfastly is that we should not even entertain any

discussion whatsoever about transforming the fraternities and sororities into theme houses until we have successfully completed the Cornerstone Campaign on June 30, 2012. To try to address this possibility until the present campaign is concluded would result only in undue controversy. But I must also state clearly that it might be possible to transform the fraternities and sororities into theme houses before the end of my presidency on June 30, 2015, to allow my successor the freedom to begin his or her tenure without the considerable burden of such a potentially controversial decision on the part of the board.

That being said, however, and the however is writ large, I contend just as steadfastly that true systemic change at Trinity could occur only if both the academic and social helices were transformed in the next several years before our two-hundredth birthday.

That a campus ethos can change may be seen in ways great and small. When Scott Reynolds (Trinity '63, former trustee, Secretary of the College Emeritus, and honorary degree recipient in 2011) and I would walk down the Long Walk each noon to have lunch with the students in 2004, he and I would speak to every student we encountered, which came as a sudden surprise, especially to those students who had assumed the new physical posture of iPod plug in one ear, Jawbone in the other, with both thumbs simultaneously texting. At first, our speaking to each student we encountered on the Long Walk struck our students as strange if not downright bizarre. Today, seven years later, when walking to Mather with my Williams Memorial colleagues for lunch, we often get greeted by students even before we say hello. What this hearkens to is the "speaking tradition" as one has long found it at Washington and Lee and the corresponding "passing hello" tradition at Sewanee, historically recognized as two of the friendliest campuses in the U.S. And inculcating a "speaking tradition" or a "passing hello" tradition at Trinity requires nothing but the tiniest of individual efforts. I have often dreamt of a "speaking tradition" at Trinity, at least along our Long Walk, and since this white paper is about dreams, my own at least, I assume I might be allowed expressing this as well.

One place where we might be able to watch an ethos change in the community is in the student body's respect for the Quad itself. When I was an undergraduate another lifetime ago at the University of Virginia, we had one of the worst reputations for our party scene (along with Dartmouth) of any campus on the East Coast, but it never occurred to any of us to trash the

Lawn, designed by Thomas Jefferson and considered to be one of the most beautiful open spaces in Western civilization. The Lawn was too sacrosanct. One could not even find cigarette butts (and everyone smoked in those mercifully bygone days) on the Lawn.

Trinity's Quad is majestic and should be respected by every member of the student body in the same vein. What William Burges did by designing the Long Walk buildings (he never crossed the Atlantic Ocean from England to see the fruits of his labors) is one of Trinity's most wonderful stories. The Quad is second to none, in my opinion, and is the most perfect academic open space I know in the entire country that might compete with the Lawn at UVa. Several years back, we hosted a large gathering during Senior Week on the Quad. I watched from my office in Williams Memorial Hall as the afternoon ribaldry played out, observing with more than a little dismay as the trash and beer cans mounted all over. I telephoned for ten or so large plastic trash cans with double liners. The B&G staff that brought the cans to Williams Memorial asked me what I was going to do. I told them to watch. As is always the case when students gather, the groupings are largely anthropological in nature: the squash players are here, the soccer players there, musicians one place, The Fred's constituency another, etc. I went over to the soccer players since they know I am admittedly prejudiced in favor of their sport. I dragged one of the large cans with me. They asked me what I wanted them to do, and I told them that they should respect that our Quad was one of the most beautiful settings of any school in the country and that I thought they might want to help demonstrate by their own example how the students should feel about that space. I left the trash can and walked away without saying anything else. I continued dragging the large trash containers from one group to the next until I saw the other groups gravitate to where the astonished B&G staff were guarding the few remaining unused cans. In no more than fifteen minutes, the Quad was void of trash and beer cans on the ground.

Small things can make a difference, and the total of the small and large things constitute the DNA of a school.

Everything changes except the need for change.

**With a Nod to Sterne, Diderot, and Pirandello:  
A Conclusion in Which Little Is Perhaps Concluded**

Timorously accepting this assignment from the faculty planning committee months ago has caused me to spend the summer of 2011 reflecting deeply upon my long career in higher education, forcing me to think back upon all those individuals, programs, readings, and schools that have informed my own feelings about the ideal essence of the academy in both theoretical and real terms. I shall here confess that this has been among the most perplexing tasks of my adult life, of a kin with attempting to write the *Odysseus* paper on my childhood<sup>22</sup> and my third book that dealt with Rousseau's bewildering *Dialogues* (Droz, 1991), before this assignment the two most difficult compositional tasks I have ever undertaken. And I want to acknowledge the help I have received from Drew Sanborn and Rita Law of our Communications Office, Alice Tucker, my talented executive assistant, as well as the generous assistance I have received from those many colleagues and friends on campus and off who have read the various drafts. Of special mention here would perforce be William Marimow (Trinity,'69, trustee, winner of two Pulitzer prizes, and one of the best editors in the business in his generation). Whether or not I have succeeded to any extent remains now to be seen in the discussions and debates that will ensue from this white paper.

I must here too confess a sense of profound urgency, one that has grown consistently along with the numerous drafts and revisions of this paper as the summer months have so swiftly disappeared. And I am confident that part of my own sense of such profound urgency is driven by the fact that my stewardship of the presidency here will conclude on June 30, 2015, and that historically, schools most often change at glacial paces. The speed of transformation around what happened at Washington University, Duke, Emory, and those liberal arts colleges like Kalamazoo and Bard is not the norm across the landscape of American higher education: some combination of singular attributes has to occur to allow transformations such as those I have endeavored to articulate in this white paper. But I would suggest to all the College's constituencies that time to insure Trinity's future may well be fleeting and that concerted action is required in the next two or three years

---

<sup>22</sup> "Searching Still for Odysseus," *The Kenyon Review* (2008, Vol. XXX, No. 1) pp. 163-177.

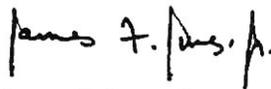
if we are going to protect this noble place for future generations of faculty, staff, and students. Trinity has in the main a noteworthy past, one that has provided a transformative experience for thousands of students who have strolled through four years of their early adulthood along the Long Walk. But systemic change to insure Trinity's future will never occur unless we have the corporate will to make changes, some small, others perhaps more radical. Our two-hundredth birthday is but twelve years away, which is only the day or so after tomorrow in institutionally historical terms. Our challenges are many as we imagine what Trinity's ideal DNA might encompass by 2023: liberal arts colleges are today having to confront serious competition for talented students, too small an endowment, the never-ending pursuit of academic excellence, the intricate interstices between the intellectual helix and the social, a rapidly changing prospective pool, and all the rest. But the essentials are here: we have dedicated faculty and staff, a loyal alumni body all over the world, generous benefactors, an aesthetically beautiful campus, and most especially students who are ours for only four brief years.

One of my most cherished mentors, the late Marilyn LaPlante, a beloved dean of students and then one of our vice presidents at Kalamazoo, was always wont to say that we had no choice but to take our students where we found them on their first day on campus, remembering each fall that if those same students were not forever transformed in the four brief years during which time they were ours to be molded into responsible adults, we had no one to blame but ourselves.

I have never once lost Marilyn's salient wisdom about the true essence of a school, for her words ring in my heart, mind, and soul every day on Trinity's campus.

In order to do the best we possibly can for the students—*our students*—and to insure Trinity's future for the next century, everything *must* change except the need for change.

Respectfully submitted,



James F. Jones, Jr.

President and Trinity College

Professor in the Humanities



# Trinity College

HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

300 Summit Street  
Hartford, CT 06106-3100  
(860) 297-2000, [www.trincoll.edu](http://www.trincoll.edu)