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A View from Melrose

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Learning civil discourse

I recently returned from Washington, D.C., where I met with Oregon’s two senators and an enthusiastic group of Linfield alumni. During my visit, the Florida Republican Primary was concluded, President Obama gave two notable speeches and political fervor was at a high pitch. We have entered the year of the presidential campaign and the rhetoric is already hot.

I was struck by the contrast between the speculation and debate of the political pundits and the conversations I had with our alumni. It’s often observed that Washington, D.C. is truly a national city because so many of its citizens have come from other places to work in government or non-governmental organizations. I saw more than 20 Linfield alumni who are working for U.S. Senators, employed by the State Department, conducting research, leading businesses or attending graduate school. Thanks to the influence and effort of Senator Ron Wyden and Linfield Trustee Phil Bond ’78, we held our reception in the historic U.S. Senate Finance Committee Hearing Room. Thus we were at the center of America’s political system at a time of hyperbolic, dramatic political debate. And although our alumni had Linfield in common, I know that there were both Democrats and Republicans in the room.

We didn’t discuss politics very much. But if we had, I am convinced that it would have been a civil conversation. Linfield students receive a liberal education – that is, an education in the liberal arts. Our mission is to teach people to think for themselves, to analyze evidence and conduct thoughtful discussion, to consider what they believe is best for our country and what is true. Based on my conversations with alumni in the nation’s capital, and the positions they hold, I am convinced that we are succeeding with Linfield’s graduates.

But I wonder if there is a correlation between the growing incivility in society, and the decline in liberal arts education in America. Colleges like Linfield no longer enroll the majority of America’s students – we don’t even come close. And thus the lessons that come from community-building, rational analysis, reasoned debate, and the pursuit of truth are no longer at the center of the education of many of our citizens. There aren’t enough Linfield graduates to go around.

As we face a new election and consider our nation’s future, I hope we can remember the lessons of a liberal arts education and insist that all candidates rise to the same level of humanity and citizenship that we see in Linfield alumni and students. At a time when we face so many external challenges, we must strengthen our ties and remember our commitment to our civil society and its freedoms.

At Linfield College, we are engaged in a year-long strategic planning effort. While new priorities and initiatives have not yet been finalized, I am confident that they will include a redoubling of our efforts to graduate effective citizens and uphold the fundamental values of our society and our nation. 🍷

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– Thomas L. Hellie
President