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A View from Melrose

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Making a case for the liberal arts

(Editor's Note: President Vivian A. Bull delivered the fall Convocation address Sept. 1 to mark the formal opening of the 2004-05 academic year. The following are excerpts from her remarks, "A Case for the Liberal Arts.")



President Vivian A. Bull greets parents at a reception in the Oak Grove during orientation activities.

You have heard me often say, a liberal arts education is the best preparation for a lifetime of learning and serving. But how do we define the liberal arts?

The Association of American Colleges and Universities defines and describes a liberal education: "A philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility." A liberal arts education provides students the opportunity to explore important issues and is more a way of studying than a specific content. A liberal arts college, such as Linfield, can be defined as a particular type of college, often small, often residential, that facilitates interaction between faculty and students. Its curriculum, like Linfield's, is grounded in the liberal arts disciplines – the humanities, the social sciences and the sciences.

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As a student in search of a liberal education, you will learn an appreciation for complexity. You will be able to see issues and approach problems through your work in many disciplines. Breadth in one's education leads to breadth in one's perspective.

As a student in search of a liberal education, you will appreciate the importance of effective communication. This institution, this community, this world require better understanding and new systems of communication. There is a crucial role for expression in the development of humankind. That is clear in the humanities, but also in the history and understanding of math and the sciences. Liberal arts students love ideas, and the goal is to communicate those clearly.

As a student in search of a liberal education, you will learn to appreciate the question, "why?" Small children ask that endlessly and the learning goes on. At some point we seem to accept what we hear or read on the Web, or pick up on the Fox channel, without asking, "why?" or, "is that the truth?" We have extraordinary access to information, but we must continually test the accuracy and relevance of what we learn.

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I urge you to take full advantage of all the opportunities that are available. Beyond exciting classes, go to plays, attend great lectures, participate in the arts, do forensics, take an art course and attend the gallery openings, participate in and attend our varied and very fine music programs, be in a sport – intramural or varsity – keep physically and mentally fit. Travel into new parts of this country and in the world. Become involved in one or more of the many student clubs and organizations. We urge you to participate as a way of learning and growing. But remember, you are called first to be a student/scholar.

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Let us celebrate and take full advantage of the opportunities which we have both on the campus, in the community and around the world.

Let us develop habits of the mind and habits of the heart, and let the waves and ripples of this Linfield community extend far and wide.

Let us find joy in what we do, wherever we may be, and let us celebrate the liberal arts tradition at Linfield: connecting learning, life and community.