2012 CONVOCATION:

**The University and the City**

Thank you Father Von Arx, very much. This afternoon I'd like to extend a special welcome to the Fairfield class of 2016—a welcome not just to our University, but to the longstanding tradition of liberal arts education of which we are a part. As a Jesuit liberal arts institution, Fairfield challenges us not just to study a variety of academic disciplines, but to seek connections between these fields of study, and to solve problems by drawing on a variety of intellectual methods. In the 1850’s, the theologian John Henry Cardinal Newman described the ideal University as a place where “all branches of knowledge are . . . not isolated and independent of one another, but form together a whole system;” (221). This is fine as an abstract idea, but it becomes more relevant when we fill in the surprisingly contemporary social context within which it arose, and also when we consider a practical example of how it works in the here and now.

As for the social context, one of the reasons that Newman wrote his book *The Idea of a University* was to defend the study of the classical languages, literature, art, and philosophy at Oxford and Cambridge against the charge that these were no longer useful subjects of study in the industrial society of Victorian England. The men making this argument edited an influential magazine called *Edinburgh Review*, which had a very Utilitarian bias (Avery 1). Utilitarianism held that the moral correctness of any given action depended on whether it brought good or bad consequences for the greater number of people. Sounds okay on paper, but it became a dogma by which the ends justify the means, in which the “good” was only defined in aggregate, impersonal terms, and in which being “good” became equivalent to being “useful,” as
defined by the social majority. So Newman was fighting against this. He argued that a university education was not just a means to an end, but a way to cultivate each individual’s intellect “for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper object, and for its own highest culture” (171; my ital). In other words, he saw college as a place in which we are liberated to challenge status quo ideas and discover the ideas that truly captivate us, and he felt that this discovery was “good” for its own sake. It certainly prepares us to make important contributions to society, but more importantly, it ensures that the capacity of our minds will always exceed the limits of our occupation.

The multi-disciplinary nature of the liberal arts university is also about the power of collaboration. It’s about an academic community that comes together to share knowledge, exchange viewpoints, and pool its different areas of expertise to address issues of common concern. After all, many of the world’s most pressing problems, and many of its most intriguing subjects, can only be understood by combining different fields of study. For the next two years, our university community will be pooling our collective knowledge and experience to examine a perfect example of such a subject: the City.

The city is one of the most important phenomena in human history, yet no single academic discipline can tell us what it is. As Economists and students of Business well know, the city is a testament to the human proclivity for commerce, a manifestation of our inclination to form markets and pursue wealth. For political scientists, sociologists and philosophers, the city springs from the radical conundrums of the social contract: whether the human collective is formed by altruistic nature or competitive need; what legitimates political sovereignty; how to include without exclusion. Evolutionary biologists and Ecologists have meanwhile noted that
humans in cities, as they move along busy commuter routes in and out of the urban center, behave in ways remarkably similar to certain species of ants. This is a compelling irony, for the towering structures that we see as evidence of our greatest progress thus also reveal how close we are to our animal cohabitants, how deeply embedded we are in the laws of nature. Last year in Edinburgh, the Physicist Geoffrey West announced his group’s finding that Cities do in fact develop and function like biological organisms, and according to specific mathematical equations. This finding in many ways proves Architect Joseph Rykwert’s claim that “the [structural] fabric [of a city] is a tangible representation of that intangible thing, the society that lives in it” (6).

Philologists and Classicists might encourage us to begin with the etymology of the word “City,” for it derives from the Latin “civitas,” which originally referred not to a place or territory, but a “body of citizens, [a] community” (OED). Indeed, from the ancient city of Ur, in the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia, to the city-states of Greece and the walled cities of the early Empires, to the massive metropolitan centers of today, to call a place a “City” has been to speak of it as a living thing, a dynamic embodiment of the abstract concepts of civilization and citizenship. But just as Cities symbolize our capacity to engineer productive civil societies and socio-economic collectives, so too do they illustrate our capacity to exclude, exploit, and isolate. The irony that urban locations, while bringing large numbers of people in close contact, can also alienate the individual from society and expose the massive economic imbalances between classes has long been one of the central themes in literary works about the city. As Albert Camus wrote in his Notebooks in 1940, “As a remedy to life in society I would suggest the big city. Nowadays, it is the only desert within our means.”
For better and for worse, one thing is certain: as of this century, the human population has become predominantly urban. For the first time, over 50% of people on the planet live in cities, and trends indicate that this will rise to 75% within the next half century. The great majority of college graduates will follow this trend, earning their first job in a city. And to think about the city today we must, quite realistically, think globally, for most of the largest and fastest growing metropolitan regions are no longer in Europe and North America but in Asia, Latin America, and outer Africa: cities such as Shanghai and Beijing [in China], Sao Paulo [in Brazil], Mumbai and Karachi [in India and Pakistan], Jakarta [in Indonesia], Istanbul [in Turkey], and Cairo and Lagos [in Egypt and Nigeria]. To understand the promises and problems of urban life globally, we must look to these metropolitan centers as well as those closer to home. In too many cases, what some call development, as they point to shimmering new skylines, is at close range an alarming example of multinational wealth suddenly superimposed on underdevelopment—a reminder of what international law scholar Richard Falk calls the stark difference between “globalization from above and globalization from below” (17).

Given these challenges, it is important to remember that for as long as there have been cities, there has also been the question of how to build better ones. Engineers and Architects know this by heart. Today, the question of how to imagine and engineer better cities is being answered through a variety of innovative professions, projects, and collaborations. And here’s the rub: all of these new solutions are the product of inter-disciplinary thinking, the result of people drawing upon different fields of study. For example, this years’ winner of the “Technology, Entertainment and Design” [TED] award, a project called “Cities 2.0,” highlights revolutionary ideas by health professionals, musicians, scientists, business entrepreneurs, and educators that each show how changes in one aspect of urban life can create huge ripple effects
throughout its other dimensions. In Columbia and Caracas, collaborations between engineers, geologists, artists, and architects are turning conventional wisdom on its ear by introducing high quality transportation systems and public spaces into the poorest neighborhoods, resulting in lower crime, better public health, and more vibrant commerce across the entire metropolitan area. A recent United Nations exhibit demonstrated that, in cities around the world, collaborative projects like these are dismantling the old Utilitarian assumption that truly innovative civic spaces and structures can only be the byproduct, rather than the precondition, of human progress. Here at Fairfield, the program in Peace and Justice Studies has brought together Political Scientists, philosophers, historians, theologians and sociologists to help communities in New Orleans reinvent key public programs and institutions in the wake of hurricane Katrina. So in conclusion, it seems abundantly clear that the proverbial “key to the city,” and to our global future, lies in exactly what a liberal arts University aims to promote: a broadening of the mind, and a meeting of the minds.

Works Cited:


Urban Transformation Projects Referred to above:


  “a platform to allow citizens anywhere to participate in the creation of their City 2.0. The platform will excite, connect and empower individuals and communities around the world through editorial content (video and text), a shareable project database, tools for local connection, and resources for executing ideas.”

- UN Exhibit of the “Design with the other 90%: Cities” Project: [http://www.designother90.org/cities/home](http://www.designother90.org/cities/home)
  “features sixty projects, proposals, and solutions that address the complex issues arising from the unprecedented rise of informal settlements in emerging and developing economies. . . . the exhibition shines the spotlight on communities, designers, architects, and private, civic, and public organizations that are working together to formulate innovative approaches to urban planning, affordable housing, entrepreneurship, nonformal education, public health, and more.”

Other national cities projects that inspired these remarks:


  “The Atlantic Cities explores the most innovative ideas and pressing issues facing today’s global cities and neighborhoods. By bringing together news, analysis, data, and trends, the site is an engaging destination for an increasingly urbanized world.”

  “Urbanized is a feature-length documentary about the design of cities, which looks at the issues and strategies behind urban design and features some of the world’s foremost architects, planners, policymakers, builders, and thinkers”