HIGHER EDUCATION SINCE 2008
Changes and Challenges
A Speech by Robert Stacey
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I want to thank John Hancock for inviting me to speak to you here today. Thanks also to Dave and Mari Clack and Lynn and Eddie Mills for hosting me here in Spokane and all of you for your kindness in listening to a Husky speak in Cougar country. It is a pleasure to be here.

It is always thought provoking, though sometimes mortifying, to consider what 18-year-old college freshmen do not know because they have never experienced it. For example, this year’s entering freshmen, born in 1998, have never known a time when the United States was not at war. India and Pakistan have always been nuclear powers and Princess Diana Spencer has always been dead—although, on a happier note, they also have no memory of Senator Robert Dole advertising Viagra on television. For this year’s entering freshmen, snowboarding has always been an Olympic sport; Magic Johnson, John Elway, and Wayne Gretzky have always been retired; continental Europe has always had a common currency, the Euro; and the German mark and the French franc are, for them, just as outdated as were the Confederate dollars my Texas in-laws played with as children. For this year’s freshmen, computers have always been portable and wireless; Google has always been a verb; email has always been a means of communication employed by parents (the kids text, or use Snapchat or Instagram or Twitter); and they have never, ever, licked a postage stamp, because postage stamps have always come pre-glued.¹

Now, I am not the first ageing university administrator to observe that our students get younger every year, and I suspect that I shall not be the last. But my concern this morning is different. I’m not so much interested in how young they are as I am in how different our students are today from the students who entered college only a decade ago. I think there has been a sea change in their interests, their attitudes, and their outlook on the world since 2008. These changes pose challenges for colleges of arts and sciences such as my own but they also raise questions that should concern all of us, whether or not we work in higher education. These changes and challenges are what I want to consider with you today.

2008, of course, was the year that the Great Recession began, and from which many of our fellow citizens are still struggling to recover. More than any other single event, the economic collapse of that year has induced in this generation of college students a sense of the fragility of their economic

prospects, coupled with an abiding fear of unemployment. Whether such fears are justified is a different question, one that I will take up in a few minutes. But their fear is real, and it influences everything from their choice of college major, to the courses they take in college, to the time it takes them to complete their degree. In a recent poll—admittedly unscientific—done by some University of Washington students, two-thirds of the UW students they surveyed listed fear as the most important consideration driving their decisions about what to study in college.

The Great Recession is not the only thing this generation of students is fearful about. They are also frightened by debt. As state support for public higher education has shrunk, tuition at public colleges and universities has risen; and as tuition has risen, so too have levels of student debt. Nationwide, about half of all college students now graduate with at least some debt and those debts now average more than $25,000 per indebted student. In the state of Washington, our levels of student indebtedness are lower than the national average, in part because tuition at our state colleges and universities is significantly lower than the national average relative to median family earnings. We rank high, in other words, on the “affordability scale” for public higher education. But for those students who do have to borrow, this is only modest comfort. Interest rates on student loans are high and unlike most other types of debt, student-loan debts cannot be wiped out by declaring bankruptcy.

Non-economic factors also feed our students’ fears. This year’s entering freshmen were only three years old when the twin towers were brought down in New York City by terrorists, with the loss of 3,000 lives. As a result of that attack, students born in 1998 have no memory of a time when the United States was not at war in Afghanistan and Iraq, or of a time when there were not security lines at airports. In fact, since 2001, more American civilians have been struck and killed by lightening than have died in terrorist incidents around the world. But the fear of terrorism is real, and as is often the case with the things we fear, our fear seems to be impervious to, or at least incommensurate with, the actual scale of the threat.


This is also the most tested, prodded, and judged generation in the history of American education. Students entering college in 2016 have spent their entire lives in schools whose curricula have been dictated by the standardized, high-stakes examinations mandated by “No Child Left Behind.” Despite all the talk from educational reformers about the greater importance of analytical skills over the memorization of data in the age of the Internet, we have built an entire testing regimen in the K-12 educational system that is based upon the memorization and recall of discrete pieces of factual information that are largely unconnected to any larger arguments or debates. Should we be surprised, then, that this generation of students, fearful already about their future, is so relentlessly focused on knowing the right answer to a question rather than on the real goal of education, which is (or at least ought to be) learning how to determine the right questions to ask?

This focus on acquiring discrete pieces of information to answer a pre-determined question has been further encouraged by the extraordinary development of search engines such as Google and Bing. The class of 2020 is the first generation in human history to have grown up with easy and immediate access to the vast quantities of information accessible on the Internet. They are not the first generation to despair that the sum total of human knowledge is too large to be mastered by any single human being, but they are the first for whom the search and retrieval systems for this information are so efficient, and the scale of the data to be retrieved is so enormous, that serious people now argue that the critical task for education is no longer to transmit information from teacher to student but instead to teach students how to process, evaluate, and analyze the information to which we all have instant access on our cell phones.

There is no doubt that this capacity to search instantaneously across the Internet for bits of disconnected information is both powerful and pleasurable. But too often, this information comes to us completely detached from any larger context. And we are starting to see the consequences of this in the habits of mind that our students are bringing with them to college. One example is that our students are increasingly reluctant to read anything lengthy. TLDR is now a well-known abbreviation in the Internet world; it means “too long, didn’t read.” This is not laziness. It is something more disturbing. It reflects, I believe, an increasing inability on the part of our students to wrestle with any type of long-form argument in prose. Many of our students are so accustomed to reading simply as a way to find nuggets
of information that they are losing any awareness of the larger intellectual and argumentative context that make such nuggets meaningful. And this, it seems to me, will have serious consequences for our lives as citizens of a democratic republic.

In the 19th century, audiences regularly listened to two—and three—hour speeches by political candidates. When Abraham Lincoln debated Stephen Douglas, the debates went on for hours at a time with no moderator needed to ask questions of the candidates. Now we have political candidates advancing their policy prescriptions on Twitter. Even a magazine article is too long for many students to understand, and college students are shocked when their professors tell them that yes, they really are expected to read the *entire* book. Many of our students now come to the University of Washington never having read a serious book from cover to cover in their lives. I don’t know how many graduate in the same position—but undoubtedly there are some, and there may be quite a few.

Changes of this sort should concern us. The disassociation between facts and the larger contexts that give facts meaning; the unwillingness or inability to engage with long-form prose, whether spoken or written; and the cautious conformity, born out of fear, that characterizes so many of the students who have entered college since 2008 and who have succeeded in our test-driven K-12 educational system by never taking an intellectual or a personal risk—these are not the qualities that employers are looking for. Nor are they the qualities we should wish to cultivate in the future citizens of a democratic republic. But they are the qualities that a great many of our students are bringing with them to college. And it is proving very difficult to change the habits of a lifetime in four short years of university education.

We are also seeing a dramatic shift in the courses of study students are choosing to pursue in our nation’s colleges and universities. These trends too should cause us concern. In a nutshell, students are surging into science, technology, engineering, and business classes, while fleeing from classes in history, literature, international relations, and foreign languages. At the University of Washington, enrollments in history classes have dropped by 40 percent since 2008, and the number of history majors has been cut in half. Similar declines are apparent in many other social science and humanities
departments also, not just at UW but around the country. In the natural sciences, by contrast, enrollments at UW since 2008 have risen 20 percent. As a result, we now have among the largest undergraduate programs in the country in chemistry, physics, biology, and mathematics and are having a hard time keeping up with student demand for these subjects. Student demand for engineering, business, and computer science has also grown exponentially since 2008, with no sign of a slowdown, resulting in intense competition for the available slots in all these programs.

Why are these striking shifts in students’ courses of study occurring? Both “push” and “pull” factors are involved. There is no doubt that the world in which our students have grown up has been transformed in fundamental ways by science and technology. It is perfectly understandable that many students would want to be a part of such exciting fields of study. Similarly, business leaders like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates are heroes to many of our students. It is not surprising that students would hope to emulate their success by majoring in business—even though neither Jobs nor Gates ever took a single business course in their university careers.

But notwithstanding the undeniable appeal of careers in science, technology, engineering, and business, it seems clear that the major factor “pushing” this surge of students into the so-called STEM fields is economic. Students and their parents are convinced that, after 2008, unless today’s college students major in a STEM field, they will never find a job. We’ve all heard the claims: that employers aren’t interested in history or philosophy or English majors; that jobs in STEM fields are going begging; that arts, humanities, and social science classes teach no skills that matter on the job market; and that graduates from such departments will not only have a difficult time finding their first job, but will also earn less over the course of their careers than will business, engineering, or natural science majors. And so students are not just majoring in science and business; many of them are actively avoiding even taking classes in non-STEM areas, because they believe that such courses are of no value to them.

But before we climb onto this bandwagon and consign a broad and deep arts and sciences education to the ashcan of history, we should ask an important question: are these claims about the irrelevance and unemployability of non-STEM majors true?
There is mounting evidence to suggest that they are not. A recent study from the Economic Policy Institute casts serious doubt on claims that America has now, or will face in the future, a national shortage of STEM graduates. Even in computer science, only half of those who earn CS degrees will wind up working in computing. And for natural science students, only a quarter will work in a job that actually requires a degree in their undergraduate field of study—the exact same percentage as for humanities and social science students. Nor is it the case that there are no jobs for arts, humanities, and social science majors. Even in 2011, at the height of the great recession, unemployment rates for humanities and social science majors were essentially identical to those for math and computer science majors (8.4%). That is still true today. Nor is it the case that STEM majors earn substantially more money than do majors in other arts and sciences departments over the course of their lifetimes. STEM majors do tend to have higher starting salaries but for the past 70 years, humanities and social science graduates have, on average, outstripped business and engineering graduates in lifetime earnings and in career satisfaction. And even with respect to starting salaries, it is sobering to remember that back in 2010, the highest starting salaries of all were going to petroleum engineers—just try to find a job as a petroleum engineer today! 


Even in the high-tech sector itself, the tide is starting to turn in favor of humanities and social science graduates, because the software industry is becoming more and more about the sales and marketing of its products than it is about the products themselves. In 2015, both Facebook and Uber had more job openings for sales and business development specialists than they had for software developers and Google’s desire to hire liberal arts graduates is well-known. As a recent story in Forbes, magazine declared, “That ‘Useless’ Liberal Arts Degree has Become Tech’s Hottest Ticket.” Looking forward, the trend is the same. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that by 2022 some 1 million more Americans will enter the workforce as educators. Another 1.1 million newcomers will earn a living in sales. The vast majority will be humanities and social science graduates. By contrast, software engineers’ ranks will grow by less than 300,000, barely 3 percent of overall job growth.

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting that students who are sincerely interested in science and technology should not study those subjects. The world needs science and engineering graduates. But it also needs students who have studied literature and history and sociology and foreign languages, not only because all these areas are intrinsically important, but also because these fields are excellent career preparation for a future that none of us can predict. Today, however, too many of our students are studying business and STEM in college not because they love these subjects, or even because they are good at them, but rather because they are afraid to study anything else. They are afraid of unemployment; they are afraid of parental and peer disapproval; and they are afraid to step out of the lanes that have been laid out for them by the educational system since they were in elementary school, when my daughter learned that “you can tell who the smart kids are, because the smart kids are good at math.”

So how should we respond to all this? I would offer three suggestions by way of conclusion.


11 “That ‘Useless’ Liberal Arts Degree,” as in note 9 above.

12 Ibid.
First, we need to enlarge our vision about the purposes of education. Education is a private good that leads to a better-paying job; but education is also a public good, and should be supported and structured as such. Our founding fathers took for granted that, in a democracy, only an educated citizenry would be able to preserve its liberties. 250 years later, I see no reason to doubt their judgment. As citizens, all of us have a stake in encouraging the next generation to acquire a broad and deep undergraduate education in science, technology, humanities, social sciences, and the arts. This is the sort of undergraduate education that will prepare them best—not only to earn a living in a future that none of us can foresee, but also to become informed and engaged participants in the nation's political and cultural life. And this is the sort of education that a college of arts and sciences provides.

Second, I would make an appeal to employers. Many of you here in this room own or manage businesses and hire employees on a regular basis. I would urge you to think carefully about the qualities your most valuable employees have, and hire young people who seem to you to have those qualities. John Sheppard, Divisional VP at REI, recently worked with a group of UW Arts and Sciences majors on a challenge project. Reflecting on the experience, he said: “I could have paid a consultant $100,000 and while the consultant's presentation might have been more slick, the research would have been the same as what these students did. I know this, because I've hired consultants and paid those fees and got the same results.” Students like these are out there in the labor market—and very often, they are majoring in history or English or art history rather than in business administration or statistics. Make sure you don't exclude them from your hiring pools just because they haven't majored in STEM.

Third and finally, we need to recover our own courage as Americans optimistic about our future and confident that we will overcome the challenges that lie ahead of us. And we need to communicate that courage and that confidence to our children, including our college-age children. In so doing, we might remind ourselves that our parents and grandparents came through a much more devastating economic collapse during the 1930s, and a massively more damaging war in the 1940s, than anything we have seen since 2001. They came through these experiences because they were confident that they could and would survive them.
And they did. And they did not merely survive; they triumphed, and
went on to build a better world and a better country than the ones they had
grown up in. We can do the same. But I am talking, of course, about our
history—and this generation of students has been led to believe that their
history is of no importance to them, because, like all the non-STEM fields,
history won't get them a job. They are wrong. They've been misled. We have
to do better, for their sake and for our own.

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