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Remarks - Fall Faculty Meeting, Sept 30, 2019

I want to start my remarks with a story about the bookmobile. For those of you who haven't heard of them, bookmobiles are government-funded libraries on wheels. They travel from town to town to provide books to those who don't live near public libraries. They are based on the idea that education is a democratic right and should be accessible to all.

I grew up in a town with a bookmobile. I still have really fond memories of it. As far as I knew, everybody loved the bookmobile. Until I went graduate school, and studied history it never occurred to me there was anyone in the United States who didn't think bookmobiles were a good thing. But I was wrong.

In March of 1950, a bill to expand federal funding for the bookmobile and other rural public library services came to The US House of Representatives. In the course of the debate, Illinois Congressman Harold Velde explained to his colleagues the dire consequences that would follow if bookmobiles spread across the nation. As Velde had it:

“Educating Americans through the means of the library service could bring about a change of their political attitude quicker than any other method. The basis of Communism and socialistic influence is education of the people. Perhaps I should not say education – perhaps a more correct word would be propagandizing.”

This was the middle of the Cold War. When Velde said education turned Americans into communists, he meant Soviet sympathizers, disloyal Americans.

Of course there's no factual basis for a connection between bookmobiles and government subversion. But Velde wasn't stupid. He knew what all of us who teach understand: education makes people more likely to question authority. But instead of seeing this as part of one's civic duty, Velde equated criticism of the government with disloyalty.

And Velde wasn't marginal: The bookmobile bill failed & it wasn't passed for another 6 years. And a few years later Velde became chair of HUAC, the high-profile House UnAmerican Activities Committee.

Cold Warriors like Velde crafted a powerful equation between education, propaganda and allegedly leftist and “unAmerican” ideas. This equation has had major effects on Americans' attitudes toward education - esp. liberal arts education. Velde never mentioned the liberal arts, but he didn't have to. Critical thinking has always been synonymous with a classical liberal arts education.

That was why in early 20th century America, white supremacists tolerated and sometimes even funded schools for the “industrial” or vocational education of black youth, but not schools that provided black students with a liberal arts education. Industrial education trained them to be workers. Liberal arts education taught them to think critically and expect to be treated as equals.

After the end of the Cold War, the link between liberal arts education and leftist propaganda continued - now under the name, the "Culture Wars." One of the legacies of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s -70s was that fields like African-American studies and women's studies became academic subjects. For those who complained about "tenured radicals," the mere existence of such fields was evidence of liberal propaganda. More recent criticisms of universities as bastions of "political correctness" that squelch free speech fit into the same pattern.

What I am saying is not new. I bring it up here because I don't think we pay enough attention to how these attitudes shape current conversations about higher education.

The popular conflation of a liberal arts education with leftist propaganda has done massive damage to universities' reputations and their relationships with the public, state legislatures and governing bodies.

It has also laid groundwork for broad attacks on higher education that, on the surface, may not seem political, but they are: the idea that universities don't teach students useful skills, and are not preparing them for the workforce. That is another way of saying a liberal arts education is a waste.

It is in this politically charged environment, that universities across the country now face budget crises and enrollment declines. There is acknowledgement that some of these financial and enrollment problems are external. But there also a widespread narrative that enrollments are declining because Universities are out of touch. They must re-invent themselves to become more relevant to the 21st century students.

That was the message of a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* ominously titled "The Great Enrollment Crash." It stated that students are "inexorably marching away from the traditional liberal arts majors" because those majors don't prepare students for jobs. It warned: if Universities continue to "adhere to traditional low-demand curricula" enrollments will collapse. It quoted Apple's chief exec. Tim Cook, who said: "I don't think a four-year degree is necessary to be proficient in coding. I think that is an old traditional view." The point here was: colleges need to start offering "Short term lower cost credentialing" because that is what students and employers want.

I want to be clear - articles like this address real problems – Enrollment decline is a serious issue. Of course faculty should review and revise curriculum. Universities should make improvements. And individual universities face specific challenges: Here at UNI, I think we all know we need to work on increasing the diversity of our students, faculty and staff.

But the assumptions and the proposed solutions here are rooted in an anti-education, anti-democratic ideology. It blames Universities for focusing too much on old fashioned "traditional" majors - especially the liberal arts. It claims these majors are not useful. They don't prepare students for jobs and jobs are what students and their families want and need.

This ignores the fact that years of negative public messages have taken a heavy toll on such majors. The constant repetition of the claim that they are useless scares students and their families away from those majors, despite student interest.

We know liberal arts majors actually do get good jobs – so why would we believe they are not being prepared for careers? And the criticism of the liberal arts here doesn't just apply to specific majors– it is also about the liberal arts education that is the foundation of all majors, including our pre-professional or professional majors. Teacher education was also singled out as a “traditional” field in decline.

And as this article tells us: employers don't care if their employees have 4 year degrees – a cheaper and shorter credential is just fine. Maybe Tim Cook is right. Maybe coders don't need a four-year degree. But how would the lack of a college degree serve that coder, who may have no skills and knowledge relevant to employment 10 years later? And how does it serve this county and the world if universities narrow their purpose to producing proficient coders and other workers? What about their obligation to prepare students to be citizens of a democratic society?

I know that no one in this room wants to go down the road of pure worker training. I don't even think that's what the author of this *Chronicle* article wants. But if we don't fight back against the idea that the liberal arts are irrelevant and useless; If we don't challenge the notion our primary mission is to prepare the next generation of workers, if we succumb to the pressure to provide quick credentials, we will end up going down that path whether we mean to or not.

So this year, when we evaluate our curriculum and our majors, as we revise the Liberal Arts Core and start having conversations about Academic Positioning, I think we as faculty need to keep some things in mind:

These attacks on higher education have a history that reveals their bias. They originate from a distrust of democratic access to education - even in the form of bookmobiles - not from the bad behavior of American universities.

That is why it is so important to reject the assumptions these attacks have created – that the “liberal arts” are useless; that students from liberal arts programs don't get jobs, and the idea that the *only* thing that matters is jobs.

It's time that we recognize that the foundations of what we have are worth fighting for - they actually work – and that is why they are being attacked. And if we tear these foundations down, we are not going to be able to rebuild them.

References:

Congressman Harold Velde, speaking on HR 874, Public Library Service Demonstration Bill, on March 9, 1950, 81st Congress, 2nd session, *Congressional Record* 96, part 3:3129.

Bill Conley, “The Great Enrollment Crash,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 Sept 2019 at <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190906-Conley>