DAVID UNDERWOOD AWARD LECTURE

"ACCESS, TO A HIGHWAY OF LEARNING"

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INTRODUCTION

Before I begin, I would like to share some comments made since I was so honored that Friday in April, and some of my reactions. I certainly appreciated all of the congratulatory remarks and the helpful hints about what would happen today. Kinds of things that really make you feel good. For instance, someone asked, "Will you be nervous?" I said, "Yes." Joe Rezny offered to applaud, laugh or whatever, if I would cue him in. Someone else asked, "Will you be nervous?" I said, "Yes." Emily Liebman said, "I don't mind getting up in front of a classroom, but in front of all my colleagues, I don't know." Ann Brand said she hoped the lecturn wouldn't fall down as it was prone to do on occasion. Someone else asked, "Will you be nervous?" I decided I had better think about this business of being nervous.

When I was in undergraduate school two or three years ago, three or four years ago, in Public Speaking 101, I remember some advice about nervous feelings. Sometime ago, a person in the Mathematics Department said to me, "I like to hear you talk. I like your voice." I thought about that. I said, "That's the person I'm going to focus on, that's the person I'm going to look at." That person was Sue Morrow. For those of you who don't know, Sue resigned. So much for nervousness.

I was thinking about today one afternoon in the summer, a little bit worried about it. While I was rummaging through some old jewelry, I don't know what I was looking for at the time, and I came across a small medal tag with a chain on it that had a saying that all of you would know. "Suppose they gave a war and nobody came." And I thought, "Suppose I gave a speech and nobody came."

Well, I started to think, "Now who has to be there?" Well, the Committee has to be there, that's four people." Then I remembered that Mike Marty was on leave. Then Gladys Thum called and said she had urgent business in Portland, Maine. Now we're down to two and I thought with the one-hundred degree temperature in St. Louis, I'd go to Portland, too, if I could. Then I knew that some of my counseling friends would be here. Then I threatened a few of my other friends to come, and they did. Then I thought, "Let's see, I'm up to about ten people." I needed to get somebody else. So, who do you call on when you want somebody to show up for you, and nobody else will? Who is that? That's your mother, that's right. So I called and said, "Mom, you better get out here, I might need you." So she came. Hold up your hand, Mom! And of course, I knew Annabelle would be here. Thank you, Annabelle. But I see I didn't have to worry. You're here, you're beautiful, and the campus police are standing at the exits, unofficially, of course.
As I began to think of what I wanted to say to you, so many things rambled through my mind, and I had great difficulty sorting out ideas. I considered doing an investigation on some more recent research in counseling, or discussing demographic changes affecting Florissant Valley. I also had to consider for what things you would be willing to sit still. And so, I began to jot down random thoughts on how I feel about counseling and instruction. As these thoughts began to flow from four or five directions, I discovered that what I was doing was not so much constructing a speech but writing a sermon. Well, I am not a preacher, but if you are willing to indulge me, I promise there will be no collection plate passed.

As some of you know, when I was named for the Underwood Award, I indicated that most of you knew David Underwood as an excellent class room instructor. I believe that Dave could have been an excellent counselor if he had so chosen. He had many attributes I would like to think we as counselors have or have acquired through training. So I feel a special honor in receiving this award because I know David's qualities of humaneness and compassion have served as positive influences in my daily life. David subscribed one-hundred percent to the philosophy of the community college. As we begin the first academic year of a new decade, I wish we could recommit to that philosophy.

When one considers the institutions of higher learning which are selective in admissions and have a raft of applications from which to choose, it must really seem that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. Those institutions perform a great service exclusive to a talented, gifted, favored and capable segment of our population, and their alumni make a name for their colleges or universities.

Our mission is different and distinct, but often with rewards that may be fewer in number but no less gratifying in intensity. We, too, have talented students, but many of our students have not developed well-defined attitudes toward the purposes of education and are in college either because of today's cultural pressures or because they cannot find employment. Many have not given adequate time and attention to long-range educational planning. Many show a lack of realism when they declare their intentions to transfer at a later date. Moreover, many do not have a complete and clear-cut picture of the world of work in today's society. Knowledge of educational requirements for many careers are exceedingly vague, and counselors face an enormous task not only of assisting students in realistic choices but also of helping them achieve a sense of confidence and fulfillment as well.

Oscar Handling said, "The system favors certain character types over others, and not always the most desirable ones. For the young man who knows when he enters that he will be an actuary or a patent attorney, the learning track runs clearly to his destination and all the stations are plainly marked. By contrast, those who come to college without specifically defined goals or who change as they learn, are at a competitive disadvantage. They must make choices along the whole route, and therefore, face the hazard of mistaken decisions. They are prone to
turn into dead ends and need second chances... Their records will look spotty and erratic, yet they may be growing at every stage and may, in the end, be the better for their mistakes than their fellows who never faltered. Society may be the loser by the failure to make room for the recovery of such talents."

The effective counseling program is one that inter-relates the needs and abilities of the individual with the social situation of which the individual is a part. This is no less true for instruction.

I like to think of counseling and instruction as parallels, moving together, complementing each other - each different and yet necessary for the fulfillment of student goals; parallel tracks, if you will, or fences (not barriers), allowing the student to fall sometimes, but being there, allowing the student to break through sometimes, but providing the door for return.

If we are to fulfill our roles as educators, then it is imperative we see the student as a whole individual, not as a mathematician, historian, engineer or any other finished product in the context of our disciplines but as a developing human being on a road whose end we cannot see. Students cannot be taught in a vacuum. Any information which sheds light on a student's value system, his motivational pattern, his career orientation and his personality patterns or degree of influence of family or friends is important. Involvement must be a part of education.

Equality of opportunity is often thought of in terms of hiring for a particular job, or a barrier free facility, or fulfilling a quota designed to conform to a federal or local statute. But opportunity cannot be equal if we think only in terms of physical structures and laws. Consider instead equality of opportunity as an entrance or access to a highway; a highway that is open, not just free of barriers. Open because someone knew the importance of smoothing the way; someone who understood the context or environment surrounding the students before him or her; someone who did more than paint a line down the center to create a defineable lane, but was concerned about the driver, the potholes, the ruts and other obstacles along the way; and someone who took the time to find the proper ingredients for a good mixture to fill those potholes and ruts. In other words, the pavers and the waymakers.

Who are the pavers on this highway to learning? They are you, my friends; you and I, and all who believe in the ideals of open access. We must make the private needs and concerns of our students a dominant thrust.

Students, sometimes, lower their expectations because of limited knowledge of opportunities and lack of confidence or their predisposition to a programmed way of life. It is the counselor's job to expand this horizon, not in isolation, but instead, with you our colleagues, in a joint venture to light the way, as it were, or to encourage strongly, to push a little, to shove along, and if necessary, to pull kicking and screaming into success.

"I do not have time", you say. "It takes time to be a mover, a shaker, a paver." That is true - but you are there. I know about some of you. Your name may not be Jeannette Kimbrough, who, thinking beyond the average criteria for a practicum, placed a disabled student in a health
facility to fulfill his practicum requirement, and at the same time, have the advantage of the proximity of any needed health care for himself. You may not be a John Yoder or Jerry Thompson, who thought it was important for a blind student to learn something about physics. You may not be as fierce as Pat Wedle who stopped just this side of physical violence toward the director of an agency so mired down in bureaucracy he had forgotten the true purpose of his institution. Perhaps you do not have the patience of a Marvin Laurent who refused to leave the Bureau for the Blind in Jefferson City and staged a mini sit-in until they gave him an Apollo Machine promised to Florissant Valley, an instrument now in the safe care of our capable Instructional Resources staff. Admittedly, all of us do not have the talent of a Geneva Shearburn who thought that graduation was important enough to the hearing impaired to sign the entire ceremony. Your name may not be Carl Dietz whose class made a guard for one of our data processing machines so a young man with the spasticity associated with cerebral palsy could experience punching his own cards. You may not be Bill Schallert or Andy Lindberg who paved the way for a young black man, not even a student at Florissant Valley, to get his much delayed degree at the University of Missouri at Columbia. I refused to go into a supermarket where his mother worked for a long time because she would cry every time she saw me, thinking about Bill and Andy. Unlike Carolyn Davis, perhaps you have not included in your library of recently acquired knowledge, the self-taught mechanics of repairing wheelchairs. And no one desires the headaches Mary Lauber earned just scratching the surface for a young man who knew, too late, he had been deprived of the opportunity to read and write. Never the less, each of you has the tools and the talent and the opportunity to be a paver. Those I named are only a few. There are many more. I wonder how many of you really understand the significance of some of these things you do.

Who are the travelers on this highway; who are the students who get caught in the traffic jam? There are those who come through our doors quietly, stay a short while, and leave untouched. We call them tranquilized. Others enter, plan well, ride a smooth course, and graduate in spite of us. We call them highly motivated and bright. Some will ride the revolving door, in and out, back in and out again, before anyone knows who they are. We call them invisible. Perhaps all these are students who do not need us as human beings, but need us only as institutions, available for some suitable short term purpose. But then, there are those who do need us, unknowingly sometimes, who want the good things in our society which education promises — to be productive, useful, needed... but who are afraid, or wary, or distrustful. These are the students caught in the traffic jam. These are the citizens of our college I call the "least favored." These are not the students we are overjoyed to see in our classrooms, for they cause us the most concern, the most headaches, the most uncomfortable feelings, if we care. Who are these "least favored" students specifically? They are the handicapped, highly under-educated (we sometimes call disadvantaged), women in transition, or the poor... and often a combination of these.

Someone said, "The poor are always with us." I submit at Florissant Valley all of the "least favored" are with us and will always be with us. Generally, these are not the students who will bring us the highest accolades and honors as an institution.
Let's consider, first, the undereducated. Many will continue to enroll who have not and are not prepared for college... for various reasons. Any number will have poor reading skills, extremely limited vocabularies, not to mention inadequate quantitative skills, undeveloped study habits, and questionable motivations.

Are we to say these students should not come to Florissant Valley? Are we really ready to make the judgement creating a barrier? Are we not a "peoples' college" as Joseph Cosand called us? If we believe in the open-door, should we not provide the opportunity -- the access? Even though we would like to increase our number of graduates, remember the lack of attainment of a degree or certificate does not spell failure on the part of the student nor the institution.

That we approach these students with the understanding of where they are on the continuum, that we realize they have been cheated -- perhaps by themselves, that we know we may hold the key to some semblance of progress, that we impart to them a willingness to listen and hear is vital for any mobility toward their goals.

Nathan Wright said, "Any society that claims "success" while any of its members lacks opportunity to develop life to the fullest is less than humanely inspired. We must come to see total human development as a moral imperative. Not one human life can our nation afford to waste; not one potential contributor to the good of all can it afford to sacrifice."

I am under no illusions that we can do great things for these students -- particularly in one semester, but if we provide sufficient financial support for developmental courses, and learning labs that are adequately staffed, and faculty conference hours for individual help, then we are at least subscribing to the principles of equality of opportunity -- equality of access.

Now about the handicapped. For those of you who have not had handicapped students in your classes, it is important to know that sooner or later you probably will. Handicapped students at Florissant Valley are a reality. For us to participate in the education of these students is a reality -- a federally charged reality. Our purpose is to enhance their learning process just as we would for any other student. We may need to make modifications at times in the communications process, in testing, in the presentation of materials, and in the adaptation of equipment.

Faculty who are joining us on a part-time basis have to be aware they may indeed have students who are disabled and to know what kind of support is available, and that these students have a right to belong. We are fortunate at Florissant Valley to have a funded project for certain disabled students in vocational programs. We rely a great deal on their help and guidance. Even so, what we know in working with handicapped students is woefully inadequate. We are learning by doing, by trial and error, by bending anyone's ear who is an expert. We are learning from you who have had disabled students in your classes. We need to share more. We need to update our thinking. We need not to prejudge what a handicapped person can or cannot do. Every modification, every adaptation, every revision you have made needs to be shared with others to alleviate the
fears and apprehension of dealing with disabled students. I implore you to concentrate on their abilities, not their disabilities, for each of us is handicapped in some sense -- it's all a matter of degree.

Our third category I call women-in-transition. Over the past several years the average age of our student body has increased. Contributing significantly to this change is the increasing number of college students who are women-in-transition. Included are those who are upgrading skills, changing careers, starting careers and those who find themselves, by reason of dramatic changes in their lives, facing the prospect of becoming the sole supporter of themselves and their families. These women are beset with problems and, because of extended absences from formal education, are insecure and need reassurance.

It is important to understand their motivations for beginning or returning to college and the accompanying fears they express: fear of competition (though many of our adult students are our best), problems of dealing with youngsters at home, sometimes lack of support from a spouse or friends concerning their educational goals and fear of being unemployable because of age and lack of self-confidence. All these feelings and anxieties remain while trying to get that paper written or chapter read and pretending that everything at home is "business as usual."

I am not suggesting that these women should be expected to do less work than any other student in class, but only to reiterate the importance of understanding that they bring with them a set of problems and to be aware that this is fairly common.

I realize we are not a social service institution in the same context as Vocational Rehabilitation, or the State Hospital, or the Salvation Army and other agencies that have worked and continue to work with our students. Nor are we professional social workers, for the most part, or experts in special education. However, it does behoove us to take a fresh look at our "least favored" students -- to recommit to the ideals of the community college as a "people's college." A second chance institution, an opportunity for equal access. And, when we behold that sea of faces in our classrooms, or our offices, or our studios, we should recognize that they are individuals with all their ideals and contradictions ready to test the strategies that we will employ to keep them on the highway.

I am asking that you allow us to work in concert with you, side by side, in whatever ways we can to use the skills we possess along with yours to strengthen our students as whole integrated personalities. Encourage them to use our Career Resources Center, enroll in our courses, and join our short term discussion groups.

One last thought about this thoroughfare we have been traveling along. With today's economic situation of inflation, a devalued dollar and high unemployment, we are seeing students coming to college more and more "to get a job." In the final analysis that is why each of us went to college. But "to get a job" today, to many students means "teach me a skill and turn me loose. Do not muddle my mind with other subjects."

We have provided an access for these students through our short term courses, continuing education, and certificate programs. These are fine and essential to the comprehensive nature of our college.
However it is my hope that our degree programs would continue to emphasize the importance of courses we would categorize under liberal or humanistic studies. I am not speaking of the liberal studies curriculum, but of courses we consider non-technical in nature. Most of our Associate in Arts programs attempt to include these courses, but there is a dearth of these offerings in our Associate in Applied Science programs. I understand the reasons behind this original design but many of our Associate in Applied Science programs are now transferring to four year institutions in response to a declining enrollment picture, no doubt. Our student body has changed and many are now looking for an equal access to continuing their education. Regardless of purpose, our society is not becoming more simplistic, but more complex.

Moody Prior said it fifteen years ago in Education For Our Times, and it is still applicable. Quote, "The capacity of original, imaginative, informed, disciplined thinking is one of society's most valuable commodities. Society needs men and women who are capable of approaching new problems with a habitually undogmatic and questioning attitude, who are prepared to accept a conclusion which appears to be contrary to their immediate self-interest, who have a deep concern for the welfare of their fellows, and whose vision and information are not bound by the limits of the technical proficiency which serves their daily professional lives."

Prior continues, "Because we need such individuals, we need to provide an education which produces men and women with the knowledge and habits of mind which will improve their chances of understanding and coping with the world in which they live."

We are an educational institution - not a training center. I would never be one to disparage training centers. My purpose is to remind that while training emphasizes short-range, limited, inflexible goals with fixed ceilings, education emphasizes creative interaction. Training asks how, education asks how and why.

So that in our teaching, in our college, in our educational setting, we must provide access -- no, insist on, the inclusion of those things we call humanistic or liberal studies in all our disciplines. We must help to shape -- not merely to respond.

I would like to close with a quotation from a speech Dr. Cosand wrote ten years ago. He said, "Students in the 1980's will find values in the community colleges by which to live in our increasingly complex society. In the 1980's it would be hoped that in our educational programs we would develop a philosophy for living; that we would teach students to leave the world a richer place; to contribute and not to consume; to lift and not to lean; to give and not take."