

The Arts and the Future of Public Universities

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Thank you

- To Kathleen and the Council for the invitation to speak.
- For the introduction.
- To members of the KAM Council, for all you do to support the museum, whether you give your time or your resources—many of you do both.
 - Through your efforts, you help the Museum flourish much more than it would otherwise, and that strengthens the arts broadly here at the University of Illinois and in the community.

Before I do that, however, I want to take a few minutes to talk about Kathleen's work as Director of Krannert Art Museum, Dean of the College of Fine and Applied Arts and member of the Council of Deans.

She's going to be unhappy with me for this—you all know she's a deeply humble person who puts her colleagues, and not herself, front and center—but this may be my only opportunity.

I had a colleague once who was retiring who declared he wanted no retirement celebration or occasion to celebrate his work and accomplishments. Like Kathleen, his humility was legendary.

However, as department head, I declined to honor his request.

I've always believed such occasions aren't just about the retiree. Pausing to celebrate a colleague's work causes us to reflect on what truly good work is, the values of our organization, and our own aspirations, both personal and professional, individually and as a team. Organizations are the people who pour their hearts and souls into making them work. Recognizing those people celebrates our collective enterprise...why it is we do what we do, and how we should go about doing it to meet our standards of excellence and integrity. These are necessary rituals, too valuable to pass up.

So, Kathleen, you can feel better knowing this really isn't about you!

Kathleen came to Illinois to direct Krannert Art Museum in 2004. Since that time, she has transformed KAM in ways that are both readily apparent to any visitor and much less obvious.

Of course, her **signature project**, particularly in recent years, has been the museum and gallery renovations, which she has made possible through her vision, tireless efforts in fundraising, her own personal generosity, her pursuit of a significant campus-level investment (or “matching grant”), and her great capacity to execute.

By the way, regarding the **campus-level match** for this project, Kathleen will deflect credit to Provost Adesida, Mike Andrechak and me for supporting it, but Ade, Mike and I all know that directing resources to good leaders is the easiest decision you make as administrator because you can trust they will make good on their vision and plans. Kathleen’s leadership made approval of the match a no-brainer.

I also want to emphasize Kathleen’s **distinctive aesthetic vision**—and I thank one of the KAM staff for highlighting this for me—which was first realized in a big way in the Encounters reinstallation. Kathleen’s keen sense of clean and sophisticated design and use of space has yielded an effective canvas for curators and an uplifting experience for visitors. This signature design is now realized in four first floor galleries.

The museum as a facility is in better shape than ever, but I want to highlight some of the **less obvious things** that I believe are Kathleen's true legacy.

Architects and builders often talk about the bones of particular buildings. Structures that have good bones are built to last; their internal structures are constructed to the highest standards using top quality, resilient materials. Those structures become a solid and dependable framework for repeated and renovation and repurposing, as times, needs and visions change.

Kathleen has given KAM **excellent "bones"** by:

- Building an outstanding staff,
- Creating a culture among the staff that prizes risk taking and innovation, and
- Cultivating so effectively relationships with stakeholders like you, the college and its faculty, the campus and the broader community.

Kathleen actively encouraged her staff to reach out to faculty in the School of Art + Design and across the arts and humanities disciplines to develop programming and exhibitions of great scholarly importance and relevance.

An example is the collaboration with Dance via the Open Studio project, which was a new direction for KAM and helped reinforce a vision in the College of Fine and Applied Arts—which Kathleen very much contributed to shaping in her role on FAA’s Administrative Council—of elevating synergies between research, teaching and engagement, centering KAM and KCPA as core research and teaching (as well as engagement) units within the college, and opening up the arts even more widely to campus and community.

The museum’s **curatorial staff** are among the best anywhere and **KAM’s K-12 education programs**—KAM-WAM and related programs led by Anne Sautman—I argue are among the most important and impactful new engagement initiatives at the University of Illinois in the last decade.

Overall, Kathleen has turned KAM into a more **experimental space and robust forum** for the exchange of ideas. Along the way, she built an outstanding team and working environment, founded on trust and mutual respect, that will serve KAM, FAA and the University of Illinois for many years to come.

In fact, the internal strength of KAM—administratively, and in terms of the quality and talent of its staff—was a key consideration for me when I appointed Kathleen as Acting Dean of FAA in fall of 2016, after I stepped in as interim provost. I knew KAM could withstand losing Kathleen’s full attention.

I think you’ll remember that **fall of 2015** was not a very happy time at U of I.

- Chancellor Wise and Provost Adesida stepping down suddenly...
- Barb Wilson stepping in as interim chancellor and me as interim provost, opening leadership holes in the colleges of Liberal Arts and Sciences and Fine and Applied Arts...
- Already two months into the present budget crisis, with the campus implementing \$49 million in spending reductions...
- You may also recall that in FAA, we were intensely focused on turning around a long, steady and seemingly irreversible enrollment decline—really an existential crisis for an arts college—and were in the middle of building needed capacities in admissions, recruitment, marketing and communications, while also renewing our emphasis on research and scholarship.
- It was into this situation that I asked Kathleen to step, with almost no notice, and without a professorial appointment and career trajectory as an academic scholar, while also asking her to continue providing general direction to KAM.

I really want to try to emphasize what an accomplishment it has been for Kathleen to step into the deanship and be so successful, and indeed, to serve as one of FAA's finest deans.

I am deeply proud of Kathleen Harleman and hope you will join me in thanking her for her service to KAM, FAA and the University of Illinois.

Working subtitle for my remarks: *An Ode to Many Small Changes*

We face a real crisis in public higher education

- Not referring to Illinois specifically; it's degree of state governmental dysfunction is unique.
- Higher education—as one of the largest discretionary components in state budgets—is being squeezed, all across the US.
 - K-12, pensions/benefits, incarceration, Medicaid
- Public universities are increasingly dependent on tuition, fees, auxiliary income and philanthropy.
 - Philanthropy is not an immediate solution; it is a long-run game, especially for public institutions.
- The magnitudes of the cuts are outpacing the capacity of institutions to offset with tuition and fees.
 - Ability to pay is increasingly a problem. Universities are responding with suboptimal responses—such as reducing support staff because they cannot reduce tenured faculty—cutting off nose to spite face. Faculty are doing more administrative tasks, not an effective use of their talents relative to cost.

Coupled with—and contributing to—an erosion of public support for higher education, in a kind of vicious cycle

The condition of public discourse around higher education is very poor and seeming to get worse

Let me start with the arts and humanities

My claim: The humanities, together with the visual and performing arts, are the very core of a university education.

Not a part of the core, but *the* core.

I don't mean they are the *most important* in some kind of hierarchy of disciplines.

This idea of core—versus importance—is a hard to understand for many.

...On almonds and the ecosystem that produces them...

I want to read to you a quote from Martha Nussbaum, Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago.

In 2010, Nussbaum published a little book entitled *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*.

In it, she writes about how, as a society, we have given economic pursuits primacy, to the detriment of our polity and our civil society. Again, the notion is not that the pursuit of material things is unimportant, but that such pursuit should not be the end that drives our being.

When I first read Nussbaum's book several years ago, I wrote this quote down on an index card and I've kept it on my desk ever since. I pick it up, reread it, and think about it often. Here it is:

*“We are pursuing the possessions that protect, please, and comfort...But we seem to be forgetting about the soul, about what it is *for thought to open out of the soul and connect person to world* in a rich, subtle, and complicated manner; about what it is to approach another person as a soul, rather than as a mere useful instrument or an obstacle to one's own plans; about what it is to talk as someone who has a soul to someone else whom one sees as similarly deep and complex” [emphasis added].*

Literature, music, theater, visual art, architecture, landscape architecture, design, dance...art..." *opens out of the soul and connects person to world in a rich, subtle and complicated manner...*"

Rich, subtle, complicated...precisely the opposite of our public discourse today, imperiling us as a society within a global community grappling with challenges of enormous consequence for humanity's survival and flourishing.

The notion of humanities and arts as the core of a university education is *not really controversial*.

- Most universities have some kind of general education core, or baccalaureate core, which reflects some understanding—if increasingly tepid, unfortunately—of this.
- Land grant institutions were founded on the principle of marrying the practical and liberal arts.

But as an intellectual community, we don't think deeply about it often enough, and thus we head down paths that lead us to undercut our commitment to the arts and humanities as the core, undercutting our capacity to enrich our citizenship and polity, and eventually undermining support within that polity for quality higher education and the true essence of the university.

I fear we're in this kind of spiral today.

Sadly, in the arts in the academy, we are partially culpable...**we have contributed** to the problem.

When I became dean of FAA, we faced as our **central challenge** a long slide in our enrollments. Fewer and fewer majors each year, fewer and fewer students in our classrooms and studios. Across all disciplines.

Coupled with this was that almost all of our programs were **oriented inward**—focused not just mostly, but *intensely*—around teaching our own.

- The argument for this was that we were seeking to produce the finest quality artists, designers, architects, planners of cities, landscape architects. Of course, a worthy goal. Indeed, we *aspired* to exclusivity.
- But you can see the problem with respect to the notion of arts and humanities as the core of a university education. It is awfully hard to serve legitimately as the core if you are inaccessible to—and, indeed, purposely uninterested in—the vast majority of the university’s students.

And, like most things, there were **severe financial implications** given the university’s budget model...fewer majors, fewer students in arts courses, fewer dollars. But note—finances are not the heart of the issue. They never are.

If you can make no legitimate claim to a true role as the core, because you favor exclusion over inclusion, the question arises as to whether or not you are a critical element in a “system”—recall my analogy of the almond and the ecosystem that produced it—that is built around, and with, the core. **This is a different position to be in.**

Now you are headed down the logical path of arguing for the arts on **instrumental**, rather than **intrinsic**, grounds. We ourselves, as arts educators, abandoned our natural and compelling case as intrinsic to the university. And, in doing so, we weakened that **critical link** between university education and the essential health of our polity.

To come back to my **notion of small changes**...

These issues are subtle, they're rich and complex, but the solutions do not involve massive change.

Indeed, they usually require many small changes. But note that I didn't subtitle these remarks "Ode to *Easy* Small Changes." By small, I mean they are "at the margin"—perhaps even remedial, in a sense—and well within the scope of our institutional and professional expertise. **They cannot be described as radical.**

Opening up our courses and our curricula, creating new curricula and programs that serve a wider array of student interests, integrating schools and departments even more deeply with units like KAM and KCPA. Truly embracing our role as the core...alongside the humanities...of a university education. Ergo, arts not just for students who would major in the arts, but for all majors.

- Why, as FAA dean, did I often refer to KAM and KCPA as "academic"—not "auxiliary" units? Because they are indispensable to delivering on that fundamental university—and thus *academic/higher learning*—mission to give students a deep, visceral understanding of what it means "to connect person to world in a rich, subtle, and complicated manner" ...to know what it is "to talk as someone who has a soul to someone else whom one sees as similarly deep and complex." KAM and KCPA *were and are* open and inclusive, via their engagement missions and university- and community-wide remit. But this is **not enough in itself** to truly situate the arts as the core of a university education. The disciplines must join.
- Incidentally, this link, and its connection to our community, our polity, our citizenship, is perhaps the nub of what Mike Ross means when he talks about KCPA's mission as a "public square."

A small digression about general education...[if time permits]...

The academics in the room, if they're listening carefully, should recognize that the logic of my argument implies a great need to stop ignoring a well-known and longstanding problem at the University of Illinois: the intellectual "Wild West" that the general education curriculum has become. This challenge intersects very closely with questions of staffing various disciplines, resources and budgets, budget models, and budgeting systems. Without GenEd reform, we cannot make good on the vision of arts and humanities as the core, and thus we will not address the growing disconnect between university education and the functioning of our polity and civil society.

The story is long and complicated and not something we have time to discuss here.

But, here again, I consider a thorough revision of the general education curriculum to be a relatively small, as defined earlier—but not easy—action. We certainly cannot seriously argue that it is not well within our professional wheelhouse to do it. Surely, as educators, we cannot call it radical action.

We simply need be clear about why we're doing it and then roll up our sleeves and get it done.

I'd like to comment briefly on other small changes to higher education challenges...

Framed by the problems as “partial myths” —that is, there is some truth to them, which we need to admit and act on, but they are overstated and/or greatly (and sometimes intentionally) misunderstood in our discourse.

- The partial myth of **administrative bloat**
 - Studies show growth has been predominantly in student support and mandatory compliance
- The partial myth of **faculty failing to teach enough**
- The partial myth of the student **debt crisis**
 - The case for reasonable debt financing is strong and loan crisis overstated
- The partial myth of **weak return on investment** (ROI) to non-vocational degrees
 - Returns to a bachelor's degree are high, irrespective of discipline
 - There is a dangerous failure to understand opportunity cost and low financial literacy
- The partial myth of **galloping costs** in higher education
 - The failure to understand the varying technology of different industries
- The partial myth of higher education as a **private good**, to be paid for only by direct recipients
- The partial myth of sponsored **research as a net revenue source**

Why must *public* universities succeed, in particular?

Think about the following:

- Public institutions teach **eight out of every ten** postsecondary students in the United States. By logistics alone, our society cannot deliver university education to scale without healthy public universities. To imperil our public universities is to imperil our polity and the likelihood humanity will be capable of addressing society's global grand challenges.
- Public universities—big, accessible and affordable to the widest cross-section of our society—are essential to addressing a growing crisis: the vanishing American Dream for an increasing number of US citizens. Consider this scary fact (cited in Bowen and McPherson, *Lesson Plan*):
 - **Fifty-nine percent** of US students in the lowest income quartile—the bottom 25 percent of the income distribution—expect, when asked as sophomores, that they will complete a bachelor's degree. These low income kids fully expect to go to college and to graduate.

Only **14 percent** of those students succeed in doing so. Fourteen percent. That's a **45 percent gap** in expectations versus accomplishment. And studies further show that **ability is not the primary driver** of this gap. Imagine the societal consequences of continuing to choke off the access of so many young people with the ability and expectation, but not the means, to acquire a university education.

What must we do?

- Defend: The public research university mission vigorously, eloquently and without apology.
- Educate: Ourselves, faculty/staff, students, elected officials, the public.
- Not lose sight of that public mission even as public taxpayer support erodes.
- Do not confuse ourselves about the important “publicness” of what we do.
- Move proactively to undertake the institutional change necessary to adjust. Get to work making many small—but not easy—changes.

In closing...

The pressures are great but we should maintain our sense of optimism and keep our nerve.

This is an incredibly exciting time in higher education. We should be motivated and enthusiastic about tackling the challenges ahead and our prospects of success. Why?

1. The students who are coming to us are highly motivated to take on big problems and they are craving depth, authenticity and action. This has not always been true.
2. As institutions, we're more skilled than ever in outreach, entrepreneurship and engagement—doing and valuing these things—and we have come along way in our understanding of the diversity of creative work and modes of learning and research we will need to succeed. This is a long way from where we were a decade ago. It will help us meet our challenges.
3. The global grand challenges we face—climate change, poverty, terrorism, energy, water scarcity, food security, etc.--require what we, as public universities, can contribute uniquely: necessary scale in expertise and infrastructure, diversity in expertise and infrastructure.

Thank you again for the invitation to address you today, and for your support of Krannert Art Museum.