

Aims of Education: August 24, 2021 “The Continuum of Learning”

Good afternoon to our faculty, staff, students, and their families and guests.

Welcome back to campus and, to our new students, congratulations on joining Chapman University!

I am honored and privileged to deliver to you this year’s “Aims of Education” address. I am also quite humbled to be doing so as your incoming Provost, with only one month in the role!!

So, thank you, President Struppa, for asking me to provide my perspective on the aims of education and to articulate what I hope will be your trajectory as students over the next four years at Chapman University (and beyond).

It is my belief that, at their core, the aims of education are to equip students with the mental furnishings and dispositions to lead rich, fulfilling, considered and impactful lives as thoughtful, transformative citizens of their communities, the nation, and the world.

But to lead such lives, education has to contend with the greatest of forces: the force of change—the engine of human history and the defining trait of our shared humanity regardless of times and locations.

This is the reason why the aims of education are, have been, and will always be dynamic and expansive.

Please indulge me in a short historical detour to illustrate my point.

From Classical Antiquity to the Medieval period the aims of education were based on the study of the trivium, or the 3 Arts of the Word (rhetoric, grammar, and dialectic/or logic) and the quadrivium, or the 4 Arts of Numbers (astronomy, arithmetic, geometry and music, or harmony). Together, the trivium and the quadrivium comprised the 7 Liberal Arts: an education founded on a scientific knowledge of the cosmos as well as on the humanistic skills needed for individuals to be active members of civic life back then. The Practical Arts, or what today we may describe as professional fields (medicine, architecture, mechanics) were excluded.

Starting from this model of “Classical Education”, a major change occurred from the late 19th century onwards, when colleges and universities began to rapidly add subjects and disciplines to respond to, and prepare students for, a world transformed by major technological leaps and disruptions in agriculture, industry, transportation, and commerce. This same change continued and accelerated in the 20th and 21st century, when the rise of large-scale corporate economies, advances in health sciences, the advent of computational and digital technologies, of VR, of automation and robotics, of intelligent machines, and so on, have further changed our society, creating additional

needs for professional programs—something like a modern version of the so-called “Practical Arts”.

The response of many colleges and universities to the changes ushered in by our industrial and post-industrial modernities was often to focus on one set of educational values and competencies. In the most extreme cases, this led to an emphasis on technical, scientific, and professional education, or conversely, on the Liberal Arts only.

I took this short detour in the ever evolving history of education to provide some context to what I have observed at Chapman University. In my few weeks here, I have come to a better understanding that among the university’s many areas of distinction one stands out among all others for its importance and relevance in today’s world: An education that aims to provide a dynamic and balanced learning experience to offer students the opportunity to cultivate both foundational knowledge and professional skills, both Liberal Arts and Practical Arts.

And why are the aims of a Chapman Education so relevant and timely? Why is the distinctiveness of this university something to treasure, nurture and be so proud of?

At all levels, from the local to the global, your generation has inherited a world of significant complexities. You are living in a period when solutions to the vital issues of our times (e.g., public health crisis; climate change; sustainability; social and racial inequalities, to name but a few) will demand an understanding of many frames of knowledge, the agility to navigate across multiple fields of inquiry, and the ability to negotiate conflicting cultural and social environments.

Since the aim of an education is to equip learners with the mental furnishings and dispositions to lead rich, fulfilling, considered and impactful lives as thoughtful, transformative citizens, you will need to be versed in content areas straddling science, technology, and entrepreneurship. But that will not be enough: you will need to merge these “literacies” with the cultural knowledge, the creativity, the civic engagement, and the global awareness fostered by humanistic, artistic, and social science inquiry as well.

Your disposition may very well be towards the sciences and technology. If so, follow that path but also seek the knowledge that the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences at Chapman have to offer. Discover, with Chapman’s faculty, disciplines such as history, anthropology, philosophy, and social sciences. Uncover for yourself the differing beliefs that have shaped and continue to shape individuals, cultures, and traditions. Understand, learn, and foresee the broad implications and consequences of our human behaviors and actions. Immerse yourself in the “possible worlds” of the creative arts because they will nurture your imagination and stretch your vision. They will facilitate your ability to transcend the many differences and boundaries that you will encounter, enabling you to see through the eyes of many “others” and cultivate your sense of justice, solidarity, empathy, and compassion.

And if you are more inclined towards the humanities, the social sciences and the arts, pursue your passion but remember what history teaches us: the aims of education have never been and will never be static. As the world around us quickly changes, embrace the dynamism of knowledge creation that is made available to us by the new literacies in the sciences and technology, and participate in the entrepreneurship that derives from this knowledge, and acquire and master new skills.

Regardless of your dispositions, feed your curiosity and explore other branches of learning, whether they have consolidated across the centuries or as they are emerging. Make it the aim of your education to constantly hone your cognitive flexibility so that you may cultivate the system thinking and the higher order skills to always integrate your education in a continuum of never-ending learning.

And by embracing the continuum of learning, you will not only discover the fulfillment that comes from expanding your disciplinary and professional knowledge and skills in the breadth of interdisciplinarity, but you will be well equipped to live the full aim of an education: not an aim in itself, not the final pursuit of a degree, but a dynamic and never-ending disposition for life-long learning—both requisites to lead fulfilling and impactful lives as constantly participatory and always transformative citizens of our shared collective life and humanity.

I know you are ready to embark in all that the Chapman Experience can offer. Our faculty experts across a range of disciplines and fields are eager to travel with you in a journey of learning and discovery.

I thank you for your attention. And, once again, welcome and congratulations on joining Chapman University!