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National Liberal Arts Presidents Discuss Civic Responsibility, Diversity

April 8, 2005

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — A panel of liberal arts college presidents agreed on the importance for colleges to become involved in their communities and cited the need for presidential leadership in developing a diverse campus during a program Thursday night (April 7) as part of the inauguration of Illinois Wesleyan President Richard F. Wilson in Westbrook Auditorium.

[Watch streaming video of the Presidents' Panel](#) (requires RealPlayer)

Wilson, whose formal installation will be on Saturday (April 9) at 2 p.m., served as moderator for the event, posing a series of questions to the panel comprising Donald Harward, president emeritus of Bates College in Maine; Russell Osgood, president of Grinnell College in Iowa; and John Roush, president of Centre College in Kentucky. In addition to civic engagement and diversity, the wide-ranging discussion touched on such subjects as academic freedom, globalization, environmental sustainability, and the role of research in a liberal arts college.

Harward said that colleges have lost track of the concept that serving the public good is one of their fundamental responsibilities, adding that the challenge is to stand apart as a critic while being connected to the community at the same time.

“Serving the community means more than inviting them to come to our ball games,” Harward said. “We have much to gain from a true collaboration with our community, a true partnership. In this relationship we have to understand that we are not always the teachers. Sometimes we can be the learner.”

On the matter of diversifying campuses, Osgood cited the 2004 Supreme Court decision in the University of Michigan admissions cases as providing a road map for how to establish a successful diversity process for both faculty and students. But, Osgood said, almost all liberal arts colleges are doing poorly and are making slow progress, at best, especially when it comes to diversifying the faculty.

“Many will say that they are working extraordinarily hard on this issue, but they do not have very creative ideas...and are not applying themselves diligently over time,” Osgood said. The only way to make progress in faculty hiring, Osgood added, is for the faculty members themselves to commit to the effort, since they have purview over the hiring and tenure of professors in their respective departments.

In terms of student recruitment, the Grinnell president noted that many demographic changes are actually working in favor of colleges' efforts to diversify. In particular, he pointed to increasing numbers of Latino and Asian students. However, he said that the paucity of African Americans, especially men, attending college is a major national problem. “Not enough African American men are graduating from high school,” said Osgood. “If they are not graduating from high school, they are not even in our applicant pools. It's a national disaster.”

Presidents, said Harward, must take the lead in issues of diversity by ensuring the campus that the commitment to diversity exists on every level, from the Board of Trustees to the staff and to the students.

On the subject of academic freedom, the presidents agreed that this remains one of the defining characteristics of educational institutions and one that must be protected. Harward noted that educational institutions have as their objective encouraging “contrarianism” by getting people to question what is accepted or routine.

While agreeing that academic freedom should be a fundamental component of higher education, Roush said that academic leaders and scholars also need to remember that speaking freely on controversial issues can have consequences in terms of inciting public backlash. He added that free speech, tempered with civility, was the best way to promote active dialogue on campuses.

“We need to model for our citizens a commitment to civility,” he said. “We need to be able to disagree, to take issue with each other on important matters, without making that disagreement too shrill.”

The presidents also agreed on the importance of providing students with international opportunities. Roush noted that 75 percent of the students at Centre College study abroad at some point during their four years, with the majority of these trips led by Centre's own faculty.

“We need to get our students involved in a meaningful intellectual experience in at least one other country during their academic careers,” said Roush. “I believe that is what it's going to take for these students to become global citizens.”



From left, President Emeritus Donald Harward of Bates College, President Russell Osgood of Grinnell College, President Richard F. Wilson of Illinois Wesleyan, and President John Roush of Centre College, participated in a panel discussion during Wilson's Inauguration activities.