

# Faculty Forum

By and for the Faculty of the University of Denver



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Editor, Joseph Kraus

Many faculty members that attended the Summer graduation ceremony thought highly of the insightful Commencement Address from Dr. Robert Coombe. They thought that it would be a good idea to print his Commencement Address in this issue of the *Faculty Forum*.

## Commencement Address

August 11, 2000

Robert D. Coombe

Chancellor Ritchie, members of the Board, colleagues and good friends among the faculty and administration of the University, and most important, those of you who are graduating today, what a pleasure it is to stand here with you on this fine Colorado morning. Let me offer my congratulations to all of you who are receiving diplomas today, and also to the families and friends who have supported you throughout the difficult journey that led you to this point in your lives. For all of you, today will be one of those truly memorable moments in life, a particular and distinct milepost along the road.

I too have a son and a daughter in college, one a first year student this fall and the other a senior, and in thinking about what I might say to you today my thoughts turned inevitably to them. I found myself bouncing back and forth between the perspective of an academic, bubbling with pride in my University and its accomplishments in the education of these fine young people graduating today, and that of a father. For parents, the joy, pride, and exuberance in this singular moment must surely be tempered with concern for what may lie ahead. As a father, I found myself asking the really hard questions. Has the University really done its job in preparing these people for the future? What are they really taking with them that will hold its value in the coming years? For both the students and their families, has it all really been worth the hard work, and turmoil, and tuition? Certainly there are answers to these difficult questions, and as a faculty member and dean I found myself searching for ways to express them.

Educators (like me) are forever talking about the value of what they do. In recent times we've even been trying to measure it. "Assessment" is the watchword in higher education these days, and we've progressed from student evaluations of individual courses and instructors (in some cases published on the web, with all the attendant legal issues) to measurement, or

attempted measurement, of learning outcomes. There is no question that much of this is good, and that we are developing a far better understanding of the instructional methods that really do work. There is a disturbing corollary, though, and it is that many colleges and universities are tending to confuse education with information, treating it as a kind of commodity traded in units of credit hours. Some view students as consumers for whom the return on their investment should be evident in the short term. There have been many efforts to put a dollar value on a degree, and most of us are familiar with the studies that correlate annual income with years of education. Some of you may have seen a recent article that compared different MBA programs according to the average time needed after graduation for students to recoup the tuition cost of the program, an interesting twist on the old theme. Although such measures are informative and certainly pique one's interest, they miss the point that there are surely much deeper, much longer term rewards from the experience of being educated at a university.

To think about the real value of your education, you have to consider the nature of the world you enter after graduation, and what it means to be a worthwhile, successful, and happy human being in that world, over the long term. First, let me say that certainly we live in a time of almost unparalleled prosperity, and there is no doubt that the job market for graduates is terrific. I can certainly remember times not so long ago that were very different, when graduates struggled to find employment. Today, in fields like computer science and engineering we hear that students are often approached by prospective employers during their junior year, with some offering signing bonuses just as they might to professional athletes. There is a gratifying resurgence of the job market for graduates in the liberal arts disciplines as well, as employers finally realize that basic thinking, writing, and problem solving abilities are key to success in a complex environment. It's clear that, at least for most, a degree opens the gate to a world brimming with opportunity. But it is just that – an open gate – and your prospects in the job market today reflect only the knowledge and abilities you have right now. How well will that knowledge and those skills age in a world of incessant change? How will you, as a human being, age in that world?

Looking out a little farther and perhaps a little deeper, one sees a time absolutely wild with growth driven largely by technology. Unbridled, sweeping changes in the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of human life are demanding a dramatic response from many of the institutions that make up the fabric of our culture. Everything seems to be in motion, unpredictable and chaotic. I'm reading the new book by Jacques Barzun (a long time faculty member and administrator at Columbia) that has the imposing title "From Dawn to Decadence: 500 years of Western Cultural Life". In it, he argues that we are nearing the end of the era of western civilization that began with the reformation (that's the decadence part). His point is that this is not necessarily a bad thing, but simply the demise of the defining traits of one era in human history, making room for the creation of the defining elements of an entirely new era. Perhaps he's right. If so, you will live through the transition. I imagine that some of you will see the dawn of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century. Will you cling to the old the values of the culture of your parents and ancestors, or will you be among the creators of the new?

While it is often true that opportunity lies in chaos, there is also little doubt that the kind of rapid economic and cultural change we're experiencing today produces a new kind of stress for people. There is a growing contradiction between the fact that economic success in a technologically driven world requires that individuals possess an ever greater and more diverse mix of talents and abilities, while at the same time competition forces specialization. We often read that the new structure of work is one in which complex, multidimensional problems are dealt with by teams of people that can supply the breadth of expertise needed for a solution. The individuals within those teams are specialists, though, in particular fields where the rate of growth of information is staggering. Nowadays, the total volume of knowledge is said to double

every five years. In particular fields in the sciences or engineering, it's much faster than that. Professionals in information technology, for example, are said to need "retraining" every twelve to eighteen months. To stay competitive, individuals must pour more and more of their disposable time into keeping up with the growth of knowledge in an ever narrower field of expertise. If that's how one stays competitive, how is one to stay human?

In business, innovation and change are so ubiquitous today that success or failure is often determined by time to market, for new products that may be obsolete within a couple of years. The principal time constant is often associated with development rather than production, and this has resulted in the emergence of a new kind of "workaholic"—not the middle aged executive of my generation but the young, bright, energetic innovator of yours. We read that a large proportion of college graduates in the U.S. these days really believes that zillions of dollars can be made and retirement is possible by age 35 or 40. If that happens to you, maybe you won't burn out before you make it. But what if it doesn't? What values will sustain you during the last 80 years of your life?

I think that most of us are engaged in a continuous search for those values. We respond to change and uncertainty and the stresses they bring by looking for constants, for things to hang on to. By this I mean those things that are particularly human, those singularly *non-technological* values that *don't* change at the pace of the internet, or from day to day, or for that matter from one generation to the next.

But let's get back to the main point here. What's the value of a University education, or for that matter a University, in this sort of world? Surely it must be more than just the generation and transfer of information. After all, information *is* a commodity these days, one that's getting cheaper and cheaper. Knowledge and understanding, as distinguished from information, are more difficult to come by and are hence a little more expensive, but these days classes are everywhere and anytime, sometimes delivered over the web by for-profit organizations. I think that all of us can look forward to a future that demands continuous learning, by whatever means are available. What's the value of a university? A better answer is the intellect and wisdom of the faculty. In truth, the foremost asset of any great university lies in the minds and collective wisdom of a great faculty, its capacity to create knowledge. Certainly DU is a great university because of its great faculty. But even this is a little wide of the mark, I think. While students surely learn to think by first hand interaction with great minds, some of those great minds are to be found among their fellow students, perhaps less mature but great nonetheless. I often think that students learn as much from one another as they do from us.

I don't think that the essence of a university is classes, or labs, or tests, or high speed networks, or any of the other myriad forms that information flow takes these days. The essence of a university is still people. I like to think of our University as something that is comprised of, really *is*, the collective life experiences all of us -- students, faculty and staff. These experiences encompass the lives and minds of great writers, great musicians, great artists, great businesspeople and lawyers, great social workers and psychologists, great athletes, even great scientists and engineers, a host of people, each of us extraordinary in our own way. Think of the power of this collection of lives, the personalities as well as the thoughts and ideas, if it were just possible to bring structure and coherence to the sum of all that human capability. *That's what a University does.* To me, it's a mechanism, a kind of machine that works on the collective persona of all of those extraordinary people and extracts creativity, understanding, wisdom and truth – and then makes these things available to all of us as individuals. Certainly the university is a place, and for all of us a special time in our lives, but at its heart it is always people. DU is an unbroken chain of people stretching over 137 years, accumulating knowledge, building understanding, wisdom, truth. And if you step back and think

about it, those are the changeless, immutable aspects of humanity that men and women have always sought, regardless of the chaos of changing economics, cultures, or civilizations. They are the particularly human things that sustain us, all of us, in times of great change.

So, I ask again what has the value of your time here been? How will it sustain you in the future? Of course you've learned a great deal – from faculty, from one another, or just on your own. But I would bet that most of you have also changed and deepened as well. I would bet that most of you have found some constants in life to hang on to as you move on. On the surface, certainly DU is as changeable and trendy as any other university, or for that matter any other institution or business that has to deal effectively with the world these days. But keep in mind that DU is people, that long chain of people, and despite what may seem an ever-changing face our roots grow deeper and deeper every day.

Down the road a bit, you may find yourself trying to stay afloat in that torrent of change, taking no prisoners in the business wars, or simply trying to decide what sort of person you will have to be to next month to stay competitive. When your personal reality becomes a little too virtual, remember the *people* and the *power* that the University of Denver really is, the constants in life, the things to hang on to that it builds. And always, always remember that *the University of Denver belongs to you*. You've purchased it with all of your hard work, and with your personal contribution to its essence. You are a part of that unbroken chain. The University is an intellectual and spiritual oasis where you can always, for the rest of your life, quench your thirst. So, instead of shaking your hand and saying hey, it's been nice, good luck out there, I say that you're family here now. Welcome home.