

Practical Wisdom as an Aim of Education: Some Contributions of Marianist Universities¹

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I. Introduction

It is a great privilege to represent the University of Dayton and to receive, in my name and for the University of Dayton, this honorary doctoral degree in humane letters.

Most approaches to leadership recognize that the leader of an organization is very important but that the leadership team makes all the difference. As I approach my last year as President of the University of Dayton, I need to prepare myself to receive recognition for 23 years of leadership at the University of Dayton. The Honorary Degree from Chaminade University is the first recognition. I want to thank you and let you know that I deeply appreciate the love and kindness in which it is given. Being President of the University of Dayton is the best job that I could ever have dreamed of having as a Marianist. Through this job, I have been gifted and challenged in more ways than I ever imagined.

I also realize that this honorary degree is recognition of the contribution the University of Dayton has made in helping Chaminade University of Honolulu in its task of refounding. The University of Dayton has been very pleased to be a partner with Chaminade and to share some of the resources and benefits of our educational community. We firmly believe that Chaminade University has a great and wonderful call to be a powerful and transforming presence of Catholic and Marianist education within the Pacific Rim.

The University of Dayton has learned much through our partnership with Chaminade. We have been challenged to broaden our understanding of diversity – including a much richer understanding of the gifts many peoples and their cultures bring to our Church and our world community. Chaminade has helped us strengthen our understanding of what it means for the Western world and Asia to be part of one economic and cultural community. We look forward to continuing our learning.

I am so proud to receive my degree alongside Dr. Eddie Eu. A little over twenty years ago when Father Roesch was asked to be President of Chaminade, I heard about Eddie Eu. Father Roesch mentioned that he knew Eddie Eu, and both Bill Anderson, Chair of the NCR Corporation at that time, and Mrs. Virginia Kettering, a member of one of the families that started General Motors, had extremely warm and glowing stories about Ed and his accomplishments and their friendships with him. Eddie, I bring greetings from all of your friends in Dayton, Ohio.

¹ This paper is a revision of the talk given at Chaminade University of Honolulu for the Academic Convocation on March 9, 2001

I have chosen as a title for this short address, “Practical Reasoning as an Aim of Education: Some Contributions of Marianist Universities.” I want to outline a project that has fascinated me for several years. Over the past several years, I have been working with students to help them reflect on what makes for great leadership in all sectors of society -- whether it be in business, all levels of government, non-profit corporations, higher education, or community and neighborhood leadership. In our exploration of leadership, I am continually struck by the similarity of what these great leaders do and Aristotle’s attempts to describe the virtuous or good person or, in his time, the good and virtuous man. We must remember that Aristotle’s good and virtuous man was the hero of the Greek city-state. He was a person of great intellectual adeptness, a loyal friend, a keeper of promises, a good master of the household, and a public citizen engaged in building the civic community.

For Aristotle, the good and virtuous person excelled at practical reasoning, i.e., reasoning directed toward the determination about what is humanly good and how that rationally desirable end should be pursued. For Aristotle and Aquinas, a person is said to exercise the moral and intellectual virtue of practical wisdom or prudence when they use practical reasoning to rightly determine what ends humans should pursue and what means they should use to reach these ends.

Over the last few years, I have been exploring in what ways practical reasoning and wisdom should be an important aim of higher education. If there is a special connection between the ideas of practical reasoning, its excellence as practical wisdom, and the exercise of leadership in all sectors of society, then educating for practical wisdom should be a special concern of our Marianist universities.

II. How Do We Know Whether We are Successful?

Let me start our reflection with a question. How do we know whether we are successful at Chaminade University or at the University of Dayton? -- an embarrassingly simple question that I find very difficult to answer. One way to explore this question is to ask you the question, “Who are some of our most successful graduates?” But this turns out to be a trick question because it leads us back to a difficult question, “How do you judge success?”

For sure, I know a way that I don’t want to answer this question. During my first or second year as President, we were celebrating our distinguished alumnus awards at UD. One of our Alumni was being recognized with an outstanding achievement award. He was the basketball coach for the Catholic school in Ohio that won the state basketball championship -- certainly an outstanding achievement.

During the reception, and thankfully with a smile on his face, he said, “Over the past 25 years since graduating from the University, I have been a good husband, I have raised six children, I have been a teacher in Catholic schools, and I have been an assistant principal, but I have to win a basketball championship to become a distinguished alumnus of UD.” While this remark was offered in good humor, it has been a constant reminder over the years to think clearly about what it means to be successful as a graduate of the University of Dayton – a Catholic and Marianist university.

Over the years, I have developed my own working list of criteria for successful graduates. First, successful graduates have a “can do” attitude and know how to match their personal talents and weaknesses to a situation in which they can get things accomplished. They realize that the limits to what they can do are mostly shaped by how they think about what they cannot do. Successful graduates are “possibility thinkers.”

Second, they have a commitment to excellence in their primary field of endeavor. Somehow they seek out environments where they can not only be competent but where they can make a major difference.

Third, they are committed to excellence beyond their primary field of endeavor – to the larger community and to the common good. While they work for certain organizations or constituencies, they are able to see how their work makes a contribution to the greater community. They are people with strong convictions about what is good for the community, but they hold these convictions in a way that is not fanatical. They are open to including the perspectives of others. They are people with a vision, with an idealism that can be sustained over the long haul. They see their life as a vocation or calling to make good things happen.

Fourth, successful graduates are characterized by perseverance and resilience. They are not easily defeated. If they suffer setbacks, they have the stamina and resilience to regroup and to focus their energies toward the important tasks of their vocation.

Fifth, their life is marked with a sense of integrity – with a conscious effort to keep congruence between what they profess and what they live. They are not perfect people; they have their flaws. Yet, they are constantly striving for integrity. They are able to maintain a sense of balance between their commitments to their work, their family, and their communities.

Sixth, and perhaps most importantly, our successful graduates are people of faith. Their faith in God, and often in Jesus Christ, is not just a private or personal commitment; it touches all aspects of their lives in important ways. This is not an easy task. Taking faith seriously raises many tough questions. But somehow they bring their faith to bear on the work they are doing and the lives they live.

This is a working list. It needs further reflection and much refinement, but I want to keep asking the question, “What makes a successful graduate of the University of Dayton?” and I encourage you to keep asking the same question at Chaminade.

III. Practical Wisdom in the Life of a Successful Graduate

Over the years, I have used these criteria on successful graduates to collect some stories about our graduates. These stories provide a rich source for reflection when I think about what we are doing at our Marianist universities. I am convinced that one characteristic of successful graduates of Marianist universities is their ability to exercise practical reasoning very well – to be persons of practical wisdom.

Practical Reasoning

As I said in the introduction, Aristotle saw practical reasoning as being directed toward the determination about what is humanly good and how that rationally desirable end can be realized. While this description of practical reasoning is simple, in everyday life it is a multifaceted process.

Practical reasoning is the reasoning that we apply to action. When we reflect on the reasoning that shapes our action, it is quite complex. For example, any of us believe our actions are directed toward some good or goal. If so, how did we choose this good or this goal? We also know that we are more motivated to implement one set of actions over another set. Where does this motivation come from? To be a good leader, we have to read the actions of others and we have to plan, evaluate, and predict our own behavior in different situations. The ordinary actions of a leader involve a complex reasoning process. All of these questions point to the multifaceted nature of practical reasoning.

In helping undergraduate students and students in professional programs think about how practical reasoning enters into their lives and work, I have found it helpful to describe the underlying structure of practical reasoning in terms of four interrelated tasks: reading a situation, crafting an action strategy, realizing the action strategy, and learning through reflection.

- **Reading the situation** – We notice or recognize a problematic situation or opportunity that requires our action.
- **Crafting an action strategy** – We think about and chose a sequence of actions or an action strategy that we believe will address the problematic situation or grasp the opportunity.
- **Realizing the action strategy** – We implement action strategy with the intent to solve the problem or grasp the opportunity. Our action strategies are often realized through interaction with others.
- **Learning through reflection** – Given the ambiguity of human life, problems turn out to be different than we see them, action strategies are often flawed, and the implementation of action strategies less than perfect. We can learn by reflecting on how we carried out the first three tasks of practical reasoning and how we might carry them out in a better way.

Successful Graduates and Practical Reasoning

I would like to illustrate the importance of practical reasoning through a story of one successful graduate. Over the past couple of years, one of our graduates, a CEO of a midwestern electric power company, has been featured in the Harvard Business Review as an outstanding business strategist and thinker. Several articles have described how he was able to provide leadership for

transforming the electric utility company that was very successful in a highly regulated environment to a very successful energy company in a market-driven environment. As a business leader, our successful graduate was able to do a number of things well.

- He was able “to read the situation.” He was able to read the trends and foresaw the transition from an environment in which utilities were highly regulated to an environment that would be market-driven and where the company must be responsive to individual and corporate consumers of energy. He was able to develop urgency in the need to transform the company. If they stayed the way they were, no matter how good they were, they were not going to survive in the changing market place.
- He was able “to craft a strategy.” He was able to help people to imagine and invent the new company needed to be in the new environment and to determine the types of mergers, acquisitions, and divestitures that were needed to become this new company.
- He was able “to realize the strategy.” He and his leadership team were able to mobilize the many different people needed to implement the strategy that would transform the company. Corporate lenders were needed to finance acquisitions. Employees had to be mobilized to cut the cost of delivering energy.
- Finally, he was able “to learn through reflection.” As he was performing each of these tasks, he was able to learn by reflecting on each one of them. For example, he was able to ask, “How would I change my ‘reading the situation’ and the ‘crafting of the strategy’ now that I am in the midst of ‘realizing the strategy’”? He found he learned much in the task of leadership.

This transformation was an exercise in practical reasoning. To be an outstanding business leader, our successful graduate had to deliberate with others about the multiple and conflicting goods involved in this transformation of an electric company, and he had to deliberate with others about the right means to realize these goods. He had to harmonize the “goods” of shareholders’ return on investment, the good of the employees during the change, and the purpose of providing clean and efficient energy for a community.

Yet, our successful graduate was more than an outstanding business leader. He was also an outstanding community leader. In his community, as in many mid-central industrialized cities in the United States, public education was experiencing real problems. It was not providing African-American students a real opportunity to be successful in school and to be prepared for the jobs in an economy driven by information technology.

Again, he was able to provide leadership in his community through the skillful exercise of practical reasoning.

- He helped the community “to read a situation.” Working with others he was able to read the trends in his community – African-American students in the community were not graduating from high school and were not being prepared to be self-sufficient citizens in their community. Yet, there was a group of people that was successful in educating

African-American students. Together they were able to discern what was different with this successful group.

- He helped the community “to craft a strategy.” Working with those people who were successful in educating African-American students and others in the community, he helped develop a strategy to make the work of educating African-American students viable and sustainable in the heart of the inner city.
- He helped the community “to realize the strategy.” Again working with others, financial and human resources were mobilized and students were supported in this new educational environment.
- Finally, he helped the community “to learn through reflection.” The group was able to learn how to sustain and improve their efforts through critical reflection on what they had accomplished.

In this community setting, our successful graduate was able help organize and participate in a public community conversation in which people were able to deliberate about the common goods they wanted to create and the approaches they were going to use to bring about these goods.

Practical reasoning was important in both business leadership and in community leadership. As the storyteller, I was able to arrange the leadership work of our successful graduate around the four tasks of practical reasoning: “reading the situation,” “crafting a strategy,” “realizing the strategy,” and “learning through reflection.”

When we ask our successful graduate how he prepared himself to be a business leader and a community leader, he responds by describing a variety of experiences and opportunities that prepared him for this challenge. One element I saw in his description was a commitment to improve his skills in practical reasoning. He prepared himself for his “grand moment” of practical reasoning by constantly challenging himself to improve the “ordinary moments” of practical reasoning. He challenge himself to probe the following questions:

- How can I improve my ability to read situations? How do I engage people so that we can develop a shared reading of the situation?
- How can I improve my ability to craft strategy? How do I engage people so that we can craft a shared strategy?
- How can I improve my ability to realize a chosen strategy? How do I work with people so that we can realize our chosen strategies?
- How can I continually learn through the exercise of practical reasoning? How do I work with others to learn through practical reasoning?

I have a whole collection of stories like this one -- stories of outstanding women and men who have made a profound difference in their chosen fields and in their communities through their

leadership. These narratives of successful graduates would also illustrate how the skills of practical reasoning and practical wisdom are central to this transformative leadership.

IV. The Contribution of Marianist Universities

Let me make a few connections to learning on the campuses of our Marianist universities. In the years 1997 to 1999, a working committee from the three Marianist universities, Chaminade University of Honolulu, St. Mary's University, and the University of Dayton developed a document entitled *Characteristics of Marianist Universities*. These three universities, in very different cultural and social settings, have endeavored to embody the educational dream of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade. Five characteristics were singled out:

- Marianist universities educate for formation in faith
- Marianist universities provide an excellent education
- Marianist universities educate in family spirit
- Marianist universities educate for service justice and peace
- Marianist universities educate for adaptation and change

As one reads *Characteristics of Marianist Universities*, it is clear that we want the graduates of Marianist universities to have many of the characteristics I have briefly described in this reflection. We want our graduates to be people who can make a real difference in all sectors of society by connecting their learning to the tasks of leadership and service. We want our graduates to be a transforming presence in the world.

In the first part of this talk, I made a simple claim, namely that our most successful graduates exercise this transformative leadership through the skillful use of practical reasoning – by reading a situation, by crafting a strategy of action, by realizing the strategy, and by learning through reflection. In this second part of the talk, I want to explore a second simple claim, namely, that if practical reasoning and its excellence in practical wisdom are important to the transformative leadership we desire, then we must make educating for practical reasoning and practical wisdom an important element of education at our Marianist universities.

Every Catholic and most Church related Universities claim that “educating the whole person” is central to their mission. This is true of our Marianist universities, yet we have our own distinctive orientation. We educate the whole person by educating for practical reason and wisdom that combines a critical mind with a compassionate heart. Let me illustrate this approach with another story – a story of learning in a Marianist university. I remember vividly how one young woman caught a dream while she was a student at the University. She was an English major and she knew from her interactions with her teachers, through the work with the PR staff, and her work on the student newspaper that she could write well. She participated in a distinguished lecture series at the University where she heard Frances Moore Lappe talk about her book *Diet for a Small Planet*. She walked out of that lecture with a dream – she was going to write a book on world hunger.

After graduation, she went off to Sierra Leone, Africa, to work as a UD volunteer with a non-governmental agency working with rural communities on the issue of combating hunger. During that year, she recruited the next two post graduate volunteers to take her place. She came back to

UD to create a program that would provide a steady stream of postgraduate volunteers for Africa. She did this as a graduate assistant doing her Masters in International Relations. Next, she went to England to work on a doctorate in International Development. Through her thesis study and postgraduate research, she wrote her book on world hunger. After spending several years working on human rights in the State Department, today she is a Senior Advisor on Democracy and Governance with a major non-governmental agency. During her education, she was given an awareness of her gifts, the skills to explore big questions, and the imagination to dream of a life of leadership and service. It wasn't one event that prepared this young woman for the challenge of leadership and service. It was her participation in a learning community that took her skills and talents seriously and provided her a space to explore the big question, to formulate her dream, and to begin a tentative exploration of that dream.

Let me highlight some of the important dynamics of our Marianist learning communities that can help shape lives of learning, leadership, and service. First, we must help our students to learn how to read the situations they encounter in their work, their families, and in building their communities. For our young student, reading the situation of "World Hunger" required her not only to understand the complex ecological, economic, social, and cultural factors that shape this problem, but to also appreciate the tragic story of an Ethiopian mother. Motivation to change the suffering of hunger comes from walking with a mother as she travels without food with her baby in her arms for four days only to arrive at the feeding station and have her baby die. We must enable our students to see and interpret the experiences of their lives – a seeing and an interpretation that combines a critical mind with a compassionate heart.

We must help our students develop the habits of mind and heart that are important for practical reasoning and practical wisdom.

Critical reasoning is important. We need to provide students learning experiences where they test their ability to formulate a good argument grounded in experience and coherently structured and communicated. We must also provide opportunities for our students to test the conclusions and arguments with others.

Connected reasoning is important. While we teach courses in discrete disciplines like English, religion, history, and sociology, we need to provide opportunities where students are challenged to craft arguments that use ideas and frameworks taken from a variety of disciplines. To formulate a good strategy to address important elements of "World Hunger" will require our students and faculty to integrate ideas and concepts from many theoretical and practical disciplines.

Engaging students in constructive conversations is important. Good practical reasoning requires that we learn from others. I use constructive conversation to describe a conversation that allows each person to listen, appreciate, and learn from the ideas and arguments of others and, in turn, allows each person to express their ideas and argument so others can listen to them, appreciate them, and learn from them. This is not easy work, but it is extremely important for the learning process and our learning communities.

Enriching the imagination is important. In Marianist universities, we pride ourselves in teaching the humanities well. Well-taught courses in the humanities allow our students to expand their images of the world, people, and the experiences of self and others.

Diversity is important. The world our graduates are called to transform by their leadership is one of great complexity and diversity. We prepare our students for this world by becoming and being a diverse educational community. Our educational community must be a place where people are respected and where their gifts, experiences, and their cultures are valued and used for our common mission of learning. Being both diverse and a community will help us raise up a generation of leaders who will be champions of justice, peacemaking, and reconciliation.

Big questions are important. Almost any good university can prepare students to be a good accountant, a good educator, a good doctor, or a good lawyer. Our Marianist universities must do this and more. Our curriculum must provide the knowledge and skills our students need for any of these worthy professions. But if our graduates are to be leaders in these professions, then our curriculum must also challenge our student with big questions. Our future doctors must explore the meaning of human life and human health and explore why poor people do not receive good medical care. Our future lawyers must not only explore what are good legal procedures, but they must also explore how we build communities where all people receive justices and where the poor and the marginal are the special concern of all people. Our curriculum must ask big questions.

I believe dreams are important. Our Marianist universities must be learning communities where our graduates are challenged to develop a dream for their lives. One of the real challenges for college-age students is to develop a dream – an image of what they want their life to be as they move into the future. This dream focuses their purpose and their energies. Dreams are caught from the faculty and professional staff who are part of our community and from the questions that shape our learning.

Being a community of committed action is important. One of the most formative experiences that prepares students to be leaders for the future is committed action. When students join with other students and faculty to undertake committed action to address an issue of social justice, they are learning important skills for future leadership. When students reflect on the plight of the homeless or the hungry in their communities and undertake action to address this situation, they are building the skills of practical reasoning needed to be transformative leaders. Marianist universities are at their best when they provide opportunities for committed action.

This is a quick snapshot of the special resources that we, as Marianist universities, can bring to the task of educating for practical reasoning and practical wisdom. We are only now beginning to realize the power we have to educate transformative leaders.

V. Conclusion

Today, we celebrate 45 years of Marianist education at Chaminade University. Like all of our Marianist educational ventures, these years have been filled with many successes and just as

many crises and challenges. By the good grace and providence of God, Chaminade University is gaining strength and has the confidence to rededicate itself to its Catholic and Marianist mission.

This past fall, we celebrated the beatification of Father William Joseph Chaminade, the Founder of the Marianist Family – the Marianist lay movement and the Marianist religious communities, and also the patron of this University. Father Chaminade was celebrated as a prophet within the Church for committed lay leadership.

In five years when we celebrate Chaminade University's 50th anniversary, let us pray that we see a University that is beginning to realize Fr. Chaminade's vision for the multiplication of leaders who are transforming the world into a community of justice, peace, hope, and reconciliation. Chaminade University – its leaders, its faculty, staff, wonderful supporter, like Eddie Eu, and most of all its students will be in our prayers. Be assured of the support of your sisters and brothers at the University of Dayton.

Thank you.

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