Lee C. Bollinger Inauguration

Bollinger Outlines His Vision for Columbia, the ‘Quintessential Great Urban University’

President Bollinger with United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who addressed the audience during the ceremony.

Bollinger’s entire speech, go to: http://www.columbia.edu/pre/special/inaugural.html

Chair of the Trustees David Stern presents President Bollinger with the "keys to the administration."

RECORD PHOTOS BY EILEEN BARROSO

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Editor’s note: The following is an excerpt from Lee C. Bollinger’s speech to the Columbia community during his inauguration ceremony on Oct. 3. To read President Bollinger’s entire speech, go to: http://www.columbia.edu/pre/special/inaugural.html

A s we inherit this absolutely extraordinary institution at the beginning of this new century, I want to set out some themes that I hope will be discussed and pursued as we chart our future together. It is, and has been for some years now, a glorious time for higher education in this country, and with any luck it will be for the foreseeable future. What role will Columbia play in this era, and what do we need to do to enable that to happen? To answer that we need to know who we are.

And my general answer is this: Columbia is the Quintessential Great Urban University. Looked at from any perspective, it seems to me, this is the primary source of attributes, the defining personality, of this institution. We must embrace it. We must also understand it. Here are some of the things it means to me.

First: It is less possible and less desirable to remain apart, to be oversimplified (of people of different perceptions (often inaccurate and oversimplified) of people of different cultures, about different life experiences shape different ways of organizing societies, about different cultures, about different world views, about different races and ethnicities. This is the true marketplace of ideas.

At home in this country, the work of integration began by one of the greatest Supreme Court decisions of the twentieth century – Brown v. Board Of Education – is far from over, although much progress has been made. (Many Colombians were involved with Brown: Robert Carter, Kenneth and Mamie Clark, Jack Greenberg, Otto Kleinberg, Constance Baker Motley, and Jack Weinstein.) Over the past four decades, our American universities have done their part to fulfill the promise of Brown, by seeking the educational, intellectual, and emotional benefits of diversity and a sense of itself as a citizen of the world, and of the world, not just out of a calcula
tion of self-interest but out of a sense of responsibility.

Third: Columbia is profoundly engaged while retaining our distinctive intellectual outlook. The range of visitors to this campus – to teach, to speak, to visit, to seek counsel and to offer advice – is simply unparalleled.

The degree to which our students are beneficiaries of this access to the world beyond these buildings is self-evident. So is the degree to which our scholarship is positively affected by this augmented contact with the world. On the other side, Colombians are naturally called upon more frequently to serve and to be served by the new.

Exactly 100 years ago Nicholas Murray Butler said precisely this, in his inaugral address, at the start of his astonishing 43-year term (a record I hope to exceed, if I can). He said: "America has an international career, and it is interesting to see Butler, one of the great figures of higher education in the twentieth century (and a Nobel Prize winner), talk so comfortably and forthrightly about the importance of the university accepting the call for service to the world. My guess is that only a president of Columbia University in the City of New York (our official title) could say such things.

Here’s what he said about scholarship and service. President Butler first distinguished the scholar from the expert. Butler agreed with Aristotle that the "true scholar" is "free," meaning in an intellectual sense. To be free, he said, is to have "a large
ness of view ... which permits [one] to see the other side; a knowledge of the course of man’s intellectual history and its meaning; a grasp of principles and a standard for judging them; the power and habit of reflection firmly established; a fine feeling for moral and intellectual distinctions; and the kindness of spirit and nobility of purpose which are the support of genuine character." In these modern days, Butler said in 1902, "the university is not apart from the activities of the world, but in them and of them. It deals with real problems and it relates itself to life as it is." In the combination of scholarship and service, that, in the end, is what makes us of value to the society in the first place. And, for its part, when society invites our participation, it must be careful to resist the impulse of fools at times to crush that fragile intellectual spirit, for in any unrestrained battle, as Machiavelli said years ago, the state will win.

Second: Columbia, as the quintessential great urban university, is more international. I mean by this not only the presence in our university of individuals from outside the boundaries of the United States, which is significant. Columbia stands in the very top group of American Universities in terms of the number of international students. (This is a longstanding Columbia policy: it was the first university in the United States to have more than a thousand foreign students, in 1935.) Today our students come from 145 nations, and a quarter of our faculty are foreign born. Rather than saying Columbia is more international, I mean something more than that: I mean international in perspective, in consciousness, in our interests and our engagements with students, teachers, and scholars. In New York City, you cannot help but feel the presence of every part of the globe, and so it is at Columbia. I believe, therefore, that in every field represented at this University there is more focus on world issues. And, so deep down Columbia possesses naturally the sense of itself as a citizen of the world – we step out of the world, not just out of a calculation of self-interest but out of a sense of responsibility.

Fourth: Columbia, as the quintessential great urban university, is – perhaps ironically – deeply committed to tradition. Here I think of the great Core Curriculum, the longest running, most extensive core curriculum in the country. In the face of the swirling life surrounding us in this flourishing world city, it is not surprising that Columbia, as a university, would feel a greater need to hold onto what is precious from our history. And, yet, the greatness of this conservative impulse is not the wish to study Aristotle in isolation, but rather to immerse oneself in these great works while considering the great issues of our time – hence the title of the oldest Core course, "Contemporary Civilization." (Lionel Trilling said of reading King Lear that he read this "dire report of world history" for the "storm of ideas." "Does us the honor of supposing that we will make every possible effort of mind to withstand the force of its despair and to understand the complexity of what it tells us about the