



## Panel 3, on the subject of “The Students We Teach,” of the Curriculum Review Symposium.

### Citation

Ziolkowski, Jan M. 2003. Panel 3, on the subject of “The Students We Teach,” of the Curriculum Review Symposium. Presented at the Harvard University Barker Center, Cambridge, MA, November 23, 2003.

### Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:17552756>

### Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)



HARVARD  
UNIVERSITY

---

Author: Jan M. Ziolkowski  
Date: November 23, 2003  
Location: Harvard University Barker Center

Panel 3, on the subject of “The Students We Teach,” of the Curriculum Review Symposium. The event took place in the Thompson Room.

---

©2003 Jan M. Ziolkowski

## Curriculum Review Symposium

### Panel 3

#### “The Students We Teach”

So much concerns me deeply about our set of issues that to reduce my response to a few minutes would require the skills of a sonneteer, which I do not have. But I will try my best, by focusing on four admittedly large topics: What the college should make its mission, how we should define diversity in a global world, how meaningful international communication demands multilingualism, and how ill-advised we would be to neglect the books that have made us what we are. If anything I say proves to be unpalatable, I will take solace in both the security of tenure and the inscription on the fireplace behind me: “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold.”

Here goes: Universities can achieve much, but they cannot solve all of society’s problems. One of our responsibilities is to formulate our mission in the most ambitious way that can be realized. If such a thing as national character exists, then I posit that in the American character the line between optimistic ambitiousness and risky overconfidence is very fine. We in higher education face this peril as much as those in business, government, and elsewhere.

What is it that the college within our university should aim to provide to students? Probably precisely because of being a young nation, we often resort to our earliest documents, especially the Constitution, in determining how to handle present-day issues. The local equivalent would be the charter of 1650, in which two emphases stand out in particular. One is “The advancement and education of youth in all manner of good literature, arts, and sciences.” The other is “All other necessary provisions that may conduce to the education of the English and Indian youth of this country in knowledge and godliness.”

What the framers of this charter had in mind differs greatly from what we might understand today. For instance, “good literature” is drawn directly from Cicero’s phrase *bonae*

*litterae*, by which the Roman writer meant the proper education of a gentleman. Youth comprised young men, not women. Sciences bore no resemblance to the sciences today.

What did the men who drafted this charter fail to accomplish that we should strive even belatedly to fulfill? And what emphases did they make and techniques did they employ that we would be well advised to maintain?

The Indian youth make a good starting-place. Harvard did not follow through well in its laudable aim to educate the Indian youth of this land. It is too late to remedy its failings from the seventeenth through twentieth centuries, but we should think carefully about the modern-day Indians, those who are being left behind domestically, before we ratchet up too steeply admissions of foreign students. I have in mind not only racial minorities that the loaded word “Indians” brings to mind, but also the socioeconomic and even geographic minorities. Right now between zero and three students are enrolled annually at Harvard from the entire states of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Mississippi, and South Carolina. Are we really going to admit impoverished go-getters from Sudan, or Malaysia, or any of the hundreds of other countries around the world, when we cannot take care of our own? Will we build meaningful diversity if the foreign students end up coming primarily from privileged backgrounds—if we admit the scions of leaders such as the Shah of Iran, Ferdinand Marcos, and their like?

Please don’t think that I mean any of this xenophobically. *Au contraire*. No one could be more pained than I by the spectacle of U.S. soldiers shouting commands in English to crowds of Iraqis or the unavailability of trustworthy and qualified Arabic-speaking experts to oversee detentions and interrogations in Guantánamo. To forestall the recurrence of such crises, we need to know the rest of the world far better, preferably by cohabiting with it, both here and overseas.

I am not privileging a practical linguistic knowledge, which is often the result of chance living conditions, over a fuller academic understanding. Though many a Swiss waiter can handle

rudimentary communications in four or more languages, that does not mean that we should admit Swiss waiters as freshman or appoint them as professors.

But if the government is not going to have a Sputnik-type epiphany that we need to improve our understanding of the other value systems with which ours is in friction, and that such comprehension cannot be achieved solely in monoglot think tanks within the Beltway, then the university must provide leadership on its own. We can raise expectations of the foreign-language knowledge that incoming students must have. Either students must meet a higher standard upon matriculation or they must satisfy a more substantial language requirement while here. This latter provision would not exclude the bright students who come from school districts which are failing to offer what is needed.

Study abroad is wonderful and should be encouraged. But if our students are to profit fully from the experience, they cannot be shipped off to American enclaves abroad without having acquired a linguistic foundation. A person who does not grasp the language of a culture cannot be an expert, but only a tourist. Ours has become a culture of résumé building and consultancy, but there are realms in which analytic intelligence without years of hard-won knowledge is insufficient. Language is one such domain, history another, and woe betide the person or nation that becomes inattentive to either or both.

Rhetorically I have constructed this little *intervento* in the wrong way, since I have to conclude by “throwing the book.” The topic connects with an important truism: Harvard *is* a corporation, but it is unique among corporations in being based on books. Looming above us all in this paneled chamber is the image, albeit fictitious, of none other than John Harvard, who earned his status as founder by bequeathing one half of his estate and all four hundred of his books.

“Love Story” may be set in the Law School, but Harvard’s best-known edifice remains Widener Library. Harry Elkins Widener entered as a freshman this year a hundred years ago and

would have been dead long ago, even if he had not died in the sinking of the Titanic; but his name and books live on in his eponymous library, one of the greatest treasures over which this university has guardianship.

Books are still all around us here. Maybe it is not surprising to see a book in the clutches of a dean in the portrait on the wall over there, but it is also the symbol being perused by the fingers of Helen Keller (1880-1968) near him. Consider too the seal of the college: three books, each with a syllable of a Latin word, spelling out *veritas*: the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. You walked under it, probably unwittingly, upon entering the Barker Center, since the seal is on the pediment outside. The same volumes are on the fireplace here in the Thompson Room, on the clock to my right, and on the podium.

The ubiquity is no accident. The mass culture of music and movies is here to stay, and the computer has only just begun to alter and enrich our lives in learning, work, and entertainment. We have to collaborate as a community to analyze and understand all of what will come to our attention almost willy-nilly audio visually as a result of living in the twenty-first century. But one of our main goals must be to explore what is *not* automatically part of everyday life. Students are going to know how to google without our guidance—but they will need special help in navigating both books on paper and digitized sources. We must incorporate libraries and librarians into our teaching, both when that inclusion entails going physically into the buildings and when the motion is virtual. In universities the book has always radiated a special magic, an inspiring and unquotidian magic, and that is why it is emblazoned so often and so prominently within our buildings. Those of us in the humanities must keep alive the magic.

Uttering these words, I am almost wilting beneath the glare of Theodore Roosevelt. Partly he is irascible because I have not mentioned him yet, partly because I have neared the end of my allotted time. But mainly it is because he disagrees so strongly with what I have said. Roosevelt, who received his AB in 1880, warned students: “If you become so

overcultivated...that you cannot do the hard work of practical politics, then you had better never have been educated at all.” I would maintain that the disciplines of armchair traveling through books and language study are just as hard work as gunning down antlered herds to produce chandeliers or rough riding in Cuba, and I would point out that he and I can argue only because books have preserved his words for me, thanks to Harry Widener—whom he would have regarded as overcultivated.

Let’s bring together the domestic and the foreign meaningfully. Let’s keep half open, or even throw open all the way, the portcullis to knowledge that can be seen in the heraldry on the podium and the clock, but let’s do it without discarding the resources that have made this institution and this community as great as they are; for in our times the perils of undercultivation far exceed those of overcultivation. And, finally, let’s remember that beyond knowledge, beyond intelligence, which can be nurtured with modes of perception and means of reasoning or analysis—beyond all that lies wisdom, which cannot be taught but must nonetheless be recognized and fostered.