

Welcoming Remarks, Inaugural Symposium on the Curriculum
March 7, 2009

First, let me follow Eliza by adding my own special welcome to everyone here, bright and early on a Saturday morning, who has come to the Inaugural Symposium on Liberal Arts at Franklin & Marshall College. I would especially like to welcome our first four Emerging Scholars, whose work we have come to hear and to celebrate. I won't keep us long from that scholarly pleasure, although I would like to say a very few words about the ideas behind the Symposium, and what brought us to such a happy occasion. I would also like to take a moment here to publically thank the other members of the Emerging Scholars search committee, who developed our theme of "Resonance," who read many applications and who took the time out of their busy schedules to debate the merits of all the deserving candidates: Professors Jerome Hodos, Ken Krebs, John Lardas Modern, Eliza Reilly and Cecile Zorach.

The point of this Symposium is to enhance the College's more general liberal arts mission. An important aspect of the liberal arts is ongoing education; it doesn't begin nor should it end here at F&M, for anyone. The faculty—and, we hope, our students—also partake in this aspect of the liberal arts. We aren't just teachers; we are also learners, and one of the ways we learn is by talking to other scholars who participate in liberal arts institutions. Because of this hope, the Symposium has brought four younger scholars to campus, so that the F&M scholarly community can meet, talk with and learn from them. We don't just want to hear about their scholarship—although that will be the initial encounter we have with them today—but we want to hear how they fit their scholarship into the liberal arts as practiced in their home institutions. (And we hope that everyone will take the opportunity of our meals and breaks together to speak with the Emerging Scholars on these topics, as well as to share something of our own campus culture of liberal learning.) Those of our students who come to hear the presentations today will also have an opportunity to meet and talk with these vibrant and interesting teacher-scholars from a variety of colleges.

So the plan for today is something of a two-way street. The Emerging Scholars will have the chance to share their current research with us, as well as talk with us all about how they integrate that research into the liberal arts in their home institutions. We will have a chance to share our insights into what the Emerging Scholars are doing, as well as to talk frankly about the values of liberal arts institutions—as it should be, across disciplinary and institutional boundaries. Students will have the chance to hear cutting edge research in the liberal arts, and also to see their own professors engaging not only the Emerging Scholars but with our profession more generally. (Students, unless they attend professional conferences, rarely see the faculty in full academic mode, so this might be eye-opening for them, too.)

As Professor Billig so eloquently noted last evening, there is a larger, cultural trend towards "credentializing" rather than appreciating learning for its own sake in our society—even on many liberal arts campuses. A certain amount of professionalization is clearly necessary in contemporary society, where the "credential" is highly valued, although it's disheartening to note that our students are taught to develop resumes before

they even apply to college. The problem is that too much emphasis on the credential tends to vitiate the pleasures of learning, and liberal arts education is supremely about taking pleasure in learning. Faculty members also are guilty of this, as we are part of this larger culture (even though some try to deny us that status). A Symposium like this one gives our honored guests, our faculty and our students an opportunity to bask in learning and the pleasures of intellectual discourse. Our invitees do get a "credential," in that they are our very first cohort of Emerging Scholars, we hope they will be proud to place that on their CVs. But mostly we will do today what those of us who love the liberal arts love to do—hear about books and hands-on research, talk about what we've heard, share what we're doing and see how it fits with the work of our guests. Knowing the Center for Liberal Arts and Society, I am also assured that we will have a lovely meal and plenty of caffeinated beverages to fuel the conversation in a physical sense.

On a last note, we should take stock of why such a celebratory Symposium is needed on a liberal arts campus like this one. I believe firmly that the liberal arts are more leisurely and time draining than our society appreciates. It takes time to read a book, really think about a poem, engage in extended testing of a scientific hypothesis, do anthropological or other social science fieldwork (to add in my own subject). There is nothing instantaneous about what we do here. A student may have an epiphany in a classroom; it all may seem to become, suddenly and intensely, clear. But there is a lot of hard work and a lot of time behind the point that suddenly opened up the world; it isn't magic, even if it feels magical. I would also note that liberal arts require us to do a number of tasks and to focus on a number of subjects, but this education is not really about "multitasking" in any ordinary sense. Hopefully what happens is that connections are made, from class to class, from work inside and outside the curriculum. The liberal arts are not easy; you can't turn them on and off; they are too intransigent for that. Once they are really turned on, they make their way into our deeper consciousness, and they reside there, informing and transforming the way we think. So maybe, if we are engaged in such a difficult task—one that goes against the flow of much of our society—we ought to take the time, now and again, to celebrate the effort. I like to think that today's Symposium is one way of taking that time and celebrating that effort—not only for our four Emerging Scholars but for all of us who labor in the liberal arts vineyard, especially here at Franklin & Marshall.