

Chapman University Convocation Address: The Aims of Education

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Good evening everyone. Thank you, President Struppa, for your warm welcome and for inviting me to reflect on a question that feels both timeless and newly urgent:

What are the aims of education today?

In an age defined by polarization, digital distraction, and misinformation, it may feel like the only thing we can all agree on is this: technology is profoundly reshaping what—and how—we learn.

For two decades, I've studied how technology shapes young people's development—how it influences their educational opportunities, their identities, their family and community ties, and their sense of civic possibility. My research and my students have taught me a great deal and tonight, I want to share some of what I've learned with you—especially about what education must become at this moment. []

Let me begin with a simple truth— young people are coming of age in the most complex and connected era in human history. They are bombarded with information and with misinformation. They are constantly navigating competing truths, impassioned hot takes, and conversations that rarely extend beyond a headline, hashtag, or swipe.

And yet, studies consistently show that most young people are not extremists. In fact, they often believe that their peers are *more* politically extreme than they actually are. Many despair over whether Americans will ever find common ground again.

But here's the paradox: their pessimism is fertile ground for renewal—if we meet it with purpose. []

Our classrooms must be the antidote. Our lectures and labs, our seminars and studios—these are the spaces where we can slow down the speed of casual assumption. Deep learning and skill development take time, and classrooms can be havens in a world where everything moves much too quickly. Spaces to reduce the pace, to learn to focus attention, and to give serious attention to serious matters. Where we can ask our students not just to *know*, but to *think*. Not to merely *react*, but to *reason*.

Now, I recognize that developing deep thinkers has never been easy—and today, it's harder than ever. We're competing with TikToks, notifications, and the seductive certainty of AI-generated answers. The cognitive bandwidth required to truly grapple with complexity is under constant siege.

So how do we respond?

As a communication and technology scholar, my first answer is this: **we must be more intentional about how we integrate technology into learning.** Not all tech enhances cognition, and not every innovation belongs in the classroom.

A laptop can be a powerful tool for collaborative writing, but it can also be a barrier to presence during a hard conversation. AI can be a helpful assistant when we know enough to recognize its hallucinations, but it cannot do the work of developing the knowledge needed to recognize that hallucination. As with all communication technologies—from the printing press to the podcast—*the tool must fit the task*.

In a period of rapid technological innovation, learning to learn also means learning how to change. Change requires friction of thought; the wrestling match between competing ideas. The messiness of revision, not just in our writing but also revisiting of our assumptions and our unexamined beliefs.

This is why the best classrooms are not simply venues for content delivery—they become communities of inquiry. [] Shared spaces where students grapple with difficult texts, connect ideas, theorems, laws, and arguments, and discover what it means to take a stance—and, crucially, how to better understand stances that they do not share.

This is more than a pedagogy. It's a democratic practice. []

To educate well in this moment, we must cultivate in our students the courage to entertain conflicting views—and to do so without collapsing into false equivalence. This is hardly a new idea: it was Aristotle who observed, “It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.”

Entertaining a thought you don't accept is empathy—not the easy kind that sympathizes, but the rigorous kind that seeks to *understand*. To ask: *Why do people I disagree with believe what they believe? What histories, what fears, what hopes animate their views?*

Empathy has become harder to practice in our splintered media landscape. In the early 1980s, political scientist Benedict Anderson argued that the advent of newspapers was what fostered a sense of national identity. Citizens who started each morning learning the news of the day imagined millions of fellow citizens engaged in the same act. He argued that that sense of “imagined community” comes from shared information rituals. Today, with media landscapes that are curated to personal tastes, shared information spaces have fractured. []

But the classroom remains—and that is its radical potential. []

In our classrooms, we can still say: “Read this.” Not because it confirms your views, but because it challenges them. Because it reveals the intellectual rigor in an opposing tradition. Because it sharpens your thinking by testing it against the best counter-arguments, not the weakest caricature you can conjure.

That doesn't mean giving space to denialism or hate—not all ideas are worthy of equal airtime. Holocaust testimonies should never be paired with the works of Holocaust deniers, for example.

But it does mean teaching students to distinguish between disagreement and disinformation. Between dialogue and dogma. And crucially, how to hold more than one thing to be true at a time.

In my classes, I tell students from day one: *You are going to read ideas and claims that make you uncomfortable. Some of them make me uncomfortable too.* But discomfort is not the enemy of education—indeed, it is where real learning begins.

And we, as educators, must model what it looks like to stay present in discomfort. To ask hard questions, to give each other grace, and avoid seeking uniformity in our perspectives. That is how a small-l liberal education lives up to its name—not by avoiding hard topics, but by confronting them together, with intellectual humility and collective purpose.

Because ultimately, **the aim of education is not to teach students *what* to think, but *how* to think—and how to live productively in community with those who think differently. []**

Let me say that again: *The aim of education is to learn how to think—not what to think—and to learn how to live in meaningful connection with others who see the world differently.*

[]

If we do this well—if we succeed in forming students who are curious, compassionate, and critically engaged—then we do more than educate. **We repair.** []

In a post-pandemic world where students report rising loneliness despite constant connectivity, our classrooms can become sanctuaries of belonging. Places where deep ideas—and deeper relationships—take root. []

Because learning, at its best, is a collective act. A conversation between past thinkers, present peers, and future possibilities. []

And so, I see our shared task as educators today to be this:

To teach the habits of mind—and the habits of heart—that will help our students flourish in a world of uncertainty. To help them move beyond the shallow satisfactions of “likes” and “shares” to the deeper satisfactions of purposeful disagreement and hard-won connection to each other.

If we can do that—if we can help them cultivate deep knowledge and even deeper human connection—then we will have given them a gift far greater than any course grade or credential.

We will have helped shape citizens worthy of democracy, neighbors capable of empathy, and a generation of leaders prepared to build a more just and generous world. []

Here at Chapman, we are uniquely poised to lead that charge.

We are a university where the liberal arts meet the frontiers of science. Where communication scholars work alongside ethicists, economists, and engineers. Where students not only learn how to master tools like AI, but to ask: *To what end? In whose interest? And with what responsibility?*

And as we prepare for a new chapter in Chapman's history, I want to take a moment to honor President Daniele Struppa, whose intellectual vision and moral imagination have guided this university through a transformative era.

President Struppa, your deep commitment to inquiry, to interdisciplinarity, and to academic freedom has created the conditions in which the next phase of Chapman's reinvention can thrive.

And I want to welcome incoming President Matt Parlow. As Chapman confronts what it means to offer a liberal education in an age of artificial intelligence and deep civic mistrust, I am certain we will not retreat from these challenges, but will face them with rigor, intellectual humility, and shared purpose.

And so, to my colleagues and to our new and returning students: let us make Chapman not just a campus of academic achievement, but a community of trust and truth-seeking. A place where we train not only minds, but civic character. Where we foster not just connection, but the courage to understand— and to be changed— by each other.

Because at its best, that is what education makes possible. And it is what this historical moment, our shared country, and this generation of students so urgently demand.

Thank you.