January 30, 2013

Dear Campus Community,

During my flight back to California after recently attending the national meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) in Atlanta, I reflected on the tenor of the conference, the issues and topics that were discussed most frequently in plenary and concurrent sessions, and in hallway conversations among the thousands of national and global participants. This was like no other AAC&U meeting I have attended.

Instead of hearing language that is focused primarily on phrases such as “student learning outcomes,” “theory to practice,” “ePortfolios,” “community engagement,” “personal and social responsibility,” and “entrepreneurial education,” the language this time included words that are relatively new to our changing world of education: Udacity, Coursera, MOOCs, for-profit versus not-for-profit educational delivery and a blending of the two models, and increasing financially sustaining educational models.

In retrospect, it seems that the topics threaded through this year’s discussions were most often related to the following questions and themes:

(1) How can we create and support educational models that have three important components: maintaining quality of student learning, reducing costs for supporting the educational organization, and maintaining faculty, staff and administrator morale?

(2) How can we best understand and anticipate the broadest effects that technological advances will have on educational delivery, student learning, and cost of delivery?

(3) How can we educate the public and the government that there is not a “one size fits all” educational model that is best for every student constituent, in every location, with any one academic program?

(4) How can we graduate students (graduate and undergraduate) who have deep knowledge in their disciplines, as well as the skills and integrity to be successful citizens and professionals?

While these are all good questions, there was no common voice or “silver bullet” that emerged to definitely answer one, two, or all of these questions. But, what I can assure you is, that as the president of our university, I came away from this meeting optimistic. In fact, I was highly optimistic that we, at the University of La Verne, are having the right conversations to answer these questions in ways that are thoughtful, constructive, and visionary.

At the conference, one plenary speaker’s comment that resonated with me was, “We are no longer in the age of information; we are in the age of connections.” For me, this encapsulated much of who we
are and what we do at the University of La Verne. Internet access ushered in the age of information, where any person with internet capabilities had instant access to information found in nearly any text book, newspaper, or publication. But if we lived only in a world that was an “age of information,” we would have no need for our learning environment. Students would be able to find all of their information entirely through electronic means, and all meaningful connections would be lost. The University of La Verne is a prime representation of the current “age of connections,” and the importance of fostering connections in a higher education setting.

Students who are drawn to our mission, our ethos, our academic programs, and our locations are enrolling in an institution that is grounded in connections: students to faculty (face-to-face, hybrid, or electronically); students to knowledge and disciplines; students to students; and students to community and civic engagement. Because we identify many of our learning outcomes well beyond the identification of basic knowledge, we use our “connections” to graduate students who think critically, reason ethically and collaboratively, and are interculturally competent. It is the experiences and connections with our faculty, peer-to-peer learning, and co-curricular experiences that bring basic information and knowledge to a much higher level. The La Verne Experience, threaded throughout the traditional undergraduate curricula, the CAPA curricula, and the graduate programs, exemplifies the “age of connections” at its best.

Our 2020 Strategic Vision, in fact, is positioning us to deepen and improve these “connections” and to answer the questions articulated above. This will take us to “where the puck it going to be.” The 2020 Strategic Vision has fostered a process that represents four colleges, 11 campuses, and one university working together to achieve one mission and one vision. Because we are having these conversations together as an entire campus, we are addressing the strategies, goals and tactical objects appropriate to each campus, each college, each program, and each constituent.

The next few weeks will reveal a campus bursting with many exemplary activities and programs available to all. It is not only Winter Commencement on February 2 and the beginning of the spring 2013 semester, but so much more. The La Verne Water Technology Conference is being held on January 31, and the State of the University Address will be hosted in the Campus Center and live-streamed on February 6. The Board of Trustees Retreat will take place over the weekend of February 8-10. La Verne was selected to host the 2013 U.S. Debate Nationals Tournament and we were invited to host the American Council on Education’s Southern California Regional Women’s Leadership Conference. California Supreme Court Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye will be speaking on February 11 at the College of Law and our women’s basketball team is #1 nationally in Division III.

Just following the close of the AAC&U conference, I walked to the Martin Luther King Center. The word “inspirational” would be an understatement. Walking through the Center, listening to Dr. King’s speeches, seeing videos of the marches moved me beyond words. When I left the Center and stood before the “Eternal Flame” across from Dr. King’s grave, I was deeply moved by the plaque next to the flame with Dr. King’s words. I write these words here as we move forward with our La Verne education, remembering our purpose and our 1891 founding values:

“The Eternal Flame symbolizes the continuing effort to realize Dr. King’s ideals for the ‘Beloved Community’ which requires lasting personal commitment that cannot weaken when faced with obstacles.”

Sincerely,
Devorah Lieberman, Ph.D.
President