

Fall Speech  
August 18, 2014

Here we are – back for another year.

I plan to keep my remarks brief today. I am sure you are more interested in what our new Chancellor has to say. However, since we are welcoming a new Chancellor into this community I wanted to spend a few minutes reflecting both on the idea of community and the special nature of this community.

I confess I have never liked the metaphor of “family” to describe our collective identity. I much prefer the term “community.” “Family” implies some kind of lineage or ties of blood that bind people together. We are not that. Also, you cannot choose your family and the bonds of kinship into which you are born. That is not our situation.

I know that we use the term “family” here to mean something else. It is a word that is used to denote that we feel a sense of caring for one another, to express a bond that holds us together, that this is a place of mutual support.

But let me suggest that the term community implies that as well. And, it also implies something else. There is no father, no mother, and no children to be managed, but a community of equals, coming together of their own volition, bound in a common enterprise. So I will speak of us as a community, a particular type of community, a community of scholars.

As a community of scholars, we have a particular role to play in the larger society. We are that part of the population that is dedicated to the advancement and transmission of knowledge. Look around. This is what a community of scholars looks like. I do not need to tell of the nobility of such a calling.

But a community of scholars is just one of the subsystems that make up the larger community that constitute the states and the nations of which we are apart.

Since the beginning of civilization human beings have been seeking to understand the secrets of communities and how they function. In fact, what may seem simple on the surface is far more complex under the façade. By definition, communities are collections of people engaged in a common enterprise. This means that they require some coordination of collective action. These require rules that

communities set for themselves in their daily activity. However, the coordination of action also requires rules that determine how rules are to be made. These are the meta-rules.

I want to suggest to you that today we live in a time of conflict and tension between the rules and the meta-rules. And, if there is any place on earth that reveals this tension, it is the state of North Carolina. To put it simply, North Carolina has become a place in which the daily rules are being used to undermine the meta-rules. This is a very troubling development.

Let me explain what I mean. With the coming of the democratic era to human social interaction the answer to the question of rule seemed simple. "Let the people decide," is the mantra of the democratic age. However, it soon became apparent that such a principle was incomplete. Lacking was a process that set down the procedures and the processes for how to measure the will of the people. These meta-rules for the political subsystem became known as constitutions. So modern governance has generally been divided between the legislative process, the setting of policy and statutory law, and the meta-rules that are contained in the constitutions.

But I want to suggest to you that these constitutions actually reflect far more than just the procedures for making rules. They contain the outline of the state's covenant with the people that make up the community.

If we look at the North Carolina constitution, for example, we see rules for who can vote, limits on legislative and executive power, the role and responsibilities of local governments, etc. However, these meta-rules also encompass something else. They also seek to assure that the conditions are present for the health of the subsystems that make up the community as a whole.

It is in this document that the collective identity of the community, its values, and promises to the people are expressed. This is represented not just as a set of aspirational principles, but as an understanding of what conditions must be present for the well-being of the entire community, all its people, in all their varied activities.

Again, if we look at the constitution of North Carolina this is very clear. It does not just define who can vote, but it outlines what it considers the essential subsystems for the functioning of the larger community in North Carolina. The constitution identifies those essential conditions for the population of the state, as a

whole, to flourish. It speaks of the support for agriculture, economic development, the building of roads, bridges, and airport facilities, and the protection of natural resources. The health of these elements inside the state are each seen as essential to the flourishing of the state as a whole.

So the document that contains the meta-rules for North Carolina, the document that asserts the importance of supporting the conditions necessary of the health of the community as a whole, identifies the priorities of the community through their inclusion. And, if frequency is an indication of community priorities, then education should be understood to be at the top of the list. It is mentioned in Article I Section 15, Article V Section 12, and it encompasses all of Article IX.

So the meta-rules outlined by the state's constitution assert that the flourishing of education and the education of the citizens of North Carolina is a priority. However, for that objective to be realized the communities of scholars around the state of North Carolina must be provided the conditions to flourish. We all know that this is not the case.

We have suffered different types of threats over the years. We have had frontal assaults, attacks on the university for the knowledge it has sought to impart to the citizens. I can recall after 9/11 there was a need and a desire to understand the thinking of those who attacked us. But when we encouraged people to read the Koran and come to an understanding of Islam, we were attacked for being un-American or anti-Christian. In South Carolina just this year, universities in the South Carolina system that used books with gay themes have been threatened with funding cuts by the legislature. We all understand this as a degenerate kind of politics, one that caters to society's lowest common denominator through messages of hate and fear. The irony is, of course, that you combat such ignorance through education, the very thing that is under attack.

However, today we suffer less from this type of frontal assault. Today our plight is more what could be called a siege. A siege is carried out by denying what is necessary to a community for its survival. The strategy is not to directly confront, but to starve your opponent.

In the larger picture, the use of a siege to undermine higher education means that the meta-rules that support the health of the entire community have broken down. This is the case on voting rights, aid to the poor, access to medical care, as well as support for higher educations. All have been identified in the meta-rules as essential components of a healthy community. However, in all these cases,

statutory law has been used to undermine the covenant with the people. These commitments have either been allowed to atrophy, or consciously encouraged to do so.

As with so many of these areas, in the case of higher education we are told there is no money. But as every first semester political science student can tell you, the stream of revenue to support the health of the community is a matter of political will. The plutocratic class would like you to believe that the health of the 1% is the measure of the community's health. However, when we understand that education is given priority in order to provide economic opportunities and to serve as an engine of economic growth we can see what a foolish path we are on.

The other charge that is brought against higher education is that we are not teaching the right subjects to our students. We should be training students for jobs. The political class wants to make it our responsibility to be the engine of economic growth for North Carolina. So they flail around attacking the tenure system, imposing more stringent post-tenure-review guidelines, and pushing for a greater adoption of the business model for the university.

However, our impact on the North Carolina economy has always been indirect. We educate people in the ways of thinking and research in order that they can take those skills in new directions. It is the broad educational experiences that push the frontiers of knowledge and takes us to new advances, and ultimately new business opportunities. Therefore, our professional ethics demand that we resist the vocationalization of the university. Such thinking is small and will ultimately impede the long-term economic success of our state.

But there is another reason we need to resist the encroachment of the business model into higher education that is rarely talked about. And this takes us back to what I discussed at the beginning. The business ethos is not a community-oriented philosophy. Not only is it oriented around personal and individual gains, but it is also organized in a way that is antithetical to the health and well-being of communities. Adam Smith celebrated the hierarchical structure of the business enterprise as representing the vision of one person.

But carried out as a principle of governance, such a model produces a structure that is antithetical to a modern understanding of communities. Modern communities are collections of equals, organized not as an instrumental means to private ends, but as organizations of people that are themselves fully developed ends that are part of something beyond themselves. This realization prompted writers such as

Randolf Bourne and William Ghent to write about the coming of industrial feudalism in the early twentieth century, conveying the tension between the ethos of business and the conditions for a healthy community made up of equals.

What they recognized was that a community of equals demands mechanisms for participation by everyone. This means that not only must these communities be self-regulating, but that the collective decision-making must have a democratic character. Only by providing input for all individuals is the social cohesion generated that binds the members together, giving substance to their common enterprise.

This community is a community of scholars. Its health cannot be separated from the health of the North Carolina community more generally. Its importance is recognized in meta-rules that govern that state. Yet, at present, there is disharmony between the rules being generated by the legislature and the meta-rules designed for the health of the community. I think we all understand that.

I mention these things as I think they provide a framework for understanding the role and responsibility of the Faculty Senate. The Senate must be concerned with those conditions that are necessary to the maintenance of the community of scholars. Such concerns cannot be separated from the meta-rules around which we organize governance on the campus. For example, we all support the idea of academic freedom as one of those conditions necessary for the maintenance of a community of scholars. But academic freedom is a hollow term without a structure in place in which the community enjoys its application. Therefore, academic freedom requires rules and meta-rules in order to be realized.

I confess, I am absorbed by this and take it very seriously because I view the Faculty Senate as the keeper of the meta-rules for this community of scholars. We have to continually ask ourselves, “What can we do to create the conditions that will allow this community to flourish”? Communities are empathic by their nature. We need to keep this in mind as we make changes to the Handbook. We are all connected in this enterprise. So whether you prefer the term “family” or “community,” the point remains the same. We are all in this together. Part of our identity is bound to the common mission in which we are engaged.

In addition, we must be future-oriented in our thinking. We must design for tomorrow not yesterday. However, we must always keep in mind the values and principles that make ASU a special place. Also, we must protect and promote the

values of academic freedom, due process, and democratic governance and create the structures through which they can be realized.

And we must keep in mind that the dignity of this community can only be maintained if it is a community of equals engaged in a process that is self-regulating at its very core. I hope these are the values the Senate will always represent. It is a task that is “of,” “by,” and “for” every member of this community of scholars.

So the Senate will continue on that quest outlined by Immanuel Kant, engaging our reasoning ability to try and create the perfect constitution, knowing all the time that such perfection will always be an illusory goal. As Kant reminds us, it is the intention and the effort that defines our humanity.

Stay in touch with your Senators. We had a retreat last Thursday where we began to discuss the agenda for the upcoming year. Let us know what you think is important.

In conclusion, let me add that it is an honor to serve you, as it is an honor to work with every Senator. They work hard on your behalf and the deeply care about this community.

Thank you and have a good semester.

- Andy Koch