Keynote Address:

“Reflections on Being Interdisciplinary”

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University Technology Services
Florida International University
Miami, Florida
Dr. John McGowan
VICEPRESIDENT & CHIEFINFORMATIONOFFICER
UNIVERSITYTECHNOLOGYSERVICES

Dr. McGowan has worked in higher education for the past 20 years, both as a consultant to universities and colleges and as an outsourcing Director of Project Planning for SCT, a major software company in higher education. His expertise is in systems management, systems integration, networking and operating systems. He has also been involved as a consultant for IBM’s higher education unit, where his clients included the University of California system, the California State University system, the California Community College system, Washington State University, and the University of the Pacific. In addition he has consulted for UNISYS, DEC/Compaq, AT&T, American Express, and many Department of Defense agencies, including NASA, NSA, the Air Force, and Army.

In addition, Dr. McGowan was the Chief Operating Officer for a national drug-testing lab and spent 11 years prior to that as a research biochemist in the fields of cancer research and molecular biology. He was the Chief Technology Officer for the University of Southern Mississippi and was responsible for the deployment of PeopleSoft and the wireless initiative at the 100 plus building campus. He was the senior technical lead for Internet 2 at the University and at NASA Stennis Space Center.

Dr. McGowan joined Florida International University in July, 2001, as Vice President for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer. He has been selected as one of the Top 10 Leaders in IT by Cisco Corporation. In addition, under his direction the technology organization of Florida International University has been selected as a Laureate of the Computerworld Honors Program. Dr. McGowan is a member of Cisco Corporation’s Enterprise Technical Advisory Board and of PeopleSoft Corporation’s Technical Advisory Board. He also is a member of the Project Advisory Committee of the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study Human Genome Project.

“Be the change you want to see in the World.”
~ Mahatma Gandhi
Reflections on Being Interdisciplinary
by Dr. John McGowan

Introduction
It is my pleasure to share in the awards ceremony of the Honors College. I was honored by the request to share my thoughts with you regarding the "state of the world" and your role in this evolving society. Upon reflection, I thought about my own journey through life thus far and focused on how I was able to contribute to the greater cause, i.e. the development of a global village.

I am constantly viewing issues based upon my own experiential framework and my focus has often returned to a very special book. I was introduced to this book as an entering freshmen as part of a required summer reading program. The Idea of a University was written by John Henry Newman on the founding of the University of Dublin in 1850. The focus of the discourse was on the role of the university in the education of the person from a holistic point of view:

"That form of Universal Knowledge which is the perfection of the individual intellect is not knowing all branches of knowledge but simply is the power of viewing many things at once, as one whole, of referring them several to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence."

It influenced me because at that time I was in fact studying with an eye toward becoming a Jesuit priest. It was of significance because it focused upon the fact that our educational mandate involved participation in a very broad spectrum of courses, including, in my case, a minor in philosophy and theology, as well as majors in chemistry and biology. At the time, I did not begin to appreciate my undergraduate education. It is in the context of this interdisciplinary nature of education that I explore your future, regardless of vocation or professional interest.

Some Personal Reflection
In attempting to do so, I wish to initially focus on my own reflection of self and the value I placed on education. Life has been an incredible journey because of my own interdisciplinary experiences. I grew up in Butte, Montana, attended Catholic Schools, and ventured to Spokane, Washington, to study with the Jesuits at Gonzaga University. The influence of the Jesuits was similar to that of your Honors College. Their mission was to educate the "best and brightest" and to enable students to develop critical and creative thinking skills. Our senior year involved the defense of our major as well as a comprehensive oral exam in philosophy. The philosophy oral was a nerve wracking and humbling experience; it required defense in a specified area of philosophy, in my case existentialism. Additionally, I defended my senior thesis in biochemistry.
My major professor in graduate school studied with a Nobel Laureate at the University of California, Berkeley. His focus on the holistic development of his graduate students placed me in the position again of having to “think outside of the box.” We often had seminars that discussed the ethics of a particular science initiative, such as DNA testing or the utilization of marijuana as a medicinal. We spent considerable time as graduate students in discourse about science, education, research, and ethics.

My focus at that time was on the regulation of protein synthesis in mammalian systems. Thereafter, I assumed a postdoctoral position with the Environmental Protection Agency and became quite involved in the use of personal computers as a tool for my research efforts related to carcinogenesis and the role of arsenic acting as either an initiator or promoter of neoplasia. It was a time of discovery and collegiality, and as I became more involved in the computational aspects of the research I also became known as one of the gurus in the implementation and development of computer solutions for the business environment. This necessitated my return to school to take courses in accounting and management. I realized that management had become a key element of whatever I chose to do for the remainder of my life.

I also realized that I could not do justice to two careers and therefore left the university research environment for the “greener pastures” of information technology and consulting. I said goodbye for the moment to the world of biochemistry and toxicology and welcomed in the world of business and management. I established my own computer firm, and began the process of developing relationships with the larger, prestigious vendors such as IBM, AT&T, Cisco, and Unixys. I spent the next eighteen years in Silicon Valley; such an energetic and captivating time to be there working with the major players in networking and computing. Upon reflection it was traumatic to leave the academic and research community behind (which is so protected) for the corporate world.

The computer industry taught me that I must be the best in order to survive. It made me aware of the significance of the bottom line and that accountability and assessment were the norm. To be a part of Silicon Valley during the boom years was invigorating. You were constantly in “learning mode” because everything changed so rapidly. Note that many of the original “techies” were not individuals with degrees in computer science because it did not exist as a discipline at that time. What better way to become involved in a truly interdisciplinary field than to join the “movement” in the Valley.

I spent many of those years as a consultant to IBM and had the pleasure of working with many of the Fortune 500 companies on the West Coast. Again I went back to the classroom to become certified in operating systems, systems integration, and networking. I was assigned to work with the DOD agencies on matters related to security and operating systems. In addition, I took several years out of my technology schedule to turn a drug company around because of a bet for a case of good wine.

Finally I came full circle to the position I now occupy in academia, that of Vice President and...
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The Best of Two worlds

The Honors College at Florida International University in Miami offers the best of two worlds. It is a small community of outstanding students, dedicated scholars, and committed teachers who work together in an atmosphere usually associated with small private colleges. Yet, we do so with all the resources of a major state university, which is one of the nation’s top doctoral / research extensive universities. Only 152 universities in the United States hold this superior rank.

The Honors College provides a broad foundation for dedicated students who want to get the most out of their undergraduate education. The undergraduate experience it provides is significantly enhanced by the broad interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum and opportunities to work closely with expert faculty and in the community. The opportunities for graduate or professional study and for employment are greatly expanded because of the range of unique activities and academic experiences made available to students in the College.

The Honors Curriculum

You may pursue almost any major available in the University and at the same time complete the honors curriculum. The curriculum emphasizes the following activities: Critical, integrative, and creative thinking; Group and independent research; Oral presentation; Close contact between students and faculty; Integration of class work with the broader community.

Outstanding Professors and Researchers

“Knowledgeable, caring, enthusiastic, and approachable.” These are some of the characteristics students use to describe the diverse honors faculty. Carefully selected from the more than 1,400 faculty members at the University for their accomplishments as both teachers and scholars, members of the honors faculty take great pride in their close association with their students and are committed to excellence.

Honors Place at Panther Hall

“Honors Place is remarkable. It’s like home and everyone there is family. We work hard and play hard, driven by our friendship and common pursuit of excellence” - Damion Dunn, Honors Place Resident.

The Honors Place at Florida International University is on-campus residence living. As an Honors College student, you will have the opportunity to participate in this special campus housing program.

CIO. This challenges me because the university environment is so in need of a technology refresh and upgrade. Academia does not have the financial support for technology that is found in the commercial sector, yet education and technology literacy represent our future. It is not just about laboratories and media classrooms for students. It is the integration of technology into the pedagogy, i.e. the teaching-learning process.

Applying Yourself

However, this is about you and your future and I want to apply what I have been discussing in the context of your future.

The question I have often been asked is related to what I have just shared with you. “How could you have done and experienced so much in such a short period of time?” My answer has been “that you must love learning and be willing to take chances.” The risks are high and the ride is exhilarating. But there is much more to this reflection that is based on what I have seen beyond the Ivory Tower. It is apparent to me that the world now requires an interdisciplinary approach, and that you as Honor Students must be interdisciplinary. I have been spending more of my efforts on the research initiatives that involve collaboration and access to the advanced internet, Internet 2. One such project involves the high energy physics community. I have therefore engaged myself in discussions with the National Science Foundation. Their emphasis in science is on the interdisciplinary approach to solving the major problems. No longer can you address the issues in the physical or biomedical sciences without access to a team of individuals that can each contribute to the resolution of the hardest questions in science. A cure for cancer, or an anti-viral agent to affect AIDS, will require the combined efforts of the medical, biological, chemical, physical, and computational communities. Great Science will require collaboration and interdisciplinary efforts of the community at large. This extends into your positions as members of this Global Village regardless of disciplines. Therefore, your commencement must be viewed as the beginning of your educational career, which is beyond what you will learn in the classroom, laboratory or business practice. You must become the holistic individual that John Henry Newman referred to in his discourses.

There is another excellent book that reflects upon the issue of becoming interdisciplinary. It was written by Diana Oblinger of IBM Corporation who left the corporate environment and joined academia. She notes in What Business Wants from Higher Education that graduates must learn to think outside of the box and freely migrate into other areas. She asks “Are today’s higher education students prepared for this environment of speed, agility and flexibility? Are they adept at being problem solvers, problem identifiers, or strategic brokers?” And the response from experts: “Not well enough. New hires have little understanding of the role of the corporation. They do not have the flexibility required to function effectively in it. And they lack the critical skills: listening, communicating, defining problems, leveraging the skills of others in teams, and functioning effectively in an ambiguous, complex, and rapidly changing environment” (ACE 1996,8).
“Changes occurring in the business environment are leading to more complex, flexible, and responsive organizations. More then ever, business relies on higher education to prepare students for this rapidly changing environment.”

What you learn in the classroom is rarely transferable into the corporate environment because everything changes so rapidly. You are the fortunate few that have taken advantage of your education thus far, which places you in the favored position as you move forward in to the next phase.

It is vitally important you recognize that as you progress through your life and career that many different paths will be available to you. Most of those will not be related to what you thought you would be doing. Many will provide opportunities outside of your major field of study but will be related to the evolution of your experiential and learning process. As a biochemist it is fitting for me to view your development from an evolutionary perspective; that you are the totipotential stem cell that can be influenced to be what is required at a particular moment in time. It is important that you become involved and that you be open to your environment as you progress through life. It will be very exciting!

What you inherited

As members of The Honors College you have been provided with the “best” that Florida International University has to offer. You have had the opportunity to learn from some of the most dedicated professionals in their respective fields of study and to truly become interdisciplinary through the mentoring and experiences gained in your studies. One of the aims of The Honors College is to “build bridges between domains of knowledge” You are prepared to be those individuals who are capable of leading others.

In this context, I would introduce you to what you have been preparing for – you are being educated to be the leaders in your respective disciplines. Your interests in the learning process and your aspirations to be the “best and brightest” carry with it the joys and burden of leadership. You will be called upon to provide mentoring to society-at-large. You have an obligation to provide society with a return on the investment that your parents and your educational institutions, and most importantly you, have made in yourself. The call to “foster a sense of community among students and faculty as citizens with special talents and responsibilities to self, the scholarly community and society” is not just the aim of The Honors College; it is your charge as you begin the journey for the remainder of your life.

I would like to discuss this concept of leadership for just a few moments. The rate of change in society at all levels and in all areas will not slow down anytime soon. If anything, competition whether in industries or government, will increase as we struggle for scarce resources and global positioning. What will it take to bring you to the position of competency required to successfully compete in this environment? My own experience is that those who become excellent leaders possess a strong interdisciplinary bent, and thus have proven themselves academically and experientially sound. In addition, they possess the emotional intelligence to become effective leaders. As a leader one must possess the qualities of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. IQ must be balanced with what Daniel Goleman has termed EQ. I strongly suggest that all of you read his book Primal Leadership Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence. People who are connected and can communicate vision, possess this sense of balance. The mentoring that each of you has received within the Honors College has provided a sense of balance between your academic, social, and team-building skills. You have been educated and trained to be a visionary, to become a great leader regardless of vocation or personal goals. Leadership is inherent in the fabric of an Honors College graduate.

The Challenge of Society

One has only to read the headlines in the newspaper or listen to CNN to know that we live in a very troubled world. It should also be obvious to you that the problems that seemed so isolated just several years ago, i.e. pre-911, are now a global problem. Of course they always were a global problem; it just became more glaring as we became a direct participant in the issues. America has been isolated by geographic barriers. We have been fortunate that we live in a free society, but as you individually foster a sense of community, so must the United States become a leader in the global community. Today a sinister reality exists. A philosophical schism exists within the West. As Robert Kagen states:

“Mutual antagonism threatens to debilitate both sides of the transatlantic community. At a time when new dangers and crises are proliferating rapidly, this schism could have serious consequences. For Europe and the United States to come apart strategically is bad enough. But what if their differences over world order infect the rest of what we have known as the liberal West. Will the West still be the West?”

The path to confrontation has become more pronounced by the emergence of roguean groups such as al Qaeda, who have attempted to polarize both cultures and religions. “For the first time since World War II, a majority of Europeans has come to doubt the legitimacy of U.S. power and of U.S. global leadership.”

Your position as future leaders should be clear regardless of your chosen vocation (and remember that your vocation will change because of your interdisciplinary nature) and that is, to become engaged. Your participation in the process is more important to the future of our nation and to humanity than at any time since the great wars. The struggle to define and obtain international legitimacy in this new era may be among the most critical contests that we will face. In closing, I wish all of you well in your future endeavors. The Honors Program has prepared you for your journey, and your education will provide you with the tools required to succeed.

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Study Abroad Opportunities

The Honors College has been conducting study abroad programs since 1994 and currently offers opportunities for its students in Spain, Italy, and Jamaica. The summer programs are designed to fulfill one year (six credits) of Honors College curriculum requirement, while the Spain Fall Program offers from nine to fifteen credit hours. The Honors College Study Abroad Programs offer students the opportunity to experience immersion in another culture while pursuing a rigorous academic program integrated with the honors curriculum. Instruction is in English in all the programs.

Additional Opportunities in The Honors College

Scholarships
Priority Registration
Special Advising
Research and Artistic Initiatives Program
Part of a Special Community of Students and Faculty
Excellence Lectures and Forums with Leading Scholars and Policymakers
Only College in FIU with an Interdisciplinary Curriculum
Curriculum Broadens the Horizon, Making for Well-rounded Individuals
Team-taught and Individually-taught Seminars
Student Information Technology Centers
Gamma Epsilon Phi—The Honors College Student Society
Funding to Attend National and International Conferences
Small Classes and Close Relationships with Professors
Honors Convocation with Recognition of Student Excellence
Internship, Mentoring, and Service Learning Opportunities
College Presence at Both University Park and Biscayne Bay
Awards Assembly for Graduating Seniors
Special Recognition at Commencement
Notation on Transcript: “Graduated through the University Honors College”
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“That form of Universal Knowledge which is the perfection of the individual intellect is not knowing all branches of knowledge but simply is the power of viewing many things at once, as one whole, of referring them several to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence.”

It influenced me because at that time I was in fact studying with an eye toward becoming a Jesuit priest. It was of significance because it focused upon the fact that our educational mandate involved participation in a very broad spectrum of courses, including, in my case, a minor in philosophy and theology, as well as majors in chemistry and biology. At the time, I did not begin to appreciate the role of interdisciplinary education. It is in the context of this interdisciplinary nature of education that I explore your future, regardless of vocation or professional interest.

Some Personal Reflection

In attempting to do so, I wish to initially focus on my own reflection of self and the value I placed on education. Life has been an incredible journey because of my own interdisciplinary experiences. I grew up in Butte, Montana, attended Catholic Schools, and ventured to Spokane, Washington, to study with the Jesuits at Gonzaga University. The influence of the Jesuits was similar to that of your Honors College. Their mission was to educate the “best and brightest” and to enable students to develop critical and creative thinking skills. Our senior year involved the defense of our major as well as a comprehensive oral exam in philosophy. The philosophy oral was a nerve wracking and humbling experience; it required defense in a specified area of philosophy, in my case existentialism. Additionally, I defended my senior thesis in biochemistry.
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Dr. McGowan has worked in higher education for the past 20 years, both as a consultant to universities and colleges and as an outsourcing Director of Project Planning for SCT, a major software company in higher education. His expertise is in systems management, systems integration, networking and operating systems. He has also been involved as a consultant for IBM’s higher education unit, where his clients included the University of California system, the California State University system, the California Community College system, Washington State University, and the University of the Pacific. In addition he has consulted for UNISYS, DEC/Compaq, AT&T, American Express, and many Department of Defense agencies, including NASA, NSA, the Air Force, and Army.

In addition, Dr McGowan was the Chief Operating Officer for a national drug-testing lab and spent 11 years prior to that as a research biochemist in the fields of cancer research and molecular biology. He was the Chief Technology Officer for the University of Southern Mississippi and was responsible for the deployment of PeopleSoft and the wireless initiative at the 100 plus building campus. He was the senior technical lead for Internet 2 at the University and at NASA Stennis Space Center.

Dr. McGowan joined Florida International University in July, 2001, as Vice President for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer. He has been selected as one of the Top 10 Leaders in IT by Cisco Corporation. In addition, under his direction the technology organization of Florida International University has been selected as a Laureate of the Computerworld Honors Program. Dr McGowan is a member of Cisco Corporation’s Enterprise Technical Advisory Board and of PeopleSoft Corporation’s Technical Advisory Board. He also is a member of the Project Advisory Committee of the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study Human Genome Project.

Honors Awards Assembly Speaker

DEAN’S THOUGHT FOR SPRING 2004

“Be the change you want to see in the World.”

~ Mahatma Gandhi
F L O R I D A I N T E R N A T I O N A L U N I V E R S I T Y
THE HONORS COLLEGE AWARDS ASSEMBLY
APRIL SEVENTH - TWO THOUSAND FOUR

Honors College Reflections Series

Keynote Address:

"Reflections on Being Interdisciplinary"

JOHN Mcgowan, Ph.D.
Vice President & Chief Information Officer
University Technology Services
Florida International University
Miami, Florida