Good afternoon, and welcome to the opening convocation of the 2009-2010 academic year, recessionary version 2.0. In some years, I am forced to confess, we write a hefty check to an outside speaker who proceeds to tell you what you already knew, cared little about, or thought you cared about until you sat through the speech. This year, given the tightness of money all around, my staff decided that I was the perfect person to do such a thing for free. And so here we are. I will do my best not to disappoint.

Each spring I have the privilege of hosting at my home a group of students who have been honored with what we call the Presidential Leadership Award. These are graduating seniors who have demonstrated in their academic, co-curricular, and service work the qualities of leadership especially valued at Macalester. Often these are students I have come to know pretty well, so I was struck last April when not one but two of them asked me exactly the same question: what is it that you do, anyway?

The question was asked not as a challenge but out of a genuine sense of curiosity. They knew that, being the president, I must do something, and that given the size of my office and my residence in a college-owned house, it must be something reasonably important. They knew that if they were in my general vicinity they were likely to get their picture taken; that I served as a kind of collegiate maitre d’, welcoming everyone from new students to visiting dignitaries to campus; and that my name appeared in the Mac Weekly more often than most, particularly on the opinions page. But whereas they could define pretty precisely the jobs of their professors and their coaches and their residence hall directors, they could not define mine.

So I thought I would use this opportunity to offer a few observations about my job: not by taking you through a typical day or week, which would constitute a less than exhilarating address, but by talking a bit about the responsibilities that college presidents do or do not, or should or should not, take on. At the very least it may mean that I get asked a little less often what I’m doing here.

There is a myth about the evolution of the American college presidency that runs more or less like this: “Back in the day” college and university presidents were figures of towering intellect who spent comparatively little time worrying about such mundane and vaguely unsavory things as fund raising and balancing budgets but instead provided visionary leadership for their institutions and, even more broadly, spoke with effect to the great
issues of the day. Now, like many myths, this one has embedded within it at least some small element of truth. There have been in fact a handful of college presidents who have functioned as visible public intellectuals, and as the business of running a college has become more complex, the need for presidents to attend to matters financial has grown accordingly. If the past year has taught us anything, it is that not only college presidents, but business people and politicians and individuals of every stripe should pay very careful attention to the advice offered to Dickens’ David Copperfield by the irrepressible Mr. Micawber: “Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen and six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds and six, result misery.” It is a president’s job to avoid institutional misery.

But anyone who believes that this responsibility is new, or that college presidents used to be free of such concerns, is deeply mistaken. Here is one president lamenting the financial pressures of the job: “What I was sent here for is an inscrutable mystery. I am too diffident to wrestle with men about money or with financial problems so vast....If [a college president] can read and write, so much the better, but he must be able to raise money.” The voice is that of James Wallace, Macalester’s fifth president, writing in 1895.

The reality is that college presidents have always had to be concerned with what someone has termed both the business of education, or the work of preparing students to be successful in their personal, professional, and civic lives, and the education business, or the work of ensuring that the institution can pay its bills. Bill Bowen, the former president of Princeton University, recalls being told by a Nobel-prize winning physicist on his faculty that “excellence can’t be bought...but it has to be paid for.” Bowen, who went on to become president of the Mellon Foundation, never forgot this observation, nor should anyone whose responsibility it is to seek the highest quality in education at any level.

The question of the extent to which a college president should function as a public intellectual is more interesting and the answer, in my view, more nuanced. Few would argue with the assertion that within the college community the president should provide intellectual, ethical, and even temperamental leadership.

The faculty is responsible for shaping the curriculum and carrying out the core educational work of the college; the president can aid that work by articulating, clearly and repeatedly, the context within which it takes place and the ends to which it is directed. At Macalester I believe the central end to be the education of students for what the ninth president of the college, Charles Turck, termed “the duties of world citizenship,” which I take to mean preparation for socially responsible leadership and constructive participation in local, national, and transnational communities. Our job is to provide students with the knowledge, skills, understanding, and motivation to lead more rewarding lives themselves
and to make a difference in the lives of those around them. It is to repay families and donors and the broader society, all of whom have invested in your education, by turning you loose after four years as smart, motivated people who will make the world a better place—and along the way to prepare you for some sort of gainful employment.

Further, a college president should be expected to model those attributes that are to a learning community most essential, including clarity of language and thought, civility, scholarly curiosity and rigor, openness to views that are different from one’s own, and an unwavering commitment to ethical behavior: in other words, everything that we have not seen manifested at the recent town hall meetings on health care reform. Being human, college presidents will sometimes fail to meet these exalted standards, but every day and in every setting they should try. This is important because fairly or not, members of the community will extrapolate from the actions of the president a sense of what is valued and accepted by the college. For instance, if the president attempts to demonstrate regularly that she or he is the smartest person in the room—a habit that most of us acquire quickly in graduate school—others will assume that this is the appropriate goal to chase in an educational setting, whereas for me a more appropriate goal is for each of us to behave as if we are the person in the room with the most to learn. It’s amazing how much better that works if one’s goal is actually to learn something.

Things get trickier when the question becomes the following: what role should a college president play in relation to the many political and social questions that extend far beyond the borders of the campus and in many cases divide our communities and our culture? This is, I confess, perhaps the single most difficult dilemma that I wrestle with in my position. As those who know me well will confirm, I am by nature a person with strong opinions and a preference for expressing them directly: after all, I grew up in New York City, which is not a place known for its delicacy and decorum. At my family’s dinner table, if you weren’t shouting, someone would ask if you were feeling okay. I am also enormously frustrated by the absence of thoughtful public discourse in this country and believe that those who are educated and who embrace rather than mock the life of the mind have a responsibility to raise the level of that discourse.

And yet—fairly or unfairly, reasonably or not, the views expressed by the president are typically seen as the views of the college that she or he represents. My personal desire to express publicly my opinions on controversial issues often comes into direct conflict with my professional responsibility to preserve academic freedom and an atmosphere of openness to all reasonable perspectives that are civilly stated. And in the end that professional responsibility must take precedence. Again I turn to Bill Bowen, who wrote that “the university should be the home of the critic, welcoming and respectful of every point of view; it cannot serve this critically important function if it becomes the critic itself,
coming down on one side or another of controversial issues….It is the freedom of the individual to think and speak out that is of paramount importance, and safeguarding this freedom requires that the institution itself avoid becoming politicized.” There is no truth about Macalester in which I believe more deeply and, simultaneously, to which it is more challenging for me to adhere. But my conviction is that in agreeing to become a college president, a willingness to be measured and restrained in one’s public statements—to accept one’s status as a walking, talking logo—is part of the deal. There is no principle that has generated more debate on campus. Some of you in this room will no doubt engage me in that debate in the coming years, and that is on balance a good thing. It is to wrestle with such difficult matters that college communities exist, and it is through such discussion that we approach closer to some kind of wisdom.

Now, this does not mean that I believe that I should say nothing about anything, though I’m sure there are those who think I do a pretty darn good job of saying nothing about everything. It means that I believe that I need to pick my spots with great care. In general, when I speak to issues of public significance, I try to focus on those that I take to be so central to the educational mission of Macalester as to require the college to make a decision about its policies and practices. Admittedly the line here is very fuzzy, and what one person considers central to our educational mission, the next might consider irrelevant. But life is composed of such ambiguities.

My point might be made more clearly through the use of a few examples. It seems to me inappropriate for me in my role as president to endorse a particular party or candidate in the race for the governor of Minnesota. I have opinions—boy do I have opinions—but to express them very openly runs the risk of suggesting that Macalester is taking an official, institutional position and even of jeopardizing our status as a tax-exempt organization. Similarly I do not believe that I should be staking out through my public remarks Macalester’s position on health care reform or cap and trade or military intervention in Afghanistan. These are however precisely the issues that all of you should be studying, arguing about, and taking action on through your lives as students, scholars, and global citizens. My job is to ensure that Macalester provides the environment within which you can do these things, rather than to delineate in each instance the proper “Macalester” stance.

On the other hand, I have spoken out both individually and on behalf of Macalester on issues including the importance of diversity to higher education and the necessity for all of us to practice and model environmental responsibility. For me, these issues are inseparable from and directly relevant to our work as a college and therefore ones that I can and should address. So we have taken such public actions as signing an amicus brief in the University of Michigan affirmative action case and becoming early signers of the College and
University Presidents’ Climate Commitment. I would be prepared to contend that not to take stands on issues of this kind would actually impair our ability to carry out our educational work—and therefore that they are issues to which I should speak, both individually and as a representative of Macalester.

Again, is the line between issues of the first sort and issues of the second perfectly clear? Absolutely not. Is it important for anyone in my position to recognize that such a line exists and to decide on which side of it any particular issue falls? To that question my answer is yes. So those of you who will want Macalester during the coming years to take a position on a matter close to your heart should bear in mind that the standard I have described is the one that I consistently apply and should try to construct arguments that will meet that standard. And remember: it is not enough to argue that the majority of members of our community share a particular position on a cause or issue. One of my tasks—indeed, one of the tasks for all of us—is to create an environment within which the views of the minority can be freely expressed and listened to carefully, critically, and with respect. We do not achieve this by putting the weight of the college in every instance behind the views of the majority.

One of the most comfortable and at times energizing things about Macalester is that there is so much more consensus about potentially divisive matters than there is in the society at large. I suspect that this is why a fair number of you elected to enroll here. Bear in mind, however, that this is also one of the most challenging things about Macalester. It is a little too easy to get swept up in the collective certainty, a little too easy to dismiss those with whom one disagrees, a little too easy to become intellectually lazy. It is even, on rare but memorable occasions, too easy to become cruel. We never want to become mirror images of those whose intolerance we are constantly striving to rise above.

I wish I had foolproof advice about how to avoid these things. The best I can do, I guess, is draw for my wisdom upon that great example of popular culture and famous Twin Cities touchstone, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, which to most of you in this room is I suspect some sort of antediluvian artifact. There is one episode of that show in which Ted Baxter, the buffoonish anchorman, asks Lou Grant, his gruff producer, how to be a better person. I believe this is just prior to Ted’s marriage to Georgette, for those of you who are Mary Tyler Moorian scholars. Lou is initially at a loss for words, but then turns to Ted and says the following: “You know the way you are? You know the way you are? Well, don’t be that way.” So, if you find yourself casually dismissive of views that are different from your own—don’t be that way.

I’m not sure in the end that I’ve provided an answer to those two students who asked me what I do—except, perhaps, to say that I try to do what all of us in a college community
should try to do, and that is to learn from those around us and translate what we learn into wiser, more humane, and more constructive behavior. That’s a hard job but one I wouldn’t trade for any other.

Best wishes to all of you for a wonderful year in this wonderful place.

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