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The Value of Individualized Instruction in Liberal Education

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2004 Matriculation Convocation
*The Value of Individualized Instruction in Liberal
Education*
Jill Beck, President

Good morning. On this occasion, my first Matriculation Convocation address as president of Lawrence, I have chosen as my topic, *The Value of Individualized Instruction in Liberal Education*. Before delving more deeply into the subject, let us consider the fundamental question: “What is Individualized Instruction?”

Individualized Instruction refers to diverse forms of one-on-one learning, such as tutorial education, research collaboration, coaching, or mentorship programs, that contribute to stretching the boundaries of individual human performance and potential. It is any one-on-one educationally oriented program, in which instructors supervise a selected activity, whether it focuses on acquiring the specialized knowledge of a discipline, or a more practical understanding needed to partner effectively with the community.

The theory behind Individualized Instruction—articulated in sources ranging from Socratic dialogues to *Emile* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau—is that because students vary in interest, skill, and pace in learning, ways must be found to adapt instruction to individual needs.

The most common form of Individualized Instruction is tutoring. In a 1955 article in *The Journal of Higher Education*, R.B. Clark identified the following goals of tutorial education, which are generally agreed to, and which apply equally well, I think, to Individualized Instruction as a whole:

1. It stresses familiarity with primary source materials.
2. It teaches students to think for themselves and to have confidence in their own conclusions and opinions.
3. It is a supplement to lectures and laboratory courses.
4. It develops the facility to express oneself in writing, or other means of presentation.

Moreover, the purpose of tutorial education is not only academic but also to form a caring, advisory, collaborative relationship between teacher and student. In 1986, the Vice Chancellor of Oxford University, as cited in Tapper and Palfreyman's book, *Oxford and the Decline of the Collegiate Tradition*, observed that (quote) "the old view of the tutorial was very much founded upon the idea that you established a relationship. I never thought tutorials were a system; I always thought they were a relationship. . . ."

My own introduction to the virtues of Individualized Instruction took place 15 years ago. In 1989, I was a member of the faculty at The

Julliard School, and had invited a guest teacher from London to my class, Ann Hutchinson, who had recently completed a translation. This translation did not involve any languages that I think anyone in this Chapel knows, despite the many international students and language scholars in our midst.

The translation was of a dance notation score written by Vaslav Nijinsky to record what he considered his best work of choreography. [*Slide 1*] Nijinsky was a legendary ballet dancer with Les Ballets Russes in the early 20th century. In 1912, he choreographed “L’Après-Midi d’un Faune” (“Afternoon of a Faun”), to music by Debussy. The ballet was revolutionary in every way, and critics agreed that “Faune” represented an almost ungraspable departure from standard practice, an expression of radical individuality.

In the years following “Faune’s” premiere, many others copied and restaged Nijinsky’s ballet, but as they did so, they altered it to make the ballet more “typical.” The dance, before Nijinsky’s eyes, began to deteriorate badly. Nijinsky decided that it was imperative to find a way to record his dance, in order to preserve it.

So he invented a form of dance notation, in which he painstakingly recorded every second of his 10-minute dance. This dance notation

score survived the First and Second World Wars but the key--the key that explained what all of the little symbols in his score meant--that key was lost amid wartime displacements of people and property. (The end result was that we had a complete score of the ballet in the choreographer's own hand, but no one could decipher it.)

The key to Nijinsky's symbols remained lost until the 1980s, when it was accidentally found in a little metal suitcase in the basement of the Bibliotheque National in Paris. The key allowed Nijinsky's score to be translated into Labanotation, the international language we use today for recording and transmitting choreography. [*Slide 2*]

The new Labanotation score of Nijinsky's "Faune" became the subject in 1989 for an ambitious foray into Small Group Tutorial Instruction at The Julliard School. That year, my tutorial students became the first dancers in the world to read the new translation in order to generate their own performance of "L'Apres-Midi d'un Faune." [*Slide 3: Video Clip*]

There are a few things worth emphasizing about this beautiful project.

- The undergraduate students were working with a unique primary source.

- The students were encouraged to think for themselves and had confidence in their own conclusions about Nijinsky the man and artist.
- The project was a supplement to normal dance classes, and was far more advanced. [Slide 4] Every tutorial student deciphered thousands of complex notation symbols.
- [Slide 5] Expressivity and performance ability were increased. The students were challenged to embody and present their understanding of Nijinsky, through performance.

There were specific outcomes to this tutorial project, among them a performance at Lincoln Center that the *New York Times* called “enlightened”; a volume of an international journal dedicated to the project, with an article written by one of the undergraduate dancers; and finally, my own commitment to the extended possibilities of undergraduate education. I became convinced that it is vital for faculty and students to create opportunities to work and learn together beyond recognized course structures, in the pursuit of unusual levels of attainment by individuals and small groups. That exceptional work and learning, it seems, goes on all the time at Lawrence.

When I arrived at Lawrence ten weeks ago, I began a personal voyage of exploration. Charged not only with guiding a fine school but also with undertaking a forthcoming large capital campaign, I needed to know what is distinctive about the college. I have scheduled numerous meetings with faculty members and staff each week since my arrival. To date, I've met separately with about 35 of the faculty and intend to meet individually with every faculty member by the end of the year. My method, in fact, has been one-on-one. I have asked the faculty, "What should Lawrence be known for?" In practically every case, in one form or another, the professors have spoken to me about Individualized Instruction.

I regret that time precludes my mentioning each person from whom I have learned about Individualized Instruction at Lawrence during the past several weeks. Here, however, are a few of the stories I have been told:

1. [*Slide 6*] David Cook, Professor of Physics, told me about the students who work as research assistants in the signature labs in the Physics department. This work not only trains undergraduates in advanced research techniques but also serves to help make the students more competitive for summer research and internship positions at other institutions, and for entry into prestigious

graduate programs. Also, Physics majors and faculty spend a weekend together at Björklunden every January. The contact established during these weekends makes it even more likely that students will feel comfortable stopping by faculty offices to ask questions and discuss their work.

2. [*Slide 7*] Students at Lawrence have opportunities in many areas of the sciences to assist faculty with laboratory research. One such student, Phyllis Odoom, a senior this year, spent the summer working in the lab of Biology Professor Beth De Stasio. Phyllis studied the effects of chemicals secreted by predators on the body shape of their insect prey. Support for the research comes from a joint Merck/American Association for the Advancement of Science grant for interdisciplinary research by Lawrence faculty and students.

3. [*Slide 8*] Such collaboration doesn't only happen in the sciences. Natasha Prouty, also a senior this year, studied gallery practices this summer with Frank Lewis, director of exhibitions and curator of the Wriston Art Center. Studying as an intern at Lawrence helped Tasha prepare for international study in Florence this fall.

4. [*Slide 9*] Field work is another way Individualized Instruction occurs. Associate Professor of Geology Jeff Clark and his students, such as Jorene Hamilton, Class of 2005, have been collecting data about urban run-off and its effects on the water quality of the Appleton area. The water quality data is being used for Jorene's Honors project in Geology, and the findings will be provided to Mayor Tim Hanna and the Appleton City Council, to enable them to craft informed water policy.

5. [*Slide 10*] The City of Appleton is being influenced in other ways by the Individualized Instruction occurring at Lawrence. Mary Markowitz's installation of a public artwork on the exterior of a downtown climbing center is a wonderful example of that. After apprenticing with Professor Rob Neilson on his art piece that spent the summer on display at the Navy Pier in Chicago, Mary, Class of 2005, proposed, fabricated, and installed her own artwork on the façade of a local business. When Mary went to de-install the work two weeks later, as scheduled, the climbing center decided instead to purchase the piece in order to retain it permanently.

6. [*Slide 11*] Further afield, Lawrence students regularly interact with their professors on international study trips. The \$1.5 million Freeman Foundation grant the college received in 2001 has

supported many such trips. This past summer, five linguistics and four religious studies students joined Professors Sung, Vorenkamp, Rew-Gottfried, and Biringer on a Freeman trip to China and Tibet.

7. [Slide 12] Individualized Instruction allows students to *develop their abilities more fully*; [Dale Duesing master class]
8. [Slide 13] *to master more advanced material and techniques than is possible in regular class settings*; [advanced printmaking by student Laura Corcoran, working with Assistant Professor of Art Joe D’Uva]
9. [Slide 14] *and to receive targeted guidance*. [coaching with theatre professor Tim Troy]
10. Close interaction between faculty members and students can have unanticipated consequences as well, for not only the student but also the faculty member. [Slide 15] Pictured here is alumna Yasmine Rainford, Class of 2004, in a classroom in her home country of Jamaica. Government Professor Claudena Skran traveled to Kingston in August to participate in Yasmine’s PIECE project, which teaches conflict resolution skills to children in Jamaica and Appleton.

11. [Slide 16] Faculty members may also benefit from the involvement of their students in their own research programs. This fall, Professor of Psychology Bruce Hetzler will present research on which he collaborated with Elizabeth Martin, Class of 2003, at an international congress in Heidelberg. (Elizabeth is co-author of the paper that will be presented.) Professor Hetzler has made 10 conference presentations with Lawrence students as co-authors and has had research published in 15 scientific publications with students as co-authors. Others on the faculty similarly involve student co-authors in their publications.

12. [Slide 17] I discovered that one-on-one interactions are encouraged at Lawrence in ways that Chemistry Professor Karen Nordell says “complete the circle of education.” Those who have been mentored, or noticed as an individual, have the ability and motivation in turn to offer that experience to a younger student.
[Slide 18] Here is Dan Perelstein, who graduated in 2003, one of more than 30 Lawrence students who volunteer their time each year to serve as LARY Buddies. Since 1988, Lawrence Assistance Reaching Youth has been acclaimed locally and nationally for providing mentors for at-risk children in our neighborhood.

13. Alumni have mentioned to me that memories of close faculty-student ties are what make Lawrence especially dear to them. It is noteworthy that these fond recollections are sustained even as Lawrentians rise to prominence. If you have been paying attention to the news, you will have noticed a certain preponderance of college alumni in Wisconsin's state government. [Slide 19] Lawrence is currently represented by Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Lewis Butler, Class of 1973; Wisconsin Secretary of Commerce Cory Nettles, Class of 1992; and Wisconsin Lieutenant Governor Barbara Lawton, Class of 1987. When Justice Butler was appointed by Governor Doyle last month, he credited Lawrence with having a formative influence on his career, and I quote, "I had some wonderful mentors there who were very helpful. I love that school." Justice Butler has worked as a Lawrence mentor himself, advising young alumni about the importance of careers in public service.

At this stage in my investigations of Lawrence at work, I have come to a preliminary conclusion: This college is awash in many forms of one-on-one experiences. Some of these are time-honored—such as tutorials, independent study, Honors projects, internships, and Individualized Instruction through instrumental and vocal music lessons. But there are also relatively newer forms of one-on-one learning that are extending the

experience. These include actively involving students in creative and research partnerships with professors; encouraging students to co-author papers and conference presentations with professors; engaging students in K-12 [TEXT MISSING?].

Not only is Individualized Instruction thriving at Lawrence; I sense, without yet being able to prove it, that the college may, in fact, be a largely unrecognized leader in this academic approach within higher education, and that, with the right encouragement, might serve as a national laboratory for expanding our understanding of Individualized Instruction.

Might one infer from all this that Individualized Instruction is relatively new to Lawrence? Most assuredly that is not the case. Let's take just a few minutes to look at some of the history of Individualized Instruction.

One of the earliest formal mentions of "tutor" is to be found in the statutes of Brasenose College at Oxford University in 1509. 350 years later, a description of tutors at Oxford was written that could apply equally well to many of our professors at Lawrence. According to W.G. Moore in *The Tutorial System and Its Future*,

The tutors of Balliol were the elite of the university, and thought no sacrifice of time or labour too great for the sake of their pupils. It was no uncommon thing for them to hear essays and correct compositions in the small hours of the morning. Even their vacations brought no rest; if they traveled it was to gather new ideas for their lectures. . . .

At another important institution, Princeton, tutorial education was given a vigorous boost in 1906 when all undergraduates were assigned preceptors or tutors. The “method” as it was called was introduced under the leadership of Princeton President Woodrow Wilson to combat deteriorating teaching conditions in large lecture classes and an unhealthy lack of student independent reading. One of the important findings of this experiment, which was watched by the entire nation, was a greatly increased use of the library!

[*Slide 20*] Tutorial education at Lawrence was introduced by President Henry Wriston. In 1932, Wriston wrote:

Education is growth, and growth is always individual . . . The object of college is not to produce human units one just like the last. Its purpose is to develop individuals.

[*Slide 21*] Wriston continued,

The tutorial plan of instruction is based on individual teaching with a view to individual growth, and the student is measured with reference to his own capacities and his own development rather than upon some arbitrarily established relationship between him and his fellows. It opens the way, therefore, not only for a more individual development but for measuring progress upon a basis which is more just and more intelligent.

[*Slide 22*] Like Wriston before him, President Nathan Pusey focused more upon the individual than upon the group, arguing that only by transforming individual students, provoking “revolutions” within them, would they be equipped to provide the leadership necessary to improve society.

[*Slide 23*] President Richard Warch, in 2003, cited Individualized Instruction as one distinctive feature of the Lawrence Difference:

By affording students opportunities for close collaboration with faculty, by encouraging student research as a central element of the learning process, by giving them individual attention, by fostering their personal aspirations and self-confidence, . . . we enable them

to gain the kind of education that serves them in their personal lives and in their contributions to the common good.

The *bona fides* of Individualized Instruction at Lawrence have also been affirmed by outside observers. In 1995, the Art and Science Group, a consulting firm hired by the college, concluded that the individualized academic experience was a distinctive feature of a Lawrence education.

[*Slide 24*] There are five points that I wish to leave you with in concluding today's remarks.

1. Lawrence students, find a way to make Individualized Instruction a part of your college education. This could take many forms. You heard accounts today in which students were encouraged to ask questions, to get to know their professors, to pursue topics of special interest through independent study, to learn by being apprentices and assistants in faculty labs and studios. You can also learn a great deal from your fellow students. I encourage you to be interactive. We are all here to learn from and with other people—maximize the interpersonal aspect of a Lawrence education.
2. [*Slide 25*] I commend the faculty for their outstanding work in Individualized Instruction, and encourage you to continue this

work. It defines Lawrence. Individualized Instruction is not a one-size fits all endeavor. In the sciences, field work and lab assistants may be the norm. In the humanities, faculty may think more in terms of independent study and honors projects. But in some way that makes sense for you and for the nature of your discipline, I urge every faculty member to consider the place of Individualized Instruction in their work.

3. [*Slide 26*] The fluidity in the types of Individualized Instruction is actually a great advantage. We have an exceptionally long list of instances of Individualized Instruction at Lawrence. I think we should study that more fully, and attempt to measure:
 - a. The diverse and distinctive ways in which Individualized Instruction occurs at Lawrence.
 - b. The extent of time spent on such instruction, and its actual place in the faculty workload and the student workload.
 - c. The outcomes of Individualized Instruction, from co-authored papers, to conference presentations, to public artworks, to entry into more competitive graduate schools, to progress in our community.

I would like to suggest that these may be more superior measures of a quality undergraduate education than some of the more easily quantifiable data used by commercial rankings such as U.S. News & World Report's "Best Colleges." Is the size of a college endowment really a guarantor of the highest quality education? Is reputation among peer institutions a hard and reliable assessment of a school's actual achievements? Perhaps we ourselves should attempt to re-frame the debate about what defines a high-quality undergraduate education. If we measure Individualized Instruction at Lawrence, and disseminate those results, we would be taking a position about what we consider to be a meaningful component of undergraduate education, and we would be documenting that we are very good at it.

4. The classification system for institutions of higher education that was developed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is being revised in 2005. The Carnegie Foundation intends to introduce two new features. One will group institutions "according to the nature of their efforts to learn about and improve upon undergraduate education." The other will provide national data on "the constellation of activities termed outreach and engagement." Our work in Individualized Instruction and our attempts to measure it at Lawrence will enable us to respond to

Carnegie's call for the development and refinement of new measures of the undergraduate experience, and to position the college well in the two new indicators.

5. Lastly, I'd encourage us to keep in mind Nathan Pusey's words about the relationship between the development of the individual and the leadership that is necessary to improve society. Pusey's vision was that the community is best served when individuals are developed to their highest degree. But his words imply that individuals will think and act with the community in mind, not only in their own best interests. Individualized Instruction is important for each of us, but equally important are the ways in which we choose to act as we take what we have learned beyond ourselves and into the world.

Thank you.