

Women in Leadership Seminar Highlights

May 24, 2013



Left to right: Cathy Cox, Victor (from Commerce Club), Susan Hitchcock.

Topic: *"The Future of Higher Education: What's at Stake & the Impact on Business"*

Cathy Cox, the 21st President of Young Harris College and former Georgia Secretary of State, joined us this month at Women in Leadership for a discussion on liberal arts education.

Recapping her background, Cathy's journey includes an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Mercer University where she also received her JD degree. Prior to going to law school, Cathy received a BA in Journalism from UGA. Her early professional experience includes being a reporter and assistant newspaper publisher; an attorney in a Bainbridge law firm; and an attorney/partner in an ATL law firm.

Entering the political arena in 1963, she served in the Georgia House of Representatives until 1996 and as the Assistant Secretary of State from '96 to '99. That same year, Cathy was elected GA's Secretary of State and served in that capacity until 2007. She then had the experience of

running a gubernatorial campaign and although she was unsuccessful, she had a lot of support.

When her gubernatorial plans did not work out, Cathy said, "I had to start thinking about what I wanted to do next." On an interim basis, she was offered a position in the UGA School of Law and other options soon came into play.

"Totally unexpected," she explained, "I received a call from Young Harris College (YHC), asking if I would consider being a candidate for President of the College. I was stunned since I had no higher education leadership experience, but I agreed to interview for the position. And, in the spring of 2007, I was offered the job, happily accepted – and my next challenge and one of the most rewarding experiences of my life began."

At the time, Young Harris was planning to make the move from a 2-year school to a 4-year college. Cathy enthusiastically tackled this challenge, and acknowledges that it was like building a college from scratch. YHC has since doubled the number of faculty and has raised over \$60 million in a capital campaign that has taken place in the last three years. Cathy has also been influential in revising the college's mission statement.

An enthusiastic and unabashed advocate of a [liberal arts education](#) for today's students and graduates, Cathy shared her views on why this kind of education is imperative in today's fast-growing, global economy. It prepares students and graduates entering the world of work to deal with the increasing complexity and change in today's workplace. In a 2013 survey conducted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, employers value the following traits when hiring:

- 95% want employees with “innovation” skills – skills that will enable them to contribute to innovation in the workplace
- More than 9 in 10 agree that “innovation is essential” to their organization’s continued success
- Nearly 93% agree that a candidate’s “demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their specific undergraduate major.”
- More than 9 in 10 say it is important to hire people who “demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity; intercultural skills; and the capacity for new learning.”

Cathy also shared a story she recently heard about a student at YHC. “The father of a student graduating with a dual degree in Religion and Philosophy was asked by another parent what his daughter would do with her degree,” she said. “He responded that she would be able to create her own job and work anywhere in the world.” Cathy also pointed out that many of the students at YHC also go on to graduate school and professional programs.

Asking how many of the audience knew what a “MOOC” is, Cathy explained it and said there’s a resurgence of MOOCs – massive, open, online classes. “While those kinds of programs have their place,” she said, “I believe learning is fundamentally different than the ‘distribution of information’ offered by MOOCs. From my experience, students need and want interaction!”

Cathy went on to discuss the qualities that students should develop at a liberal arts institution in order to prepare for the future, including:

1. A skeptical discontent with the present, informed by a sense of the past.
2. The ability to make connections among seemingly disparate phenomena.
3. Appreciation of the natural world, enhanced by knowledge of science and the arts.
4. A willingness to learn from / be open to experiences and perspectives other than one’s own.
5. A sense of ethical responsibility.

-- Andrew Delbanco, *College: “What it Was, Is and Should Be”* (Princeton: 2012)

Here are other quotes Cathy shared from two outstanding leaders:

“The only education that prepares us for change is a liberal education. In periods of change, narrow specialization condemns us to inflexibility – precisely what we do not need. We need the flexible intellectual tools to be problem solvers, to be able to continue learning over time.” -- David Kearns, Former CEO of Xerox and former Deputy Secretary of US Dept. of Education (2002)

“If the American economy is to recover from the Great Recession – and I believe that it can – it will be because of a ready supply of workers with the critical thinking, creative problem solving, technological, and communication skills needed to fuel productivity and growth.” -- Norm Augustine, former Chairman and CEO, Lockheed Martin:

To view the virtual tour of Young Harris College, [click here](#).

Q&A

Q: How are universities reaching back to prepare younger students in the public sector to prepare for a college like YHC?

The current focus in the public sector is 'teaching to the test'. This is taking the focus away from the arts in order to be able to teach testable knowledge, thus increasing test scores and allowing institutions to receive more funding. Computers in classrooms have become babysitters. Local high school students come to take course at YHC in order to be challenged.

Q: How do you foster out-of-the-box thinking?

We need to help students understand the world. A liberal arts education is not leisurely. There are many elements encompassed that are usable. Employers should ask applicants more about their education in interviews.

Q: How are you going about establishing corporate partnerships?

This has changed greatly due to STEM. We have had discussions with companies like Lockheed Martin regarding partnerships. Private donors definitely support the humanities and language arts. We have recently had major gifts contributed towards building new fine arts and student centers.

Q: What is the conversation surrounding the student loan crisis?

This is a huge issue skewed by the for-profit higher education industry. It's almost criminal. Students should incur manageable debt, as an education is an investment in yourself!

Q: As you transitioned from a 2-year college to a 4-year college, did you follow the Swarthmore example? What did you learn from them?

I admire Rebecca Chopp and Swarthmore is one college that we look to as an aspirant school. This year, we took time to visit several schools that have January terms to learn more about implementing a program like that at YHC. We like to copy schools that do things well. I haven't visited Swarthmore myself, but we do try to incorporate some of their ideas into our model.

Q: What value does YHC place on study abroad and experiential learning opportunities?

These kinds of opportunities teach students how to apply their classroom learning and are invaluable. We encourage them, because we want students to see the real world! Many students truly come back a 'changed person' from study abroad opportunities.