

Students Who Are Curious

It has been over a century since Howard Bliss stood before the student body of AUB and delivered his hopes for the future of education. The crowd he addressed and the world that received him in 1911 was infinitely different from today and yet similarities can still be drawn between these ages. In fact, if he were to give his speech today there would be very little need for redaction, and that is a saddening fact. When Howard Bliss spoke, he knew, just as I do, that he was addressing the future and all of its potential. What he did not know, something that I am now a witness and even a culprit to, is that most students do not enter college to become doctors who are women, teachers who are men or to follow a profession held by a complete human. The focus back then and today has remained on the profession and the degree. College has successfully become an institution of close mindedness that actively encourages repressing passions. Think about it, electives in humanities are not seen as a chance to broaden horizons but rather as a chore and obligatory courses that deviate from the description of the degree are seen as bothersome. This way of thinking is almost an insult to the immense capabilities of the students here today and to the full, untapped potential of humankind. By reducing the paths we could take we have stopped nurturing our curiosity; we have stepped so far from the ideal of the renaissance man that we are content with ourselves and our miniscule knowledge base. Our world is one with many problems, and solving them will require the curiosity to dive into and combine the thought processes of all sorts of fields in order to create the complete human who can change the world.

Gustave Lanson said it best when describing Voltaire, “In a world of bureaucrats, engineers, and producers, Voltaire is the necessary philosopher.” The exact same phrase can be applied here. In a world of doctors, plastic surgeons and civil engineers, curiosity is the necessary agitator. The world we have today was not built on the ideas of one or two fields; it was the beautiful, accidental and sometimes even weird synthesis of completely unrelated schools of thought. It was the brainchild of curious, fertile minds. It is those kinds of minds that bring about drastic and lasting changes, because it takes that kind of person to bring change. If you are unable to step out of your comfort zone to learn about something that fascinates you just because others are telling you things like there’s “no money there,” “it’s not a safe career,” “I’ll disown you,” then stay where you are. Enjoy the comfort of your little mind garden where nothing interesting grows. In the meantime there are engineers learning about polynesian people’s history; they might stumble on ancient navigation methods. There are business majors diving into classical music; they might understand how sounds from centuries ago still produce such powerful emotions and become better marketers. There are also doctors spending their nights learning about archeology! To be honest I have no idea how they could use that knowledge in their field. But that doesn’t matter. We do not need to know ahead of time where this or that path will lead us, because knowledge is not your typical road. Where we end up does not depend on the bends and turns we took but rather

how many paths we have set foot upon, and the greater that number, the closer it leads us to our goals.

A bit earlier I mentioned something called the ideal of the renaissance man. It could be argued that those born during the renaissance period were leaps and bounds ahead of us in intelligence. After all it churned the likes of Da Vinci, Machiavelli, and Galileo, all great artists *and* scientists. That time period had a much more holistic approach to education. Back then, an educated person was one who spoke several languages, could write literature, play an instrument, paint, draw, and hold a conversation in a few fields of science. These abilities could only be developed through a universal education coupled with a universal curiosity. That is where the word “university” comes from. Initially, universities served the purpose of helping students build a strong and broad foundation after which they might specialize. Maybe it is because of the times we live in, but universities today do not have that liberty, the closest being freshman year, the pre-med program, and a liberal arts education.

This is not meant to be a sermon or a critique of your educational choices. That would be going against the greatest progress we have had since 1911, giving back to people the freedom of choice. No, this is meant as a sign to reflect, to think forward to the change you want to leave behind you. At this very moment you have an opportunity that is unheard of. The unique chance to jump head first into the unknown with very little lasting consequences and unlimited potential upside. Howard Bliss did not just want professions held by men and women; he wanted students who are not afraid, students who wanted to learn, students who questioned everything and sought out the answers. He wanted students who are curious.