

INAUGURAL ADDRESS
KAREN GROSS, PRESIDENT
SOUTHERN VERMONT COLLEGE
November 18, 2006

Good Afternoon. A warm welcome to students, staff, faculty, alums, trustees, past trustees, past president of SVC, Barbara Sirvis, members of the Bennington community, friends of SVC and my personal friends, mentors and family – now new friends, I hope, of SVC.

First, I want to say how pleased I am that this event is taking place in this theatre within the Bennington Center for the Arts. Bruce and Elizabeth have my deepest thanks. This is a particularly apt location since the customary good luck send-off for an actor before a new performance is “break a leg.” And, I have literally done that – which means I, hope, that I will have very, very good luck – with this inaugural event and in my presidency.

Second, I want to thank Mike and Wally and Frank for their most gracious remarks. I am humbled by them and hope I can live up to your lofty expectations.

I am honored that all of you are here to share this special day with me – a day that celebrates SVC and education. You have come from near and far –from across the street and from abroad. I am touched by your presence.

Robert Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone*, talks about how disconnected we have become and how autonomous we are in American society. (No, this is not one of my five books -- a topic to which I will return!) Perhaps Putnam’s theory is right but it does not explain my life.

I have not been bowling alone. I have been privileged over my career to have been surrounded and supported by a remarkable group of colleagues, friends and family. Without their mentoring and support, I would not be here today.

I give all of you my thanks -- including my parents, Mitch and Pearl Rieger, and my brother Charles Abelmann. As with any event of this sort, there are also individuals one wishes were able to be here. I also want to thank the remarkable group from SVC that put together this special day. Karen Trubitt, our Dean of Advancement, understood my vision for this event from the very beginning, and she was joined by a wonderful team that included Sue Lamontagne, Randy Krum, Kelli Cressy-Gassaway, Mark and Priscilla Klauder and SVC student Helene Metzger.

I do want to single out two special people who are sharing today with me – my husband, Stephen Cooper, and our son, Zack Cooper. No spouse could ask for a partner who is more supportive. Stephen (Coop as he is called by friends) has understood my dreams since we were married over 25 years ago and has helped make those dreams a reality. And, on days when the world seems bleak and problems appear too vast to solve, our son (Little Coop as he is called – but, as those who have met him know, he is not exactly little) serves as a constant reminder that the next generation is in very good hands indeed. He makes me proud every day.

I had intended to give an inaugural address about the power of education – the ability of education literally to lift generations. That is an important topic for me. As many of you know, it is a topic about which I have written and spoken – both on and off campus. It is a topic about which I am passionate. And, it is a topic that is very consistent with SVC’s core mission.

As many of you also likely know, I agreed some months ago to name, and indeed did name ahead of time, the five books I intended to cite in my inaugural address – five books that I thought would demonstrate the themes about which I would be speaking – educational empowerment.

This would all have worked out rather well – until I decided quite recently that I wanted to speak about something else.

Now, I could ascribe the change in topic to breaking my leg, and I could tell you that the literal leg break caused me to then figuratively break away from what I had wanted to say originally. But, that is not the truth.

The truth is that I decided to change the topic of my inaugural address as a result of a conversation with our new and terrific Director of Public Relations, David Scribner. During an interview on our weekly WBTN 1370 radio show called Campus Perspectives, he asked a question that struck a nerve. He asked me: “What will the classroom of the 21st Century look like?”

David’s question was a really important one. In essence, I had to articulate on air what kind of learning and education the students of tomorrow should receive. It was NOT a question I wanted to answer quickly. It IS a question that merits a serious and thoughtful response.

As I answered him on air, I realized that the subject I should be addressing on Nov. 18th is my vision for education in the 21st Century and --- more particularly --- my vision for SVC. Today really celebrates the official beginning of my presidency and as such, the beginning of a new chapter in the life of an institution. And so, today, I want to share how I see that chapter unfolding.

My only real challenge was how to find a place for those five books that were selected with an entirely different topic in mind. (I could just list them now and be done with it – but that would be too easy.)

Let’s see how I do.

This year marks the 80th Anniversary of Southern Vermont College, founded in 1926 as St. Joseph’s Business School. Indeed, in 1929 and again in 1933, we graduated 8 students. I am the college’s 8th president. Today is November 18th. Today’s event (for those who have seen the inaugural countdown) is 80 days from our first day of class this semester. In short, there is something happening here with the number 8 – and I cannot let it go by un-remarked.

With the help of my SVC research assistant, Garrett Vogel, let me share some things with an 8 in them. In music, there are 8 notes on the Western scale. There are 8 days of Chanukah. There are 8 steps in the Buddhist pathway. The Beatles sang about love in a song titled “Eight Days a Week”. There are 8 vegetables in V-8 juice. There are 8 apparitions in MacBeth. In cooking, there are about 8 pinches to a teaspoon. In tarot cards, the number 8 means strength. Martin Van Buren was the 8th President of the United States. (OK – that is not a good example as he had a mediocre presidency at best.) In chess, each side has 8 pawns.

My favorite baseball player of all time – my Red Sox hero Carl Yastrzemski -- wore the number 8. And the list continues.

But, for me, the significance of the number 8 rests first in mathematics and then in something visual. In higher math (or perhaps not that high math) and more generally, the number 8, when resting on its side, symbolizes infinity.

For me, those interlocking and interconnected circles are compelling – especially if one puts several 8’s together. Look at your program and those interlinking and interconnected 8’s --- that notion of interconnectedness and linkages is central to my vision for education in the 21st century and my vision for SVC.

Let me explain.

When David Scribner asked me to describe the classroom of the future, I responded that it would look nothing like many of the classrooms of today.

First, chairs and tables would not be bolted to the ground. The configuration of the room would change from day to day – depending on the material taught.

On some days, the room would be set up in lecture style (with the Professor at the front) but on other days, there would be clustered seating – with students sitting in work-pods, solving problems together in groups.

On other days, there would be no tables and the students and professor would sit in the round – sharing ideas and concepts – working through issues together. The classroom would become a type of gathering space.

On many days, there would be more than one person teaching – perhaps it would be a person from outside academia who would share his or her wisdom and on other days, multiple professors – each of whom would share how the issues were reflected IN and addressed BY their respective areas of expertise. Imagine co-teaching as a model.

Perhaps some learning would involve no formal classroom at all – students would learn on the web instead.

On still other days, the students would not be in a classroom on campus – they would be in the field – experiencing and applying the information and approaches they were learning in the classroom.

This vision of the classroom of the future is, in reality, a way of describing – signaling -- my vision of education in the 21st century.

Stated most simply and bluntly, quality education in the future will need -- to use a contemporary expression -- to get real. Undergraduate education is, for most students and their parents, far too expensive to acquire for its own sake alone. For a large number of students, quality education needs to be a pathway into the workplace and into graduate education.

Let me be clear. This does not mean that education should be un-intellectual. This does not mean that we, as undergraduate educators, should turn to pure skills training or career training.

But, it is time for the isolated academic experience -- symbolized by the proverbial ivory tower -- to end. The walls of the ivory tower need to be knocked down or, at a minimum, made vastly more porous.

As George Nelson says in his book *How to See*, to be educated, we cannot ignore the world around us; instead, we need to see the world as it is more robustly. (Note to everyone: this is one of the five books – watch the countdown!)

Let me explain.

Many, many years ago, when I was a young law professor, I wrote a piece about a six month sabbatical I took in which I left my comfortable academic perch and practiced law at the New York Legal Aid Society. (This organization represents low income folks in NYC.)

Thereafter, I wrote an essay about my experiences. It was titled, aptly I think: *Tumbling from the Ivory Tower*. I wrote about three things I learned from my experience: First, I learned that some of what I was teaching in my academic tower was simply wrong. Really wrong. Second, I learned that some of what I was teaching was right – but my reasons and explanations were not always complete and were not always fully grounded in reality. Third, I learned that there were issues out there that I had never thought about – or had never thought were very important -- and these were issues that truly mattered to clients.

My time outside the tower enabled me to see.

That experience has stayed with me. The messages were and are clear: Never underestimate the importance of the real world and never stay so bound up in the ivory tower that you cannot appreciate or listen to the stories of those literally in the trenches.

Adam Kahane – in his book – *Solving Tough Problems* – recognizes the importance of trenches. He observes that successful solutions to intractable problems are rarely mandated from the top down or resolved by outsiders coming in. Real solutions to major issues --- like Apartheid --- need to be developed by insiders thinking broadly and openly and boldly and creatively about their situation. Outsiders “helicoptering in” to solve the problems will not work.

In that vein, I was struck by an email exchange Kahane mentions in his book:

Question: How does one learn good judgment?

Answer: From experience.

Q: And how does one gain experience?

A: From bad judgment.

We need to help our students get experience. And, we need to help them process what they experience. We need to help them learn to make good judgments.

If we want our students to succeed, we need to train them to navigate the evolving workplace. We need to think about the skill sets the employers and employees of tomorrow need to be taught today. We need to create opportunity and open vistas.

It was this need for wider vistas, for more expansive learning and richer opportunity, that propelled Jill Ker Conway to leave her homeland and her home (a farm named Coorain) to travel to the United States – all beautifully described in her autobiographical book, *The Road from Coorain*.

And, what are some of those skills that will be so important? Here are some of them.

We need students who can figure out how to approach problems – both simple and complex ones -- and then solve them effectively – whether working alone or with a team.

We need students who are capable of and engaged by learning – now and into the future.

We need students who are nimble and flexible and not scared of or by change.

We need students who are not provincial –we need individuals whose perspectives are national and global.

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As educators, we want an educational product that cannot and will not obsolesce.

But, I want more than that for our students.

I want us to remove for them the artificial constructs that “cabin” how we learn. By that I mean that real life is not compartmentalized. Life does not happen in categories. Yet, for the most part, we still learn in categories – math over here, science over there, economics up here, writing down there, art beyond there and the list continues. That is how we customarily teach. In short --- real life commonly does not mimic how we teach and learn in the Ivory Tower.

This is a point made eloquently by Atul Gawande in his book *Complications*. He states: “We look for medicine to be an orderly field of knowledge and procedure. But it is not. It is an imperfect science, an enterprise with constantly changing knowledge, uncertain information, fallible individuals and at the same time lives on the line.”

Paulo Freire, in his remarkable book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, makes a similar point in critiquing how many teachers teach. We cannot teach by dumping information on our students, he observes. We cannot treat students like a bank where we, as teachers, just make educational deposits. NO, we need problem-solving education, education that empowers students to become critical thinkers engaged in solving the real problems of our world.

As he puts it – and powerfully – “Problem solving education is revolutionary futurity... It affirms women and men as beings who transcend themselves, who move forward and look ahead, for whom immobility represents a fatal threat, for whom looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so they can move more wisely to build the future.

This is a bold vision – a deconstruction of the academy, an eradication of previously firm walls and categories, a literal and figurative movement out of existing constraints into a bold new world.

How can this be done? How exactly can we, in the academy, move from educating students for a career to educating students for a lifetime of multiple careers in the real world?

There is no simple answer. There are no simple solutions. That is for sure. But, we, at SVC, have a rich history as an institution capable of evolving with the times – first as a place attended high schoolers who wanted “commercial courses” to a place where men and women could receive a quality business education to a place that is a four year residential liberal arts college with multiple academic programs for a wide range of full time and part-time students.

And, I have a few ideas about how we can evolve yet again to keep up with or get ahead of the times.

Reflect with me for a moment on maps (including the more contemporary three dimensional maps that are computer generated). I love maps almost as much as I love books.

Maps identify the many places we can go and the many possible routes to get there. But, maps do not tell you where or when to go. Instead, they give you options at every level -- different destinations, different routes, different opportunities. You can go forward or backward or up and down or all of the above. You can even get lost and find your way out.

So it is with education. It needs to provide opportunity. It needs to be multi-dimensional. It needs to have many routes to the same place and many routes to different places. It needs to help students navigate, without dictating a final result or a single solution.

Our job as educators, and our job here at SVC, is, then, to be good mapmakers – creating opportunities and routes for our students and their successes. We should call ourselves educational cartographers -- creating educational opportunity -- giving students maps for their future.

If you look at a map – any map – it is all about connections – all about finding the links between places and across spaces. For me, education in the future and education for SVC students of today and tomorrow is all about creating and finding connections.

The key word here – and the one that defies the isolated ivory tower – is connect. And so, today, I offer this vision for SVC’s future: We need to create a stunning educational map that I am calling “SVC CONNECT” – it is actually a map the contours of which are already in process.

Here’s some of what will be on our SVC map:

We need to connect within the SVC community – our students with our alums, our alums with our faculty, our faculty with our staff, our full-time faculty with our part-time faculty, our trustees with our students. We need to connect with our prospective students. You get the point.

We also need to find ways for our students to connect with those outside the college – specifically with the Bennington community, and we need the Bennington community to connect with us.

We need the community to come to the college on the hill more often – to see our magnificent space and to find places to gather within it, and we need to get off the hill more frequently too.

We already do connect with the community in important ways, including through community service and service learning opportunities. This is important work.

We need to connect with employers through groups like BCIC, the Chamber and Rotary. And, we need these organizations to connect with us. Some of these connections are already well underway.

We need to have our students work in internships here in Bennington and in other communities near and far, and we need businesses willing to mentor our students. We have already started to do this.

We need to connect with our collegiate neighbors – where we can learn together and share programs and expertise. That has already begun, and I am delighted to report that the Presidents of Bennington College, Marlboro College and Williams College have all welcomed me and have welcomed discussions of how our institutions can work more together.

We need to connect with our elementary and secondary schools and our regional community colleges. And we need our regional schools to connect with us. We have already started these connections through writing and essay contests and a recent conversation with the principal at Mt. Anthony High School, suggested how possible this is going forward in Bennington. We have articulation agreements with some of our regional community colleges – and we are seeking more such agreements.

At SVC, we need to find even more connections with our local and wonderful hospital – a place that I have experienced first hand.

We need to use our radio station, a gracious gift to SVC from Bob and Cora May Howe, to connect – literally and figuratively -- with the community. We need to poll our community members on important issues to understand their views – so we can communicate those ideas to others. And, we need to expand our broadcast reach too – so a wider audience can share in what we have to say.

But we need to do more than that.

At SVC, we need to connect with the world outside of Bennington. This means literally going places (like our upcoming academic field learning experience to NYC). This means having people come to us – speakers, visitors in residence, foreign students and foreign faculty. We have started down this path already.

But we need to do even more than that.

We need to connect with others in solving the problems our society faces – problems related to the environment, to healthcare, to terrorism, to crime, to economic justice. And we need to be a place where those solving those complex problems look for at least some solutions. Places like the town of Bennington, the state of Vermont and national leaders need to look to us, among other places, for assistance in problem solving.

We need to work with civic leaders so collectively we can make our world a better place.

SVC CONNECT is my metaphor for how to create infinite opportunities, infinite routes to different or similar places. We need to find and explore new connections, and we need to expand on the connections we already have in place. Just keep that sideways number 8 – with its infinite possibilities -- in mind.

Our job as an educational institution, and my job as president, is to develop our educational map. And today, in announcing my vision for SVC CONNECT, I hope that this inaugural event itself is a model for how to map connections.

We have many different people here – many connecting for the first time. I hope some new friendships are forged. We have students, staff, faculty and community who will be singing together in a few moments. We had a live radio program discussing civil liberties – using WBTN and transmitting later through pod-cast. We had questions from students, staff members, faculty members and alums. We had four sitting college presidents connecting to discuss education. And now we will have a reception, then informal conversation in my office and lastly a concert in our Gallery --- all designed to help us connect. Music has a way of connecting together people sitting separately.

SVC can be one model for how to create education for the 21st century. We can -- indeed we must -- connect ourselves to the larger world and in so doing, create a generation of students who will be prepared for the workplace of the 21st century – students who will become leaders in their communities. I am confident in our capacity to create and sustain connections.

I want to end my remarks with a poem – read in both English and Spanish. I hope this will be yet another example of SVC CONNECT.

Many years ago, I was taught Spanish in high school by a remarkable woman who traveled here today from Northern California — her name is Sandra Velasco Jordan. She understood that to learn language, you could not only learn the outside architecture of language. You had to learn a language's inner timbre – its inside architecture – its inner map. And so, she taught me Spanish through Spanish literature, starting with the play *Bodas de Sangre* by Federico Garcia Lorca (the play is the Spanish equivalent of *Romeo and Juliet*). What a perfect choice of book for a 16 – 17 year old teenage girl!

Now, I looked for a Lorca poem to read today -- to connect to her, to my early education, to wonderful teaching --- but the Lorca poems were all a bit depressing.

And, as I was thinking about this, I had a chance to connect for the first time with a remarkable friend of SVC – someone who is an author and poet and film maker and business person, someone in whom I have found a kindred spirit. His name is Don Axinn, and I am pleased to report that he is here today too. And, in a world of connections, he has written poetry in English and Spanish.

And, so I end with excerpts from his poem titled “Echos in the Morning Sun.” I will read those excerpts first in Spanish and then in English.

Quiero lo que tu quieres:

Renunciemos a mantener el control,

Investiguemos el centro
Y la esencia de nuestras vidas,
Descubramos reflejos de memorias,
Ecos de la quintaescencia que brillan

Entonces adelantemonos de nuevo
Para que podamos emigrar
No tan ciegamente hacia la mañana.

I want what you want....

We must give up control,

Probe the core
And the essence of our lives
Ferret out reflected memories
Quintessential echos beamed
Forward into the now,

Then forward again
So that we may migrate
Less blindly
Into tomorrow.

I look forward to sharing my tomorrows with all of you and to working with you to make SVC's students, alums, staff, faculty, trustees and friends immensely proud. I believe in SVC and its splendid future. I believe in all of you and your deep commitment to SVC. As I have said many times this fall, we may be small in size but we are most assuredly not small in vision.

I thank you for sharing today with me, and, as you reflect on SVC CONNECT and our vision for the future – which I hope you will do --- I leave you with an adaptation of the words of former College President and now Professor Claire Gaudiani -- -- Never Dream Scrawny.

Thank you.