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Weaver, John (2022-)

10-6-2022

President John B. Weaver's Inaugural Address: "Higher Education for Deeper Discipleship"

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Recommended Citation

Weaver, John B., "President John B. Weaver's Inaugural Address: "Higher Education for Deeper Discipleship"" (2022). *President Weaver's Speeches*. 1.
<https://palms.floridacollege.edu/weaverspeeches/1>

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“Higher Education for Deeper Discipleship”
Presidential Inauguration Address
Dr. John B. Weaver
10/6/22

I’m grateful for you all being here. Thanks to all the friends of Florida College who have joined us here and online. I appreciate the presence of my family, for their love and encouragement. Seeing them all here is like seeing a beautiful sunrise that reminds you of times past and gives hope for the present day.

Thanks to Craig Hodges and to other members of the Board of Directors for their leadership of the College. I give thanks to Craig for his leadership of the presidential search committee, and for that committee’s work in discerning the best way forward. Seeing Craig, Olen, Charlie and Wally work on that committee regularly reminded me that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and that insight is with the humble, as the book of Proverbs says.

Thank you, Florida College faculty and staff, for your kind participation tonight and your example of diligent faithfulness as colleagues and Christians. Thank you especially to the facilities employees who prepared things tonight. They give of themselves fully. As one of our facilities crew, Bob Waugh, observed to me yesterday, our FC employees are like the pig and not the chicken in a bacon and egg breakfast. The chicken is involved, but the pig is COMMITTED!

The best and most beautiful things in life are known to us by what our souls truly desire to return to: the taste of our favorite food, the presence of our best friend, the words of our Savior in Scripture. For many of us in this room, Florida College is one of those things, that we long to be near, to come home to in memory and in person. For most of us here tonight, Florida College is the finest school we know, truly, really, and quite beautifully.

I stand here tonight knowing that it’s not my arrival that makes it so. I stand on shoulders of women and men whose saintly love and service are the dearest parts of memories that draw us back here. Like them, and like you, I’m not here tonight because of or for me, but because of God’s grace and because we want to be a part of a school that supports families in bringing youth up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and that fulfills Jesus’ great commission to make disciples. This latter idea about our connection to the Great Commission is what I want to talk briefly to you about tonight. My theme tonight is “Higher Education for Deeper Discipleship.”

Three years ago, the FC leadership team reflected on the meaning of our college mission statement: not to replace it, but to condense its words into one sentence and consider its significance so that we leaders had even deeper commitment to our mission. The team’s meditation on the college’s fourfold development of students spiritually, socially, intellectually, and physically, reminded us that we teach students to be like the young Jesus

as described in Luke 2:52: “[he] increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52). This led to the following statement: “at Florida College we educate the whole person to imitate Christ in service to God and the world.” What struck me most about this statement was that we educate to “imitate Christ.” Over the past three years I’ve come to understand that this imitation of Jesus is best described as discipleship.

This is what Jesus called it. Jesus said this to his disciples in Matthew 16:24, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus describes an education that imitates him to learn more self-governance and self-sacrifice in service to others. My thesis is that Florida College is higher education for this deeper discipleship that that Jesus calls us to.

This type of education is distinctive, historically speaking. You don’t see it a lot of places. Here’s a very brief history lesson on the source and value of what we have here at FC. The Christian missiologist Leslie Newbigin has observed that Christian movements are divisible into three main groups: Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Believers Churches. Newbigin concludes that, unlike those Roman Catholic traditions that emphasize sacraments of the church, or Protestant emphasis on faith of the congregation, believers’ churches emphasize individual “discipleship” or actually walking in the way of Jesus. Being a Christian is not only possession of a church tradition or membership, or primarily hearing and confessing the gospel, but it is actual possession of life in Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit that comes through believer’s baptism.

Many of us here tonight will identify with this mindset. It’s an attitude that leads to our college mission’s integration of our student’s life with the inspired Scripture and to serving God and man. It leads to our current College tagline: “Learning, Living, Leading his Way.”

More important than taglines, is the tour of campus I could take you on to see this discipleship in action among our faculty and staff: go on a walkabout with me to view the courage of Dee and Renee Anderson, the love shown by Brian Gilliam, the wisdom of Holly Cabina, the faith shown by Thaxter Dickey, the justice given by Colleen Engel, the self-control exhibited by Tom Garland, the hopefulness that exudes from Bonnie Cable. I could name many others here tonight. My point is that the purpose of the college is seen in the character of the people selected to serve here.

Florida College is Higher Education for Deeper Discipleship. There are three values – three things we hold dear – that are implied by this statement of what we do. First, we value higher education. A college education is not necessary to life, but it is often preferable when it is focused on truth and Christian discipleship. This flies in face of many narratives right now in our country that question the value of many colleges and universities because of their left-wing, ideological fixation on “social justice” and because of their perceived lack of value for professional or vocational skills that do something for ones livelihood besides racking up debt.

One of our former Florida State senators, John Grant, recently observed to me that Florida College stands out as different in our current educational environment: “FC is an oasis,” he observed, “in a parched educational desert.” There are five reasons I would give for this uniqueness:

First, the college educates with a liberal arts curriculum focused on truth, not social justice. Inquiry after truth is our telos, our purpose and end, not some political orthodoxy;

our student experience focuses on conservative character formation through practice of the classical and theological virtues, and not some therapeutic self-fulfillment in pursuit of personal desires or momentary inclinations;

our religious instruction teaches Biblical faith, not man-made theology or denominational creeds;

our core curriculum, moral code, social event focus on self-governance and traditional family formation, not bodily exhibition or sexual liberation;

finally, both our campus gatherings, and our community service events exhibit allegiance to the founding American ideals of God-given liberty and common sense in order to unite the nation under God. We are not beholden to postmodern Marxist appeals to group division for secular power.

But what makes our disciplines of higher education truly distinctive that they stem from and seek something deeper, biblical discipleship. And this is our second, most fundamental value: discipleship, learning from and living like Jesus in service to God and neighbor. The word discipleship transforms our academic disciplines at FC because following Jesus, learning, and living His Wisdom, means we combine and hold together things that are often kept separate in world. I'll focus on two:

First, we combine education and experience, we unite theory and practice. Discipleship is about what Jesus both taught and did, and so too higher education for deeper discipleship learns not for learning's sake, but both for truth's sake and for the outworking of that truth. This why FC is called both a “common sense college” -- attentive to the shared knowledge of facts of God's Word and world -- and we're also called “hard work college” – because we're engaged in the effort to apply this knowledge for solutions in the world, whether it is a new artistic design, a different physical therapy, or an entrepreneurial business venture.

Discipleship means that we restore and revive the liberal arts to show their practical value. We are not haughty towards the vocations, what Aristotle called the “servile arts.” But, as in a broader Christian tradition of the liberal arts, extending back to the

Renaissance, we teach in a Liberal Arts education how to think, question, and communicate to develop practical and professional skills. As the classical liberal arts model of the trivium was linked to the quadrivium (skills like astronomy and rhetoric) and to professional education like law and medicine and theology, so too we combine theory and practice as a liberal arts college with degrees in business, and health science, and technology.

In our past, our pragmatic approach to truth has meant that we emphasized training students in “Kingdom work.” From our founding in 1946, this meant we taught skills in preaching and/or teaching God’s words, in evangelism, and in physically serving our community doing good to all people. We must reaffirm and restore this evangelistic, service-learning orientation at the heart of an FC education, in part through the spiritual disciplines that we already have and must maintain: daily chapel and daily Bible classes and daily interactions between students and faculty who are NT Christians. Again, this is higher education that combines theory and practice, doctrine and application, not due to market forces or cultural fads, but because our higher education is for deeper discipleship – a discipleship which is by definition a doing, a serving, a profession that not only makes a living but deepens understanding of life As Jesus says in John 7:17: “If anyone’s will is to do . . . then he will know . . .”.

Finally, we value *higher* education and *deeper* discipleship. Like the apostle Paul, we seek to excel still more. We already teach higher education, equipping youth with refined insights and rare skills for critical thinking and creative activity, but we seek to teach an ever-more-higher education, not primarily in the sense of better credentialed faculty, or more specialized disciplines, or training for more lucrative professions, but in the sense of enabling greater service to God and more giving to others by our students and alumni As Winston Churchill wrote, “you make a living by what you do; you make a life by what you give.” For my part, I think this will involve Florida College continuing to extend its services deeper into the K-12 educational environment, supporting parents and students earlier in the formative teenage years, and in pursuing additional degrees options in the technical trades and STEM disciplines once these they do come to FC as the destination school for NT Christians and as Tampa Bay’s Christian College.

We pursue ever-more-higher education not out of a sense of inadequacy that comes from comparing ourselves to others, but out of our mission to develop students for greater integration with God’s word and service to others – we pursue higher education for *deeper* discipleship. We go deeper not necessarily because our loyalty to God is now shallow, but in order reach what Christ calls us to. We seek greater depth in the way that his disciples put down their nets into deeper water because Jesus told them to in Luke 5:4.

We go deeper in discipleship in sense that Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:48 when he taught about the man who built a house by digging deep and laying the foundation on a rock. We dig deeper by coming more often to Jesus, hearing his

words, and doing them. This discipleship drives our education: it is why there is no truth under the sun that we cannot discuss on this college campus, if it is spoken in love. There is no Christ-centered conversation or instruction that we cannot have, if it is done with charity. There is no man-made tradition that exalts itself above God in higher education that we should not cast down, if we honor each other's consciences and have book, chapter, and verse for our action.

All of these are reasons that we provide a higher education for deeper discipleship. Again, I thank you for your attention tonight to this idea; I ask for your continued support in this effort; and may God bless us to this end.

Mr. Hodges, it is my honor to accept your charge and this presidency of Florida College, and to continue to join you and the employees of this college in being servants to the servants of God. Thank you all.