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Lincoln's Legacy and a New Generation of Leadership

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Lincoln's Legacy and a New Generation of Leadership

Abstract

One hundred fifty-three years ago our nation was adrift, embroiled in a civil war and grappling with questions about our future. Many had lost hope. In November of 1863 here at Gettysburg, President Abraham Lincoln called upon our nation to rededicate itself to the unfinished work before us—the work of equality, the fulfillment of our democracy, a new birth of freedom. [*excerpt*]

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Lincoln's legacy and a new generation of leadership

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Photo by Miranda Harple.
Lincoln Statue at Gettysburg College.

One hundred fifty-three years ago our nation was adrift, embroiled in a civil war and grappling with questions about our future. Many had lost hope. In November of 1863 here at Gettysburg, President Abraham Lincoln called upon our nation to rededicate itself to the unfinished work before us—the work of equality, the fulfillment of our democracy, a new birth of freedom.

As we celebrate the legacy of this great American president on Presidents Day, it is clear that the great task to which he called our nation is far from complete. We continue to wrestle with

inequality and discrimination in our communities, on our college campuses, in our own country and throughout the world.

Given these complex challenges, one might be tempted to throw one's hands up, to bury one's head in the sand, to feel that the unfinished work of equality is too much to face. But as an educator and a college president, I have hope. And my hope resides in the new generation of leadership that I see on my campus and on college campuses across the nation.

This new generation of students—the most diverse in our nation's history—is truly embracing Lincoln's challenge. They are becoming informed citizens, adept at discerning opportunities from threats; creative thinkers able to confront multifaceted problems; activists and resilient change agents.

Last winter, Gettysburg College students planned and facilitated a town hall meeting that provided our campus community with insights into their experiences as students of color, highlighting the importance of cultural competence and the impact of unconscious bias—and providing the platform for ongoing collective conversation that is necessary for growth and positive change. This fall, another group of students staged a 24-hour demonstration against hate speech, encouraging our community to engage in dialogue about issues of justice and equality on our campus and across the nation. These students remind us of what is too often lost in today's divisive climate—the importance of respectful and civil dialogue.

Gettysburg students also extend themselves beyond campus to deepen their understanding of complex social issues. Through our Center for Public Service students partner with over 30 agencies and organizations to integrate academic theories with community realities and address a wide range of local concerns—from food security to homelessness to environmental justice. In addition, most Gettysburg students spend at least one semester abroad immersed in and learning about a culture different from their own.

These experiences build bridges, change perspectives, and open dialogue. They prepare our students to move gracefully between cultures to build relationships and find solutions. My hope for the future lies in the fact that these students are our future politicians, entrepreneurs, doctors, scientists, and teachers—our future leaders.

The skills that liberal arts colleges advance in students—complex problem-solving; effective communication; the understanding and appreciation of cultural difference; evidence-based reasoning; and ethical decision-making are exactly those skills needed to answer Lincoln's charge, the skills that our world so desperately craves.

Lincoln once said, “You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today.”

As we consider the unfinished work before our nation and our world, let us encourage more, rather than fewer, of this new generation to see the value—and the practicality—of an education in the liberal arts and sciences. Our future depends on it.