The Day

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Conn College president reflects on the role of liberal arts reaching from college to community

By Leo I. Higdon Jr.

It was my honor and privilege in 2006 to be selected as Connecticut College's 10th president. Today, as I prepare for my retirement, I am pleased to reflect on the growth and achievement of this extraordinary institution over the past seven years, and to offer a few parting thoughts on the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Now, in the early years of its second century, Connecticut College is a successful, accomplished and resilient institution. This college today offers an education that is deeply rooted in the classical definition of the liberal arts and provides an unusually active and outward focus on the world.

A Connecticut College education today combines a rigorous intellectual framework with profuse opportunities to test, apply and expand what is learned in the classroom. This combination has produced a unique form of education expressed in our mission statement as putting the "liberal arts into action."

Perhaps the best example this is the work our students do in New London and the surrounding region. Every year, more than 500 Connecticut College students are routinely involved in internships, coursework, work-study placements and volunteer placements in local schools, agencies and other non-profits. Even more students are involved in specific projects, such as the day of community service during orientation week when more than 400 first-year students fan out across the city and complete service projects.

Our students serve as tutors and mentors in the New London Public Schools and in after-school programs. They also participate in a wide range of New London initiatives, including helping to preserve the coast and environment, participating in walks and other fundraisers, and volunteering with seniors. With college staff and faculty, they also bring local children and youth to campus for language expos, cultural activities, athletics and art projects.

In addition to the work of our students, our faculty and staff are closely connected to the community through their service to local organizations. And, with more than 900 employees - 20 percent of whom live in New London - and more than 8,000 visitors each year, the college has a significant impact on the local economy.

The world of higher education is changing rapidly. A lagging economy, shifting demographics and new technologies all present challenges to the highly personalized, high-cost model of residential liberal arts education that we practice at Connecticut College.

These same factors, however, point to the rising need for precisely the kind of education Connecticut College offers. This is not an ivory tower; it is a community of intellectual inquiry and practice. This is a place where students learn how to think and act.

Since 2006, we have invested in our campus facilities and in our educational and co-curricular programs. We've broadened access to this education with new support for grants and scholarships, and we've continued to bring the best and brightest students and faculty to New London from all over the world.

Connecticut College graduates are extraordinarily well-prepared to succeed in, and contribute to, many and varied professions, vocations and communities. With the continued support and involvement of our college and the local community, Connecticut College itself is poised for continued and rising relevance in a rapidly changing world.

It has been an honor to serve as Connecticut College president for the last seven and a half years. And it has been a pleasure to live and work in this wonderful city. On Jan. 1, 2014, Connecticut College welcomes Katherine Bergeron as its 11th president. Under her leadership, this extraordinary institution will continue to thrive in New London.

Leo I. Higdon Jr. is president of Connecticut College.