

# Now, more than ever, making excellence inclusive

“In these times.” I’ve noticed that phrase has become commonplace over the past six months, as shorthand for the global economic recession creating turmoil not only on Wall Street, but in businesses, nonprofits and families. It is the explanation for so much of the bad news we hear: layoffs, budget cuts and downsized ambitions.

All colleges and universities share in these difficulties. In the past year, Wheaton reduced its already-lean budget by more than \$2.5 million more, and the college’s endowment lost 25 percent of its market value, according to year-end projections.

And yet Wheaton faces a challenge that transcends the current economic turmoil. To be blunt, many people now question the value of the high-quality, personal, liberal arts education that is the college’s hallmark. We know the problems—such as the rising costs of colleges having outpaced the growth of family incomes and the elevation of immediate career preparation over learning that will last a lifetime—but the solutions are not so obvious.

How can Wheaton thrive while remaining true to its historic mission?

The answer to that question may not be easy, but our path toward discovering the right course of action seems clear. We must rely on our core strengths as a collaborative and creative community willing to think beyond the traditional boundaries. It has been observed, more than once, that Wheaton’s history is one long experiment in progressive approaches to education, from its founding as a seminary and its groundbreaking work on retaining a gender-conscious approach to coeducation up to the development of our current curriculum, which recognizes the value of interdisciplinary study, intercultural learning and experiential education.

Last spring, I attended a two-day conference with the presidents of other top liberal



arts colleges, including Amherst, Williams, Bates, Smith and Connecticut colleges, to discuss how we could continue to promote diversity in ways that will enrich the learning environment on campus for all students. As preparation for our discussions, we read an article from the book, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*, by Scott Page.

The reading struck a chord with me. Essentially, the author, a political economist who teaches at the University of Michigan, makes a social science case for my belief that diversity represents an educational asset. He has developed a formal approach for “capturing” diversity, which he calls a “person’s toolbox.” In other words, he characterizes people’s capabilities as their collection of tools. “Our toolboxes become a framework for thinking about individual cognitive differences because each of us has a toolbox filled with different cognitive skills.”

The diversity of Wheaton’s community—whose members hail from across the country and around the world, from many religious traditions, ethnic and racial groups, and myriad experiences—ensures that we have a well-stocked toolbox to tackle complex problems.

I have pointed out the educational benefits of diversity many times in the past: the fact

that students learn from each other as well as from their professors and that students with diverse perspectives and skills enrich the learning environment for all. However, varied points of view and a range of talents also can help guide our college in remaining true to our historic liberal arts mission while responding to the contemporary challenge to demonstrate the value of the education we offer.

Wheaton’s campus community is working to make the most of our diverse set of tools.

Indeed, the entire campus pulled together last year to find ways to reduce spending and allocate more resources to meet the financial aid needs of our students and their families. More collaborative efforts will be needed this year to find new ways to deliver programs more efficiently and reduce spending further.

In addition, the President’s Action Committee on Inclusive Excellence is building up the capacity of students, faculty and staff to work together through Dialogue Action Teams (DATs). These groups tackle the issues that arise from differing perspectives head-on, in a straightforward but supportive process that is designed to turn dialogue into a plan for action. I participated in one of three groups that met during the spring and summer, and I am looking forward to getting more people involved in the process this year.

The need to work together, and to make the most of our diverse talents, has never been more urgent. In these times, we need to make the most of every tool at our disposal. □

