

The Inaugural Speech of President David G. Horner

Pierce Theater - March 7, 2009

An Idea

They had an idea – the founders of this college: to make a difference in the lives of girls in a distant land. Their vision was large; their resources meager; but the idea took hold. Originally planted in Smyrna in 1875, relocated amidst great suffering in 1923 to Greece, the idea grew.

Tonight we meet as the inheritors of this 134 year old idea to dedicate ourselves to its furtherance in our time.

Mr. Chair, distinguished guests, colleagues, friends and dear family, it is a profound privilege to have the opportunity to serve this cause. I want to thank each of you for sharing this moment marking a new stage in the evolution of the idea of The American College of Greece.

To be candid, this is an event that has come into being somewhat reluctantly. Knowing that there was no tradition of presidential inaugurations at educational institutions in Greece, I had planned to assume my new duties rather unobtrusively. This had some appeal because I have been inaugurated twice before in America. So I knew that an inauguration such as this was rather like a large wedding (although perhaps not a Greek wedding), and who would want their third marriage to be so publicly conspicuous?

It was one of our trustees on the presidential search committee, Jon Westling, former president of Boston University, who first challenged the “no inauguration” assumption, pointing out that such an event at The American College of Greece would be consistent not only with American educational practice but also with this College’s tradition of breaking new ground. So, we decided to give it a try, and I must say, especially seeing all of you here tonight, I am very glad we did.

For one thing, while this is my third time around, I am experiencing some aspects of an inauguration for the first time. For example, in my previous two inaugurations the first institutional delegate in the academic procession represented Harvard University – the oldest American university. In fact, my spouse, Sue, was the Harvard representative at my last inauguration. (Tonight Sue is representing Northwestern University, and Harvard is represented by our trustee, Dr. Tim Bolton.) But on this occasion, held on European soil, Harvard is in the third position following two universities, Edinburgh and Cambridge, with Cambridge predating Harvard’s founding by more than 400 years. And, I am especially pleased that one of our younger, Pierce College faculty members is representing the University of Cambridge this evening. (Actually, we had hoped, given our setting, to outdo even Cambridge. We tried hard to identify an alumnus from Plato’s Academy to lead the academic procession, but in the end the Academy’s alumni records proved too challenging for us.)

So, however reluctant we might have been initially, I am grateful, indeed, that you are here. Your presence is a testimony to the importance of the mission and the achievements of this College founded 134 years ago with that seminal idea: to make a difference in the lives of girls in a distant land.

Given the flowering of this idea in all the years since, especially in the immediately preceding 33 years of President Bailey's leadership, what are the possibilities for the timeframe of our stewardship? Drawing on my developing sense of the history of The American College of Greece, aided by the insights of hundreds of conversation partners over the last nine months and with the benefit of an expanding body of analysis focused on this question, I want to suggest two major trajectories.

First is the trajectory of **personal transformation**. As I have listened to the stories of our alumni, I have been struck by the life altering influence of this institution. "My years at Pierce or my years at Deree were the best years of my life" many have said to me – apparently not because the years since have been so bad but because it was at Pierce or Deree that the foundation for so much that followed was formed. For some this formation process was utterly astonishing. For example, one individual told me that he literally cried when he stepped on to the campus and sensed the dramatic difference in the learning environment from all that he had previously known. Several others have shared how they undertook advanced studies at the most prestigious universities in the world or received job opportunities with international organizations around the globe, but it was here that they experienced

their best teaching, teaching that opened the doors to these academic and professional opportunities. Many have spoken to me of the impact of the learning that takes place outside the classroom – the bonds of friendship and connection that have enriched their lives and advanced their careers. While still others have waxed eloquently about how Greek culture and history came alive for them, even though they had been raised by parents who emigrated from Greece.

But the influence of this school is broader than the personal because through its life-shaping influence on individuals and through its innovative educational leadership this College also has spurred positive, social change. Therefore, the second trajectory I want to identify is **social contribution**.

As noted earlier, breaking new ground has been a hallmark of this institution from its first days, whether it was pioneering in the education of girls from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds in Smyrna in the nineteenth century or educating Greek social workers in the mid-twentieth century to address the vexing social challenges following World War II or introducing the study of marketing or information technology to Greece to empower the national economy or the study of psychology to enrich undergraduate curricula or whether it was simply operating as we have throughout our entire history as a private but non-profit institution, dedicating all of our resources to improving the quality of our education in service of the common good. In these and other ways, both in curriculum development and educational practice, The American College of

Greece has pointed the way for others to follow and has prepared its graduates to make a difference in the society around them, thereby extending our founders' vision.

Pursuing vigorously these two trajectories of personal transformation and social contribution is, then, an overarching objective that grows authentically out of our particular history. This ideal, however, reaches back far beyond 1875 and the founding of The American College of Greece. In fact, it emanates from the foundation of the western intellectual tradition, which originated in Greece, for it was the ancient Greek philosophers who envisioned education as both personally and publicly beneficial. In their view, education held the key to the development of a productive and meaningful life as well as a just and sustainable society.

We are proposing to build, then, on very solid ground, the solid ground of our own institutional history and core competencies and of our unique cultural context. But, given the array of challenges certain to confront us, challenges both known and unknown as we gather this evening, our determined pursuit of these two trajectories linking private and public good through the mission of The American College of Greece will surely require the disciplined execution of an ambitious institutional agenda, specifically:

We must not rest on but rather continuously earn our reputation as an educational innovator by staying attuned to the constantly evolving, best practices of student-centered education, and we must support our

faculty and staff with the resources and experiences they require to incorporate these practices into the life and culture of our college. And, we must intentionally develop our internal culture to continue to instill in our students the recognition that education is a gift to be received for one's own good and a gift to be shared for the good of others.

We must extend the opportunity for a personally transformative educational experience to an ever more diverse set of students, students from every region of Greece and from the geographical region surrounding Greece as well as students from around the world. To do this, we must thoughtfully seek high quality international institutional partners to open our doors to a wider and richer mix of educational options both for our students and students from partner institutions.

We must articulate our case more visibly and effectively, making clear that the educational environment of The American College of Greece is among the very best and is worthy of the investment of families with the highest dreams for their children. And, we must redouble our efforts to assure that a family's financial resources are not an insurmountable obstacle to the pursuit of these dreams.

As an international, educational citizen, we must be faithful both to our American heritage as well as our historic commitment to the well-being of Greece. We must build on and utilize our wide network of relationships to develop academic initiatives that address issues of importance to the ongoing advancement of Greece and the wider

world, and we must encourage our faculty through their research activities to engage these issues. And, we must lend our support enthusiastically as constructive changes are implemented in the Greek system of education in order to assure the best possible future for the young people of Greece as well as the enduring strength of this remarkable and resilient nation.

As a local, institutional citizen, we must dedicate ourselves to the protection of our priceless physical environment, enhancing the magnificent facilities we have inherited and increasing access to them for our students, alumni, families and the surrounding community.

Finally and by no means of least importance, we must live out the recognition that our people – our students, our alumni, our faculty, our staff, and our voluntary leadership – are our most precious assets. We must earnestly cultivate a comprehensive organizational culture of mutual respect and high achievement in which every person's role is valued and every person's capability to contribute to our mission is tapped. And, we must carefully nurture a positive, equitable, developmental, meaningful work environment in which competitive and just compensation is assured to the full extent of our ability.

These are, indeed, ambitious commitments in pursuit of the twin goals of personal transformation and social contribution, and the fulfillment of these commitments will require much. But, in 1875 Congregational women missionaries from Boston had an idea: to make a difference in the lives of girls in a distant land. Because of their vision and

perseverance, because of the wise stewardship of many that followed, especially President John Bailey and all those who worked with him during an extraordinary period of institutional growth, the resources we now possess would have been unimaginable 134 or even 34 years ago.

So we have both the obligation and the opportunity to use these resources wisely and imaginatively. We must and we will carry the idea of our founders and those that followed them forward in our time. We will set our sights high and we will fully expect to reach these heights for we have become, we are The American College of Greece.