

US-China Presidents Roundtable  
Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie  
President, Indiana University  
Anderson Family Commons  
Rice University School of Business  
Monday, June 22, 2015  
1:30 p.m.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Thank you Presidents Jenkins and Xu.

And let me also express my thanks to President David Leebron and his colleagues at Rice University for hosting and organizing this very important roundtable.

I know that I speak for my American colleagues in saying that we very much appreciate this opportunity to engage in discussions with our presidential colleagues from so many renowned Chinese universities, with many of whom Indiana University has had productive long-standing relationships.

I am pleased and honored to be part of this afternoon's panel on liberal education, student mobility, and digital education.

## 2. LIBERAL EDUCATION.

The original meaning of liberal education was the education of a free person with the knowledge and habits of mind to participate actively and productively in civil society.

It thus covered a diverse core of knowledge of the arts, literature, philosophy, and the sciences that would be a common body of shared knowledge among the educated

leaders of societies. It also formed the basis for further study in the ancient professions of law and medicine, or for further exploration in the arts and sciences.

At the same time, a liberal education developed habits of mind—skills such as critical thinking and clear expression—that are necessary to communicate with wider audiences.

Over time, a liberal education has come to have an additional meaning—that it is a liberating experience. It should free talent and curiosity and encourage students to explore, inquire, and question without arbitrary boundaries.

A liberal education, then, produces leaders who are better able to adapt and respond to the demands of rapidly changing economic and social environments. For this reason, many countries, including, as I understand it, China, seek to adopt a style of education that encourages a diverse core of knowledge and thinking skills.

### 3. STUDENT MOBILITY

Today, civil society is, without question, a global society, and if students are to participate and thrive in it—and if societies are to thrive from their participation—their core knowledge must be more global, and they must acquire the skills to navigate and lead in a global society.

This applies both to students who are themselves truly global in that they have had substantial and demanding study abroad experiences like thousand annually at Indiana University, but it also applies to the many students whose circumstances, choice of major, or other factors make it impossible for them to have such a study abroad experience.

For these students, in particular, the global breadth of a liberal education is perhaps most important and most liberating.

#### 4. DIGITAL EDUCATION

How then, do the world's growing and vast computer networks—like Internet2, which Indiana University operates, and CERNET in China, headed by my good friend Wu Jianping of Tsinghua—how do they serve the ideals of a liberal education for a mobile, global society?

I believe that we are at the very beginning of understanding the potential impact of the new tools of digital education on liberal education. But, like all tools, digital education must be shaped, harnessed, and refined to reach its potential.

Gutenberg's moveable-type printing press did not cause an immediate global expansion of education, but, in time, it allowed universities to amass vast printed collections representing the foundations of human knowledge. These books, along with instruction by learned scholars, amplified the reach of a liberal education more than the world had ever known. But, of course, this occurred over hundreds of years.

In recent decades, we have all witnessed rapid advances in information technology—advances that have eliminated barriers of space and time and given us more direct and immediate access to scholarly materials. With these advances has come an intense and widespread interest in digital education.

Today, we hear extravagant claims as to how a “digital education” can be a substitute for a formal university liberal education. I could not disagree more. Digital education is a complement, a means to help achieve what have been the enduring purposes of the great universities since their origins 25 centuries ago: the creation, dissemination, and preservation of knowledge.

And whether a student is on our campus or on the other side of the globe, it can also be a tool for liberal education.

Universities can shape digital education to expand our reach, to connect between our institutions, and most importantly, to enable students to access the education they seek. It allows for unprecedented flexibility in location, time, and format. It gives institutions of higher education access to a broader cross-section of individuals.

But the work of shaping the tools of digital education falls to us if universities are to be its masters rather than its servant. We must not cede control of the intellectual property of our courses or fail to capture for ourselves the big data that enlighten better paths to effective instruction.

Achieving this may require partnerships among our institutions when the scale of the work exceeds any institution's interests. That is why Indiana University has joined with other universities in founding the Unizin Consortium to amplify our talents to shape digital education. Incidentally the Consortium now has 11 major US research universities as members with more to join soon.

At Indiana University, we also believe that distance education cannot easily replace the guidance and mentorship that take place in a true liberal education through both formal and informal interactions. Nor do we believe it can substitute for the peer learning and motivation generated by the members of a cohort of learners working together on a campus.

Digital education and student mobility, are, however, two important pathways for globalizing, enhancing, and enriching a liberal education, but neither can fully substitute for one.