Fall Family Weekend

Remarks from Head of School
Dr. John P.N. Austin

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2022 / HESS CENTER / LARGE AUDITORIUM

Legacy Strengths and Future Aspirations

Good afternoon, everyone. I hope you've had a great day of classes. I speak on behalf of the entire faculty and staff when I say how glad we are that you were able to join us for Fall Family Weekend. The first thing I want to do is thank you.

Thank you for your continued support, partnership, and trust. Thank you for sharing the lives of your children with us. And thank you, as well, for the questions you submitted. We received a grand total of: eight. Not a lot, admittedly, which is perhaps a good thing.

We plan on getting back to each and every one of you who asked a question. As I have often said, your questions make us better and help us to become more intentional, so I am grateful to those of you who took the time to write.

Your feedback also helps us to do something which is very, very important for schools: and that is, to sharpen and deepen our existing strengths—even as we look to the future—and that is my theme for this afternoon, the relationship between what we might think of as "legacy strengths" and future aspirations.

A few years ago, I read a short op-ed by the Canadian journalist David Sax. The title brilliantly captures his argument: "End the Innovation Obsession: some of our best ideas are in the rearview mirror."

"True innovation," he writes, "isn't just some magic carnival of invention . . . . It is a continuing process of gradual improvement and assessment that every institution and business experiences in some way."

"Often," he goes on to say, "that actually means adopting ideas and tools that already exist but make sense in a new context, or even returning to methods that worked in the past." This idea of what he calls "rearview innovation" resonated with me, especially as we emerge from the disruptions of the past few years, take stock, and chart a path into the future.

Don't get me wrong. Schools—great schools, like Deerfield—are never complacent; they evolve and they change; they are attentive to future opportunities; they are alive to new ideas; and they strive, always, for continual improvement, and we made a number of great adjustments over the last few years. But I was struck by Sax's distinction between fads and trends, on the one hand, and authentic innovation, on the other; innovation that in his words "reflects where we've been, what we've learned, and how we actually want to live."

I was also struck by his comment that "this type of reflective innovation requires courage, because it calls into question the assumption that newer is necessarily better." Schools sometimes seem particularly vulnerable to this mistake. Too often what looks like innovation turns out to be a short-lived fad.

I want to mention four "innovations" from the past, tested by time and made all the more relevant by the lessons learned during the past few years, that I hope will endure in Deerfield. Along the way, I hope to answer a couple of the questions that I received from you, and finally, give you a sense of the opening weeks of school.

The first is perhaps the oldest—it's ancient, in fact. It is the idea of the liberal arts.

At Deerfield we have taken steps to re-dedicate ourselves to the idea of the liberal arts. As I said at this time last year when I spoke to you, our challenge is to reinvent them to meet the challenges of the historical moment in which we are living.

The liberal arts—a well-rounded education in the major disciplines of arts, science, and social science that exposes students to diverse modes of thought and tradition that resists early over-specialization—have proved to be remarkably durable, but they have never been static; they have continually evolved over two and a half millennia—rediscovered, reinvented, renewed by new scholarship and discovery and, as importantly, rescued from neglect. Over recent decades, and under pressure from a range of forces, the number of students pursuing a liberal arts education has declined precipitously (interesting enough, even as they are being embraced across the globe).

The liberal arts are truly a global accomplishment, and they have been enriched by many different cultural traditions. Yet despite differences across history and geography, certain core commitments of the liberal arts have endured and stood the test of time.

Here are a few ideas at the core of the liberal arts that shape our work here and will continue to shape it into the future. I am confident you saw them in action today across our classrooms.

The Discursive Arts:

Since the invention of the classical trivium—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—the liberal arts have embraced as central an emphasis on communication—on speech and writing and particularly the discursive arts: discussion, dialogue, disputation, argument, and debate.

It's not accidental that the Greeks pioneered both democracy and the philosophical dialogue; those go hand-in-hand. There is a deep connection between citizenship and the attendant skills of listening, discussing, and debating—all essential preparation for a life of pluralistic contention and civic engagement.

Deep Reading:

Related to this, is a commitment not simply to literacy but to deep forms of reading: reading deeply, with absorption, appreciation, pleasure, and concentration; reading generously and with an open mind; and, of course, reading critically, analytically, and skeptically.

Today that skepticism includes the ability to navigate a media environment characterized by an over-abundance of information and data—much of it unreliable, questionable, doubtful. As technological change accelerates, deep reading skills, already in precipitous decline, will become more and more important.

Ways of Knowing:

Last year at this time, I suggested that the liberal arts are, at their core, an education in different ways of knowing the world. That begins with an introduction to—and induction into—the core disciplines that shape scientific and humanistic investigation.

We divide the curriculum up into discrete disciplines for a reason: because they each offer a unique set of tools for making sense of our worlds. There will always be debates about which disciplines matter and which ones schools should emphasize, and that is as it should be; the ferment and interest in STEM-related fields is one of the most important developments of the last few decades. Stanford University, I'm told, has recently introduced a major in data science—a study our math department is also considering adding to the curriculum.

But what's not up for debate—at least if you believe in the liberal arts as an enduring curricular structure—is the central importance of introducing high school students to a range of different ways of knowing and understanding.

Inquiry:

With this emphasis on multiple disciplinary lenses comes a similar commitment to unfettered curiosity, inquiry, question-asking, and a robust skepticism of received truths and orthodoxies, and, with that a deep skepticism of practices that obstruct and slow that quest.

A commitment to courageous question-asking and expressive freedom runs like a vein of iron thread through diverse learning traditions. Frederick Douglass, in an essay I assigned to my seniors earlier in the year, calls speech and dialogue "the great renovator of society;" they are also the great renovator of the human mind, and schools need to champion that idea of expressive freedom and inquiry. I will have more to say about this—and the role that Deerfield can play in promoting those values—later in the year.

The Past as a Source of Wisdom:

You also find in the liberal arts a deep commitment to the past as a source of wisdom and knowledge—through works of art, literature, philosophy, and ethics, and the competing values and perspectives they offer. In 1969, the media scholar and educator Neil Postman wrote a book with the wonderful title: *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. After all, it was 1969. Ten years later, in 1979, he wrote another book with the title: *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*. What he meant by this is that much of what we do as educators and teachers is to transmit, rescue, and reclaim traditions of learning and art that would otherwise slowly decay and disappear without the active stewardship of teachers and schools.

These ideas remain vital elements of our educational philosophy and practice—they inform how we think about our curriculum, how we think about our teaching, and how we will think about the future of our faculty. Given trends in higher education, secondary schools such as Deerfield have a unique and leading role in cultivating the mindsets and habits that have long defined the liberal arts.

This been one of the best opening of schools I can remember—the tone, the positive energy have been palpable—which brings me to my second rearview innovation. It's the most difficult to put a finger on. Let's just call it school spirit.

We have lots of that. We see it at every week's School Meeting. We see it at theatrical and musical performances when students show up in droves to support their friends—as you will see tonight. We saw it a couple weekends of ago when all of our teams were playing St. Paul's, and we will see it a couple of weeks from now when we all go to Choate and celebrate, with one of our historic rivals, 100 years of interscholastic competition. It's easy to dismiss or to trivialize school spirit, but it's much more than cheerleaders and bonfires and natty letter sweaters, though all of those are important.

At its best, school spirit is students celebrating one another; students cheering for one another; students inspiring one another. Taking pride in one another, challenging and pulling for one another. Lifting one another up in search of their best performance and their best self. It also offers young people a common identity, a sense of shared purpose. The social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who is an insightful student of schools and their cultures, often invokes the great civil rights leader Pauli Murray, who spoke of expanding circles of connection, inclusion, and care. These centripetal energies, pulling students together into community and promoting shared experiences, are powerful and formative.

And for many students experiencing that sense of shared purpose and excitement is their first lesson in meaningful citizenship—of what it means to have responsibilities and duties to other members of the community. So school spirit is really the idea that each of us is a member of this specific community, and that students have unique obligations to one another: to support and care for one another.

This summer, in announcing the adjustment to our new approach to smart phones, I mentioned Mr. Boyden's insistence that there be no signs on campus as a way of encouraging students to actively help greet and guide lost guests. And that stands as a symbol of "innovation" number three: our commitment to a heads-up, friendly, welcoming culture with face-to-face interaction.

Not surprisingly, a few of your questions addressed the adjustment we made to our smart phone policy. Is it working? What has been its impact on students? Has the adjustment met our hopes and expectations? Does it apply to parents?

My sense from talking with students and closely observing their interactions is that it has been an overwhelming success. I can say without qualification that students have embraced the policy, and our worry that faculty might have to work overtime to enforce it has not come to pass.

Thus far this year, I've only had to remind one student of our expectations. (I think he was truly mortified!) Students appear to be using their phones less and connecting more. And some have told me it has reduced time on social media. If you walk around during community time—into the Dining Hall, the Hess lobby, the library, the café in the Koch—you see students studying, reading, and interacting with one another. And I like to think that this hiatus from cell phones during the academic day has helped our students rediscover what everyday life can be like when untethered from their phones.

At the height of the pandemic, I came across an article in the *Washington Post* about what has been called the "humane technology" movement among former Silicon Valley insiders. The article profiled a small Amish community in Michigan wrestling with new kinds of technology. The idea that the Amish reflexively shun modern technology, it turns out appears to be greatly exaggerated. The article mentions an Amish-owned factory in Ohio featuring sophisticated design software, laser technology, and advanced robotics. They have some latitude in whether or not they adopt new technologies, and they are quite intentional about these decisions. When a church member asks permission to use a new technology, the Amish ask a simple question: Will the adoption of the device strengthen or weaken relationships within the community?

In one case, they voted down the purchase of a hay baler. Yes, it might increase productivity, but they concluded that their connections among one another would be adversely affected if they began haying without the help of others.

I can honestly say I have no view on hay balers, so expect no policy change on those anytime soon. But I do love the question. I love the fact that they're carefully considering the impact of certain practices on their community life, because I believe that schools have a unique opportunity to create conditions where young people can thrive and flourish.

Number four is closely connected to two and three—and it's probably not surprising to anyone in this room. It also happens to be one of my favorite times of the day: sit-down meals.

A parent recently sent me an article with the title: "Family dinners are key to children's health. So why don't we eat together more?" It cites research demonstrating a strong correlation between dinners spent with friends and family and the well-being of young people. The article also noted how difficult it is for many families to do this: working families, busy professional families, single parent families. The author describes one young woman, a student at a day school with a long commute, and her mother, who eat dinner together in the car so she can participate in her robotics club. And I should say that the effort that we make—that faculty and dining staff make—to pull this off seven times a week (even as other schools have all but abandoned this practice) is considerable, but it goes directly to who we are as a school, and it has a powerful impact on our students and their experience here. Our Dining Hall at sit-down is really a kind of classroom, where important lessons are imparted.

What do you see at sit-down meals? You see a certain degree of formality. A simple grace of thanksgiving. You see students serving one another and cleaning up after one another. You see students working with—and beside—staff: setting tables, refilling the water, retrieving seconds, filling in for absent waiters and second waiters, friends helping friends. And that, really, is the point: You can't have a sit-down meal unless everyone is contributing.

You also see all manner of goofy announcements: Classics Club announcements in Latin, organizational meetings for the Drone Club and the Meat Club. You see students singing happy birthday to one another, and on Sunday, the entire school singing the Evensong.

At our opening meeting, I said to faculty that our goal as teachers and advisors and coaches is not simply student well-being. Our goal—our aspiration—is human flourishing: to create a school that celebrates and promotes connection, inclusion, community—what sociologists and political

scientists call "thick" or layered relationships. The kind of learning that we value at Deerfield is impossible without first creating the conditions where these kinds of relationships can seed and root, and they are one of the most important things we can do to ensure that young people will thrive.

I recently tried to sketch out for myself the qualities I most admire in our faculty: they are great collaborators and supportive, flexible, selfless colleagues. They are dedicated mentors committed to working closely with young people across multiple dimensions of school life. They bring joy, generosity, and a sense of humor to all of their interactions.

You might have noticed some things missing from that list. I should say that I take it as an absolute given that a teacher should have disciplinary expertise, wide-ranging knowledge, a passion for learning, and skill in communicating that passion to young people; they have to be great facilitators, coaches of learning.

But I was not surprised that I found myself focusing on the very intangible qualities of character that help us create thick relationships. One of the best pieces of advice I was given when I became head of school was this: surround your yourself with energy producers, not energy consumers. A great community actively creates that kind of joyful, positive energy, and that, in turn, provides a foundation from which we can challenge our students, stretch our students, and ask more of them. I believe that Deerfield has a unique opportunity, and can do that in a way that colleges and day schools simply can't. And by doing it we give our students—your children—an extraordinary gift: providing them with the kind of environment they need to thrive, meet challenges, and reach for excellence.

You, too, are a part of this—everything we do here is a team effort. So I do have a simple request: (I hope!)—and I know many of you are already doing this—but I hope you will take a moment to share a quick word of thanks to a member of our staff or faculty when you have the opportunity, especially now that you have, after a gap of three years, the chance to visit classes. It would mean a lot to them, I know.

One of our greatest hopes is that our graduates will leave here with the bridge-building and community-building skills of creating and caring that will enrich their lives and make the world and their communities—wherever they are—a better place. What they learn here will travel with them throughout their lives.

I ran into a prospective parent the other day in the Main School Building, a graduate of one of our peer schools. He was first introduced to Deerfield his sophomore year of college during a two-week stay in the hospital. Every day a classmate—a graduate of Deerfield—and someone he barely knew, regularly and without prompting but out of generosity, brought him his Greek homework, sharing notes, and ensuring that he did not fall behind. One little act. But remembered for a lifetime. I like to think that the culture we create here will engender a lifetime of thoughtfulness and care.

Each of these innovations from the past that I have described will find further expression at Deerfield in the months and years ahead.

We continue to think a great deal about Deerfield's future: how we can deepen our commitment to the liberal arts, ensuring that our academic program is attentive to future possibilities; how we can secure the resources to support great teaching and ensure that our faculty remains a learning

faculty—always striving for improvement to remain the very best in the country—both as mentors and teachers; how we can continue to build a community of connection, joy, optimism, and challenge. And how these aspirations find expression in our physical campus.

At the center of our Master Plan is the refurbishment and reinvention of the Dining Hall—the heart and soul of our community and a campus landmark. Built 75 years ago, it is in need of expansion and modernization. It's a bold, exciting, and necessary project that will create new common spaces for students, a new servery, and a necessary expansion of our seating capacity so we can comfortably seat our entire community while also maintaining the existing footprint—preserving the classical feel of a building that has connected generations of Deerfield students while keeping school size at approximately 650 students—a number we believe allows us to provide a broad and expansive program and also a powerful sense of community.

I am thrilled about what this project will mean for us, and I can't wait to share with you our most current ideas and plans as soon as possible. Again, thank you. I hope you will join us at the Arts Showcase tonight at 7:30, and I hope you have a great weekend.