
KEYNOTE SPEAKER
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DOUG BUNCH
Partner, Cohen Milstein Sellers & Toll PLLC, and former U.S. Public Delegate to the United Nations
"Building Global Perspectives in Leadership: Spotlight on Doug Bunch"
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Keynote

Address to the
Joint National Committee for Languages /
National Council for Languages and International Studies
Virtual Advocacy Days
February 27, 2024, 2:00 p.m.

Thanks very much, Amanda.

Thank you for having me today, and for allowing me to kick off your advocacy work this week.

You should know that I am a product of your work. I am a lawyer, a diplomat, the founder of a nonprofit organization, and a university trustee.

And I was also a Latin major. That experience taught me to think critically and analytically. It taught me to craft an argument. And it gave me an appreciation for the history of humanity.

Foreign languages are core to the humanities and to the liberal arts. They build not only linguistic fluency, but also cultural fluency. They give students a broad appreciation for the human experience. They teach students empathy, and compassion, and the importance of being open to people who are different from themselves.

William & Mary, on whose governing board I sit, has chosen to amplify our core liberal arts identity even as we expand STEM curriculum; even as, notably, we've established a new school for data science and analytics.

And William & Mary should know – we've been in this business for 331 years and counting. Our royal charter, granted by King William & Queen Mary in 1693, specifically establishes us as "a certain place of universal study, or perpetual College of Divinity, Philosophy, *Languages*, and other good Arts and Sciences." Classical languages have been taught at William & Mary since its very earliest days, and ours is the first department of modern languages in the United States, created in 1789.

William & Mary is now in its fourth century. From time to time over the years, *jobs*, and *careers* and *vocation* at William & Mary and in higher education generally have been seen as undesirable words – words that degrade the luster of the liberal arts. Colleges and universities didn't prepare people for *jobs*, some people thought – at least not

intentionally. They prepared them broadly in the liberal arts, as if those were two different things.

Today, in 2024, however, it turns out that getting good jobs is what college graduates care most about, and what they need. And William & Mary's president, for one, would be the first to tell you that divorcing the two – thinking about the liberal arts independently of the jobs students require – is irresponsible.

What today's colleges and universities should understand is that they can do both. William & Mary likes to refer to this as the power of our ampersand. Colleges and universities can *both* continue to embrace the liberal arts *and* prepare students for the jobs of the future.

We do it every day at William & Mary. And over and over again, potential employers have thanked us – thanked us for bringing them graduates who have a broad perspective on the human experience.

Thanked us for bringing them not only businesspeople, but businesspeople who lean into

their values and are guided by their moral compasses.

Thanked us for bringing them not only marine scientists, but marine scientists who know their role in protecting human life is existential.

Thanked us for bringing them not only statisticians, but statisticians with hearts.

And current events are the proof we need of the value of the liberal arts. Never before in our world have we more critically needed young people well-educated in the liberal arts and humanities.

As we struggle to keep up with the moral challenges posed by artificial intelligence, we need future leaders who abide by a moral code.

Likewise, there is a premium now, more than ever, on the ability to speak across lines of difference – to converse across the cultural divide.

And to do that with past lessons learned by humanity in mind – our successes, and our failures too.

In August 1987, Lynne Cheney, then Chair of the National Endowment for Humanities, authored a report called *American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Nation's Public Schools*. In framing her recommendations in that report, she says:

> "We would wish for our children that their decisions be informed not by the wisdom of the moment, but by the wisdom of the ages; and that is what we give them when we give them knowledge of culture. The story of past lives and triumphs and failures, the great texts with their enduring themes – these do not necessarily provide *the* answers, but they are a rich context out of which our children's answers can come."

Interestingly – and remember, this was 1987 – the very first recommendation in that report reads as follows:

"More time should be devoted to the study of history, literature, and foreign languages."

And the report goes on:

“Foreign language study should start in grade school and continue through high school. From the beginning, it should teach students the history, literature, and thought of other nations.”

The report uses the words *foreign language* 32 times.

Why does this matter? Because in 2024 just as in 1987, so many of the skills needed to navigate the complexity of our world are part of your toolkit – the one you use in your classrooms every single day.

For starters, these are the tools of diplomacy in today’s world. The ability to genuinely connect depends on a deep awareness and understanding of place, of context, of history, and of relationships.

I saw this firsthand at the United Nations.

Every time an American diplomat negotiates, she does so with context in mind.

The currency of diplomatic relations is cultivation of relationships, forged by shared experiences, through a realization that the world is a big place, much bigger than any one of us, and we don't know it all. Diplomacy of course requires delivering difficult messages when they need to be delivered, but in the first instance, it depends on listening. It depends on genuine connections that rely on cultural fluency and self-awareness.

In his book *Gracias: A Latin American Journal*, Father Henri Nouwen, a Dutch missionary priest who worked in Bolivia, El Salvador, and elsewhere in Latin America, described the value of cultural fluency and self-awareness as follows:

> "When we walk around in a strange milieu, speaking the language haltingly, and feeling out of control and like fools, we can come in touch with a part of ourselves that usually remains hidden behind the thick walls of our defenses. We can come to experience our basic vulnerability, our need for others, our deep-seated feelings of ignorance and

> inadequacy, and our fundamental dependency. Instead of running away from these scary feelings, we can live through them together and learn that our true value as human beings has its seat far beyond our competence and accomplishments.
>
> One of the most rewarding aspects of living in a strange land is the experience of being loved not for what we can do, but for who we are."

In other words, when we find ourselves in a place where we don't speak the language or understand the culture, it's in those moments, counterintuitively, that we experience most powerfully our common humanity.

Eighteen years ago, I founded an organization called Global Playground. During that time, Global Playground has built 17 projects in 12 countries – schools, libraries, technology centers, and other educational infrastructure – and then used that infrastructure as a platform to connect kids in different countries with each other through

cross-cultural dialogue. Kids in Thailand engage in dialogue about the crops they grow and the food they eat with kids in Uganda. Kids in the Philippines engage in dialogue about what "community" means to them with kids in Burma. And every step of the way, we see the value of cultural fluency. We see how it broadens perspectives, and deepens understanding, and triggers epiphanies in young minds.

You, as teachers of language – of linguistic fluency and of cultural fluency – make people more self-aware. You equip the diplomats of the future. You equip the aid workers of the future.

You also equip the lawyers of the future. When I make an argument before a court, I reach back in my mind to Cicero's orations against Cataline. My sentence structure mirrors that of Juvenal. The cadence of my words rises and falls to the poetry of Vergil and Catullus. And the construction of my words is deliberate and technically precise, because I've intimately studied how words fit together. Because I've been taught by a language teacher.

I, too, have taught. You should know, as I close today, that I'm the son of a teacher. My mother taught elementary school in the public schools of Augusta County, Virginia for 32 years. And she inspired me to teach; and in fact, found an organization 24 years ago to teach Latin and Greek to elementary and middle school students. That organization – called Ascanius: The Youth Classics Institute – still exists today. It's still teaching – still giving students an appreciation for who they are in the broader context of humanity, framed by lessons learned in antiquity. Students build Roman roads from Fruity Pebbles and Nestle Kwik, and in doing so learn about urban topography and architecture and how to engineer a road that will last millennia. Students dissect the names of their favorite Pokemon characters to learn the Greek and Latin roots that comprise them, and then create their own Pokemon characters with superpowers fueled by their unique Greek and Latin etymologies. Students reenact a Roman wedding and learn about gender and religion in the Roman world. Students grab some Welch's grape juice and Wonderbread and host a symposium where they philosophize about the world's problems.

These are the skills a language teacher teaches – critical thinking, self-awareness, genuine connection, cultural fluency, linguistic versatility, appreciation of history and context and place, and the value of relationships. And these are the skills the world needs most desperately right now.

Thank you very much for the invitation to speak to you today. All the best to each of you and to the incredible work you do in your classrooms, and to the work of JNCL-NCLIS in bringing to light how vital that work is.

Take care, and enjoy the conference.