

Address at the Student Volunteer programme awards

25 October 2007

Introduction

The Vice-Principal, the Dean of Students, the Director and staff of the Centre for Social Development, the Community Engagement Manager, our guests, colleagues, student volunteers, ladies and gentlemen

Thank you for the privilege of addressing you this evening as we celebrate student volunteerism at Rhodes University and recognise the contributions of our student volunteers to the community engagement and wider social and community development initiatives of Rhodes.

From modest beginnings, the continuing qualitative and quantitative development of our student volunteer programme in the capable hands of the CSD and our Community Engagement staff, the professionalism, thoughtfulness, passion and commitment with which the programme is being implemented, and the extent of participation by our students are all immensely gratifying and sources of great pride.

Why a student volunteer programme

I wish this evening to address why as a University Rhodes should be committed to spend precious resources to nurture community engagement and a student volunteer programme.

The starting point is to observe that the economic and social structure of Grahamstown, like thousands of towns across South Africa and Africa, has been profoundly shaped by colonialism and apartheid.

Thirteen years into our democracy, the legacies of colonialism and apartheid remain stark, and there is a considerable distance to be travelled for economic, social and human rights to become substantive realities for the historically disadvantaged and socially marginalized inhabitants of this town.

During the past thirteen years of democracy in South Africa there have certainly been some important economic and social gains. Yet the reality is that our country continues to be one of the most unequal societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, opportunities, and living conditions. The Presidency's *Development Indicators Mid-Term Review* released in June reveals that the Gini coefficient, which is a measure of income inequality, increased from 0.665 in 1994 to 0.685 in 2006 (2007:22). This indicates that the social grants that are provided to 12 million people and new jobs that have been created have been insufficient 'to overcome widening income inequality' (ibid.).

The percentage of income of the poorest 20% of our society has fallen since 1994 from 2.0% to 1.7%; conversely, the percentage of income of the richest 20% of our society has risen since 1994 from 72.0% to 72.5%. At the same time, the per capita income of the richest 20% has risen much faster than that of the poorest 20% (Presidency, 2007:21). 43% of South Africans continue to live on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year (Presidency, 2007:23).

The cleavages of 'race', class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of our fellow citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, unbridled individualism and crass materialism, and a vulgar mentality of "greed is cool" runs rampant in our society.

Patriarchy and sexism continue to stifle the realization of the talents of girls and women and the contribution they can make to economic and social development. The rape and abuse of women is a pervasive, morbid ill that destroys innumerable lives and wreaks havoc in Grahamstown and elsewhere. HIV/AIDS exacerbates the fault-lines of our society, intensifies our social challenges and has over the past decade reduced life-expectancy from almost 60 years to about 47 years.

These realities, I submit, must fill us with shame, offend our sensibilities, and be seen as significant and urgent challenges that should as students, staff, and as an institution spur us to action.

Our University's mission proclaims that we shall strive 'through community service to contribute to the development of the Eastern Cape', and that we shall 'foster the all-round development of our students'. Our Community Engagement policy commits us to draw on our knowledge and expertise to work 'actively to improve the quality of life of individuals in Grahamstown and Eastern Cape communities', and to 'fostering an ethos of voluntary community service (among our) staff and student body, leading to well-rounded graduate citizens who will be active agents for positive social change'.

Community engagement and student volunteerism provide the opportunities to put our commitments into practice and to exemplify our values through deeds and action. They are an attempt to harness the social commitment, knowledge, expertise and skills of our staff and students and put them to work to forge mutually respectful, beneficial and reciprocal relationships with defined constituencies, institutions, organisations, groups and individuals.

The interactions that are sought are of mutual value, in that as much as we seek to help build the institutional capabilities of specific institutions and organisations, and the capacities of particular defined constituencies and individuals, we also seek to develop as individuals and citizens, and as an institution, through a process of discovery, listening, understanding and contributing. As one of our student volunteers, Cassidy Parker, has commented, 'volunteering has taught me about myself and my relationship to people and the world around me in ways that no text book on philosophy or economics ever could'.

I'm not surprised! My own abiding interest in the history and geography, the philosophy and sociology, and economics and politics of higher education was acquired not through lectures but through involvement in student organisations and as a national student leader in the late 1970s and early 1980s. My communication skills and expertise in writing proposals, interacting with donors and fund-raising were honed outside the classroom in a community newspaper that I headed in the mid-1980s

Throughout the 1980s it was through participation in media, community and educational organisations that I had the privilege of a marvellous schooling in ethics, social commitment, discipline, strategy and tactics, and organisation building and development through interaction with numerous extraordinary people and organisations.

It was from the workers in the emerging radical trade union movement that I learnt the vital and rewarding culture of democratic practice. It was also through these workers, and poor Xhosa and Afrikaans-speaking men and women, youth and students, that I developed a passion for educating, and that I learnt about teaching and learning, pedagogy and curriculum, as I grappled with the exciting challenge of engaging with them on economic and political theory, South African

history and political economy, and the experiences and lessons of freedom struggles around the world.

Necessary and invaluable as academic disciplines and formal study are, the reality is that there is a limit to how much you can learn, develop, and discover yourself through books, lectures and essays alone. There is simply no substitute for actual involvement in student, youth, and community organisations and projects and issue-based movements if you wish to acquire more knowledge, enhance your understanding of the world around you, and extend your skills and competencies.

The student volunteer programme is a bridge to the acquisition on the part of our students of more knowledge and greater awareness and understanding of social realities, and the development of new and additional skills and competencies. At the same time, it represents a necessary and welcome engagement on the part of the future intellectuals and professionals of our society with the social ills, problems, and challenges of our town and expresses the commitment to address these.

Finally, it helps us as an institution to give further expression to the ideas of universities promoting critical and democratic citizenship, contributing to widening educational and social opportunities and to local economic and social development, and advancing the public good.

We are incredibly fortunate to have at Rhodes the Centre for Social Development. The CSD has long been a vital force for educational, community and social development, equity and justice in iRhini/Grahamstown and the wider Eastern Cape, and without its expertise and experience and the trust that it enjoys it is doubtful whether we would be able to mount the successful student volunteer programme that we currently have.

I wish to also acknowledge this evening the outstanding contribution that has been made in the past few years by our Community Engagement Manager, Ingrid Andersen. Through her passion and determination, we have made significant headway and there have been notable achievements. For one, we are on well on the road to a much more rigorous conceptualisation of community engagement at Rhodes and its implications for our practices. For another, from next year we will have in place a Director of Community Engagement to spearhead our community initiatives instead of the current post of Manager.

Further, as of now we will also have, alongside the Vice-Chancellor's awards for book publishing, research and teaching, a Vice-Chancellor's award for community engagement with the contribution being publicly acknowledged at one of our graduation ceremonies early next year. And not least, the CSD and CE will move into larger premises in Prince Alfred Street next year. It is a great pity that Ingrid will be taking her leave of us at the end of the year but, alas, such is the price of affairs of the heart!

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, as our students your knowledge, expertise and skills make you powerful, precious, and vital people who are capable of making an enormous difference in the life our society. I take great pride in your commitment and willingness to put your intellects, expertise, time, and effort to work to advance economic and social development, social justice, and peace and reconciliation in our town.

The Rhodes University slogan proclaims that we aspire to be a place 'where leaders learn'. It is therefore fitting to close with the words of two outstanding leaders. One is the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore,

who has written that 'We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy'. The other is the Jewish sage Hillel who says: 'If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?'

You, the student volunteers here this evening and those who support you well-personify these wise words.

You also wonderfully exemplify the spirit of the Rhodes motto of 'Truth, Virtue, Strength'!

You, indeed, pursue the Truth that derives from knowledge, understanding and reason. You, indeed, practice the Virtue of social commitment, compassion and giving. And you also clearly possess the Strength of courage and boldness to strive to remake our society so that all may possess the social, economic and human rights and opportunities that are fundamental to living full, decent, productive, rich and rewarding lives.

You are great ambassadors for what Rhodes, alongside its outstanding academic reputation, also wishes to be renowned, and I am confident that I speak for all when I say that you are a great inspiration to us all.