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The practice of asking questions

True intellectual leaders don't limit their imaginations to their own specialties. They also wonder about the insights, practices and questions of other disciplines, says L. Gregory Jones.

by [L. Gregory Jones](#)

August 25, 2009

Editor's note: Duke Divinity School Dean L. Gregory Jones spoke Aug. 19, 2009, during the opening convocation for Duke University's graduate and professional schools. This is an edited version of his prepared remarks.

The foundations have been shaken over the past year. Most obviously we have experienced an economic crash that exposed foundations built on sand, but those economic dynamics are symptoms of deeper cultural shifts. Well before the crash that began in September 2008, the great Czech poet, playwright and president Vaclav Havel wrote, "I think there are good reasons for suggesting that the modern age has ended. Today, many things indicate that we are going through a transitional period, when it seems that something is on the way out and something else is painfully being born. It is as if something were crumbling, decaying and exhausting itself -- while something else, still indistinct, were rising from the rubble."

There is much that feels like rubble, and little that seems to be rising yet. And, though we may have successfully hidden it from view, when we are honest with ourselves, modern universities are part of the rubble. Not universities per se, but modern versions of them. The economic crash exposed weaknesses and fault lines in the current structures of higher education, and while we have not been in the news as much as Wall Street and Washington, we ought to own our share of culpability for the messes we're in.

Actually, I believe the university you have chosen to be a part of for this next period in your life is a vibrant and exciting place to be -- both because of our willingness to acknowledge that things need to change and because we are already organizing to effect that change. Indeed, the rubble at Duke has structural integrity, and we are able to build creatively, charting new directions for the disciplines and the professions you have come to study -- and for the broader public leadership we so desperately need. But we cannot do it without your partnership and active engagement.

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Put more directly, universities will rise from the rubble only insofar as we help equip students like you to recognize that the best way to develop genuine excellence in your specialization is precisely also to connect its guiding insights, practices, and questions to those of other disciplines and professions.

We will fail you if we offer you shiny, impressive degrees with a great brand -- Duke -- in exchange for your becoming no more than experts in narrow disciplines or skilled technicians. Indeed, it is just this narrowness of discipline and skill that has weakened the structures of higher education and ensured that universities cannot escape responsibility for the mess we are in, just to the extent that in this narrowness, we have failed to form people who ask big, broad questions.

When universities are at our best, we will cultivate in you habits of forming questions that underlie your particular study and that compel you to reach beyond the assumptions that may artificially narrow your study. I am inviting you to discover again the intellectual wonder of being a 4-year-old or for those of you who were precocious questioners, a 2- or 3-year-old. Remember when you asked big questions: How do airplanes fly? Why are there so many different kinds of animals? What makes people do such bad things?

The most significant intellectual leaders in disciplines, and in our broader public life, ask such questions. They wonder, for example: What social purpose does a particular kind of business serve that makes its existence and flourishing important for society? How does a commitment to the rule of law create structures of social organization and public policy that make human freedom possible? What does the history of science help us understand about the relationship of risk and failure to new discovery? Is it possible to believe in a good and just God in the wake of the suffering of the innocent? What roles do the education of the mother and clean water play in a child's health in Ecuador at age 5? Why is Africa rich in natural resources but home to 70 percent of the world's bottom billion in terms of economic prosperity? What virtues of character do we discover in great literature -- fiction, history, biography -- that are indispensable to effective leadership in our world?

None of these questions are addressed adequately within a single discipline, or a single school, of a university. As soon as we ask them we discover that we need expertise in a specific area and collaboration with others. I remember interviewing a wonderful young woman about her commitment to educating people in Haiti, and she talked about water problems and her desire to study environmental science. I asked her how she would address the water problems in remote villages she had visited and she said, "Well, I'll need to find an engineer on the one hand, and I'll need to learn more about community empowerment on the other." She won me over as a leader in whom I could invest.

At Duke, we have discovered that in order to work collaboratively with groups in Africa around pressing needs of health care, including training health care workers, no one school or program could tackle it alone. The Fuqua School of Business, the Global Health Institute and the Divinity School are working together in creative and exciting ways -- and learning how to ask new questions as we seek to address pressing problems and grand challenges.

As we learn to form questions, we discover deeper and richer ways to pursue knowledge and to master our fields as well as to reframe the important issues we need to confront. If the illusion of modernity was that expertise in itself was sufficient, the painful birth of something new that Havel speaks of is in our context the discovery -- and the re-discovery -- of the intrinsically interdisciplinary character of knowledge and wisdom as well as of the issues we need to confront. Havel the poet and playwright became Havel the president-politician. Steven Chu, the Nobel-prize winning physicist, is now the Secretary of Energy.

We do not need interdisciplinary mediocrity or a quest for an intellectual Esperanto that no one wants to listen to or speak. Rather, we hope to equip you as people who are deeply grounded in particular fields while also crossing borders to discover exciting connections and possibilities in other fields with other fellow-inquirers. We look for such qualities in our faculty; we hope you will develop them as well.

We need your partnership and active engagement in helping make this happen. We need you to get in the habit of forming questions that cause us to take a step back from our assumptions. I do not think it accidental that the most interesting leaders I have encountered over the years -- intellectually within disciplines and professionally among a wide variety of occupations -- have been people who ask great questions. The best students I have taught do so as well. They are wonderful readers of texts and people and situations. They don't only think outside the box; they are willing to ask questions without

a box at all. They are the game-changers in disciplines and fields; they are the leaders to whom I am drawn.

And so I encourage you to get in the habit of forming big questions as a part of your education here. In so doing, I think you will also discover that the very activity of framing, and re-framing, these questions will also form you and us. They shape what we take to be important, what we aspire to, what we will study and how and why, what communities we hope to help shape, what institutions we will serve and enable to help flourish.

Over the years, the questions being asked by my colleagues across this university have changed my reading habits. I am dean of the Divinity School, but I have found that my own scholarly leadership has been shaped in exciting new ways, for example, by engaging [Atul Gawande's reflections on becoming a surgeon](#), by the psychologist Robert Sternberg's account of performative and creative forms of intelligence, and by the lawyer Cass Sunstein's recent account of why people keep "[going to extremes](#)." Malcolm Gladwell's provocative questions and creative angles of vision in "Outliers" stirs my imagination. Who knew that the chances of a Canadian man's reaching the National Hockey League has a lot to do with which month of the year he was born? My hope is that in your time at Duke you will find yourself similarly compelled by your colleagues to read outside your chosen field and to engage the full breadth of this university.

I don't so much want to add work, as invite you to think about your intellectual engagement in fresh ways. Part of that is seeking out colleagues in other areas of the university, befriending them and developing habits of listening to each other's ways of thinking and the questions and passions that brought each of you to different areas of Duke. More expansively, I encourage you to find a class in another area that will stretch you -- whether you sit in as an auditor or take it for credit. And, most importantly, I hope you will recognize that the only way Duke will continue to rise from the rubble is if you become partners and leaders in forming the kinds of questions that emerge from such wide-ranging intellectual habits.

We are delighted you are here; more than that, our future depends not only on your being here, but also your becoming the kind of masters and doctors in your fields who cultivate knowledge and wisdom and who simultaneously offer the public leadership for which we yearn.