

Vesalius College

My Classmate, My Friend: International Education in a Sometimes Difficult World

September 15, 2012

Speech at the 25th Anniversary of Vesalius College
Ambassador Howard Gutman

Professor De Knop, Rector of the VUB
Professor Mosselmans, Dean of Vesalius
Distinguished Faculty, alumni, and most importantly of all dear students
Dear international citizens all:

Happy Birthday Vesalius.

Happy 25th Anniversary.

What an honor and what a joy to get to share this wonderful celebration today. To get to share in the celebration of the full coming of age of Vesalius College.

I have now been the United States Ambassador to Belgium for over three years. That makes me the second longest serving U.S. Ambassador to Belgium in 31 years or, in other words, during the entire lifetime of the College. As such, I well realize that the idea of Vesalius College, the dream of Vesalius, was at its founding, has always been, and remains a powerful one. Create a center of international university thought in the most international city on the most international continent on the planet. Affiliate with a pre-eminent Dutch-language university in a bilingual but heavily francophone city. And do it all in English. Create a home for visiting students seeking a year of international understanding; for ex-pats seeking a degree based here in Belgium without linguistic restriction; for Belgians seeking a jumping off point to a step into a broader tomorrow.

My experience here tells me that realizing this dream could not have been easy, particularly in its early days. For we understand today far more than in 1987 how truly small the planet is. How interconnected we are. How international we are.

We realize today far more than in 1987 that we are all in this together. That the challenges we face that unite us are far greater than the differences that divide us. That we will either all rise together or that none will truly float.

So today the notion of English language education in Belgium seems not simply sensible, but indispensable. The notion of international students gathering in Brussels seems not simply sensible, but unstoppable. Surely, where Vesalius for now 25 years has led, Leuven and Louvain La Neuve, Gent and Mons, Antwerp and Liege, cannot be far behind.

And my experience as U.S. Ambassador to Belgium tells me also that this idea and this dream - never easy - must have well experienced some bumps and difficult curves along the way during the

past 25 years. For while the notion of international education must have gotten steadily easier to explain, to justify and to be proud of, the relationship between Belgium and the United States did not follow this same consistently upward slope over the past 25 years.

You see, we – the United States-- may have at one time and indeed at many times been among Belgium's favorites. Surely as U.S. boys came in the second and the fifth decades of the 20th century to liberate Belgians from the horrors of war and occupation; as U.S. support came to rebuild Belgium, that partnership thrived.

Yet despite our history as the dearest of allies and the bonds that followed the world wars, in the mid 2000's, as Vesalius was fully coming of age, the U.S.-Belgian relationship was widely described in the press as "frosty." As a result of differences over the handling of the Iraq War, the Belgian government considered closing the Port of Antwerp to U.S. ships, closing Belgian airspace to U.S. planes and subjecting a U.S. defense department official to criminal jurisdiction in Belgium under its then law of universal jurisdiction.

In that world of the yesterday of the mid 200's, amidst Vesalius's ascent through its teenage years, we had gotten off track with each other. We were speaking past each other. And it began at the level of the citizens. The politicians and government officials simply followed popular sentiment.

Indeed, the Gallup Polling Company started in 2007 to track public opinion in every country concerning America and U.S. leadership. And the results of the first poll showed that in Belgium in 2007, only 8 per cent of the citizenry had a favorable view of U.S. leadership while 65% had an unfavorable view and 27% were neutral or had no opinion.

Think about that. 8% favorable and 65% unfavorable. 8 to 1 times as unfavorable as favorable.

During such times, in that type of public opinion environment, both American interests of any sort and the Belgian-American relationship must suffer mightily. Ex-pats must feel at least somewhat uncomfortable amidst their neighbors; tourists hide the tee-shirts or guide books that would identify them as American; U.S.-based businesses play down their home roots; and colleges dedicated to fostering international education in English with a large participation from the United States and largely rooted in the notion of international partnership had to face an enormous hill.

Now the good news for Vesalius, for the U.S., for Belgium, for the U.S.-Belgium relationship, for every tourist who wants to wear a Boston Red Sox tee shirt in the Grand Place and carry their guide books face up and for every Belgian waffle shop that hopes they buy two, is that we have left that yesterday.

You see, the election of Barack Obama and the appointment of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State in the beginning of 2009 took us a long way back to the partnership path, a path in which students from St. Louis, Brussels, Mumbai, and Morocco could not be more excited to see each other here, study together in English, and learn from one another. The Gallup Poll for 2009 showed that the change in U.S. leadership raised the favorability rating for U.S. leadership in Belgium from 8% to 30% - a 22% gain - and cut the unfavorability from 65% to 23%, a decrease of 42% in the unfavorability. So that the rating as of 2009 was 30% favorable and 23% unfavorable.

Now, the latest Gallup Poll of all the countries in the world came out on May 1 of this year – just 4 months ago. The eurozone crisis and Afghanistan fatigue contributed to the favorability rating for US leadership losing 10%-15% in some neighboring countries.

But we are proud to note that in that same international poll released by Gallup in May 2012 ---4 months ago –Belgium finished first in the world with the highest gain in favorability rating for the U.S. leadership. There was another 15% gain in favorability and another 8% decrease in the unfavorability so that the rating – which was 8%-65% just 5 years ago now stands at 46% favorable and only 22% unfavorable – a more than 2 to 1 edge in favorability where a 1 to 8 rating once stood. Which means that Belgians view American leadership today more favorably than Americans view American leadership --- the world has indeed again gotten smaller.

And the lesson for us all is that we can never, never return to the yesterday of the mid 2000's as we build the future together. Not to that yesterday in Belgium. We must all fight – Professor De Knop, Professor Mosselmans, every student and alumni here, the chocolate shops and the waffle vendors, the Belgian business leaders and journalists, the ports, the politicians and all others– we must all fight never to go back to yesterday. No matter who may be in the White House. No matter which party has how many seats in the Belgian Parliament. No matter who may live in the glorious Residence of the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium.

You see, Ambassador Sam Fox, my dedicated predecessor, and President George Bush did not define America any more than Howard Gutman and President Barack Obama define America. America is 310 million citizens dedicated to the same values shared by 11 million Belgians and by all true citizens in the brotherhood of man – freedom, democracy, respect for our fellow men and women and for the brotherhood of citizens, love of family, pride in work, curiosity about tomorrow and much more. America is not about the guy who gets to speak at the Vesalius anniversary celebration or even about the President who sent him or her to Belgium, it is about the students who come here year after year. It is about the students in the Fulbright program and those still studying back home – in universities and in junior colleges and trade schools. It's about their parents. America is about their values, their plans and their dreams.

Sure we – Belgians and Americans -- may from time to time diverge in tactics – for dear friends and allies always do -- but we will always share our passions, our values and our sense of decency. So no matter where the lanes lead in the years ahead, we must always, always remain on the same highway. We cannot go back to yesterday.

And it is because we cannot go back to yesterday, and because we need to try to reach the same partnership around the globe that exists today between Belgium and America, that Vesalius, the Fulbright Program, international educational exchanges around the globe are so important. Indeed, Vesalius, international schools and international educational exchange programs have never been more important.

That was true as of last week as we looked to the future. You see, America operates educational exchanges in 155 countries worldwide. In roughly 80% of the countries worldwide, an American sits in a classroom full of the students of that country and a student of that country sits in a classroom of Americans all learning to be international citizens. People-to-people diplomacy. More than 350

alumni of our educational exchange program have become heads of State, including Dilma Rouseff, the current head of Brazil, Abdullah Gul, a critical world leader from Turkey, and indeed Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan. Could there be a better investment? A more meaningful program by which to build international understanding and peace and prosperity?

And no matter how important Vesalius was last week, no matter how important the Fulbright Program, the Commission for Educational Exchange, and the other international educational exchanges and international educational programs were last week, they are far more important today.

America lost four heroes this week. People dedicated to making the world better; to the human rights and fundamental security of others around the globe.

The world watched riots this week. The burning of Embassies dedicated to building a better tomorrow for the children of the world. Indeed, we witnessed the burning of a school in Tunisia where nearly 600 children of 60 different nationalities study in peace and in joy building international understanding and representing the hope for tomorrow, a school where 75% of the children were not American.

This was murder, hatred and violence purported to be undertaken in the name of God and in the name of one of the world's great religions. But all people of faith – and I am among them – well know that murder and hatred and violence against innocents do not honor God or religion. Hatred and murder in the name of religion is simply hatred and murder. And the extremists and murderers who killed our four heroes, who were trying to better lives in Libya; the extremists who set an international school and diplomatic missions ablaze; they do not speak for the more than one billion Muslims around the world and they sure as heck don't speak for the overwhelming majority of Muslims here in Belgium. I have shared meals with my many Muslim friends in Belgium and I have worked with Imams and mosque leaders and students named Mohammed and girls in head scarves to build a better planet of mutual understanding and respect. And I believe and hope to my core that their voices will be heard here decrying the wrongful use of the Islam to justify murder and hatred. I look forward to that chorus.

And that brings us back to the even greater importance this week than ever before of Vesalius and of the Fulbright Program, the Commission for Educational Exchange, and the other international educational exchanges and international educational programs. You see, while some will point to the few hundred extremists who opted for violence this week in Libya, the number that will actually triumph in Libya is 1700 -- the number of Libyan students who applied for Fulbright scholarships within the first month after Secretary Clinton recently reinstated the program following the emergence of the new Libyan government. Their voices shall be heard.

In Tunisia, the action that will lead into tomorrow is not the burning of a school by extremists, but the recent re-opening of the Fulbright Program for 2013, in which applications have been flooding in. And while we witnessed the violence of extremists in Egypt being rebuffed by Egyptian security forces, the new Egyptian leader who this week travelled Europe condemning the murderers in Libya and those who seek violence in Egypt received his PhD in engineering from the University of Southern California in the U.S. in 1982 and was an Assistant Professor at California State University, Northridge, from 1982 to 1985.

Education will be one of the pillars of the bridge that violence will never be able to topple.

So to Vesalius, to the faculty, students and alumni, congratulations for the first 25 years, best of luck on the next 125.

Thanks so much and all the best.