On the Importance of a Thoughtful Question

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Abstract
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On the Importance of a Thoughtful Question
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Welcome and Opening Remarks – On the Importance of a Thoughtful Question

The Symposium for me is about the questions that you have asked not simply about the answers that you have found or not found. The question that drives your research is one very real indicator of what you have learned in the process of being a graduate student. Your question is grounded in the knowledge that you have constructed and acquired, in the experiences you have had, and, most particularly, on your ability to reflect on both.

The scientist Louis Pasteur was once challenged with the question: “How is it that often great discoveries seem to happen by chance?” (examples include x-rays, penicillin and DNA). Pasteur replied “Ah my friend, great discoveries do not happen by chance, rather they come to the prepared mind!”

Your time spent here in graduate studies have prepared your mind to think deeply about questions that are meaningful to you and that are grounded in the rich knowledge base that you are continually developing. Good research and scholarship do not just happen. Good questions do not appear in a vacuum. Rather they emerge out of your reflections and are grounded in the disciplined forms of inquiry you bring to your studies.

As Schulman indicated many times over, education itself is not a single discipline. It is rather a field of study to which we bring many forms of disciplined inquiry to ask about issues, events, policies, schools, human thinking, learning and feelings, the nature of schooling and the varieties of education’s questions and issues that we think are important. Each form of disciplined inquiry has its own preferred method. Each has its own way of asking questions and seeking solutions. Each has its own criteria for evidence and rigor.

As a developmental and educational psychologist, one question that has recently intrigued me is the question of how children and adolescents develop the ability to read, interpret and construct graphic representations of information. For example, have you ever looked in some of the history and social studies texts and wondered about what sense the students are making out of the graphs and charts that are sprinkled throughout? Have you ever wondered what prior knowledge the student needs to understand these representations?

Every student here this evening has a question that has driven their research and their scholarship. I
invite you to try to find what that question is and to relate it to your own passionate interests in the field of education.