A Conversation between Condoleeza Rice and Frank Shushok, Jr.

Frank Shushok, Jr., Virginia Tech

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/frank_shushokjr/29/
A Conversation with
Condoleezza Rice

Shushok: First and foremost, thank you very much for taking time to visit with me today, and to share your insights with About Campus readers. In this edition, we’re inviting our readers to explore the role of higher education, particularly in North America, in preparing students for the increasingly global context they will encounter. As a faculty member and scholar of international affairs, a former Provost, a former Secretary of State and National Security advisor, and, undoubtedly, a person who cares deeply about students and their learning, it is hard to imagine a person better equipped to offer us counsel. With that introduction, let’s begin!

In looking at the trajectory of your career, you followed a traditional academic path in higher education that culminated in your service as provost at Stanford. Then you found yourself serving in the highest levels of government, including National Security Advisor and Secretary of State. Thus, you’ve encountered the world’s people, beauty, and problems in profound ways. Are there surprising common threads you’ve found across these experiences? Have you found stark differences?

Rice: Of course there are very big differences in the kind of issues you deal with, but I consider both my time in university administration and leadership and my time in government leadership (and I’ve said this many times) as a kind of continuation of the same process of learning how to lead and manage organizations. The issues may be different, the problems may be different, but you’re still trying to lead people by inspiring them to go to a higher goal, you’re still trying to manage an organization to make sure that it is aligned with the goals that you have established. You’re still trying to go in every day and deal with a combination of hot button issues, “it’s on my desk today” issues, and issues that may have a more long-term effect but don’t get the day-to-day attention.

Shushok: In many university strategic plans, the accelerated pace of globalization is acknowledged, as is the imperative to prepare students for increasingly complex and interdependent geopolitical and geo-economic conditions. While there is mostly broad agreement that colleges and universities need to work to this end, I’d appreciate your insight about what higher education environments are doing well to prepare students for this future. Of course, I’m also interested in hearing where you think we’re missing the mark.

Rice: The best thing that we are doing is that in universities and colleges, no matter how small, across the country, when I visit I see foreign students. I think we’re doing a very good job of attracting international students to our campuses, and that’s probably experientially the best thing we can do for our own students. They get a chance to get to know people from other
cultures, and maybe that gets them interested in other cultures. Secondly, an increasing number of North American institutions have opportunities for their students to study abroad, and I think that’s an important way to prepare students for a global environment.

The thing we could do considerably better is emphasize language preparation. America is still pretty mono-lingual, and we don’t start languages in many places until high school, if that. We now know that if you start a language at 10 or 11 years, you’re likely to be better at it, so we could do more with language training.

I believe we are doing a terrible job of teaching our students history. I can’t even tell you—even at Stanford—the number of students I encounter who don’t have a sense of the basic historical timeline. I mean timelines since World War II; I don’t mean timelines since the Revolutionary War. I think there the humanities are really falling down—we are not teaching basic history. I understand the desire to have a broad view of history and to teach about social history, what social movements and ordinary people were doing at a particular point in time, but it’s not a normative statement to say that what happened in capitals in Europe and in European philosophy has had a huge impact on how history has unfolded, including the history of this country, and so I think that we are just doing a terrible job of teaching history.

**Shushok:** I’d like to explore your remarks here a bit further. There is such a robust conversation taking place about the social sciences and humanities, their value and decreasing demand, and the need for more pragmatic jobs in science and engineering. What insight or counsel do you have for colleges and universities receiving pressure about these sorts of curricular challenges, especially from external forces?

**Rice:** First of all, I think we don’t require students to write enough. I don’t care how STEM-educated you are, you need to be able to write and to be able to communicate. I’m working with a number of small, new companies and it’s very interesting to watch these young CEOs who are engineers suddenly have to face investors or shareholders. They need to be able to present, and they need to be able to make an argument. We make a mistake if we think that basic skills in writing and oral communication are going to be swept away by the fact that you are a good engineer. It just isn’t true.

Second, some of the best of the engineers will tell you that when they are putting together a company, they are equally interested in people who understand design, and who understand human beings, because you must have humans interface with machines. Many people will say that the great success of Steve Jobs was that he had a creative side. Walter Isaacson, who wrote the biography about Steve Jobs, said that if he had not been an engineer and computer scientist, he might have been an artist. Human beings have to be fully developed on both sides: the creative side and the more technical side. I would say to universities: do not give up on the humanities, don’t give up on the arts, and certainly don’t give up on the social sciences—which through psychology or sociology or political science or economics help us to understand human behavior. We are always going to need to be people who can do...
these things. Still, the humanities have become more isolated; they are studying ever-smaller issues that are really not of interest to anybody except academics. We need to go back and broadly educate our students.

Shushok: I want to return to your point about the potential learning created for campuses when international students study in the United States. How can colleges and universities better take advantage of this potentially powerful asset for student learning?

Rice: I think we don’t have to do very much, because once you bring foreign students in, you have to make an effort to be open and welcoming. Frankly, it’s a lot of administrative work to have foreign students because you have to report to the government on their progress. I was the National Security Advisor on 9/11, and we did a lot of things because we had people coming in on student visas who meant to harm the country. But after a short period of time, we recognized we put in place some processes that were making it hard for foreign students to come to the United States. I think you’ll see we dramatically increased again the number of foreign students who could come. We wanted people to feel welcome. So, some of it is messaging, some of it is that if you have foreign students, you have to do more administrative work, but aside from that, I don’t think you actually have to do very much. When these students get to campus, they become a part of the fabric.

Shushok: As we’re talking today, there is much conflict in the world, including pronounced challenges in Ukraine, Iraq, Israel, Afghanistan, and many African countries. In the United States, complex issues abound as well, and the discourse about solutions is frequently divisive. Given the complexity of our problems, are there pedagogical practices or experiences that colleges and universities can offer students to better develop their skills for engaging intricate conflict and diverse discourse?

Rice: That’s a very good question. I would cite two. The first is we have to be very clear to our students that it is not okay to simply engage with and listen to people who agree with you. You never actually learn how to hone your own opinions. When you don’t engage with people who disagree, you think that people who do disagree are either stupid or venal. The first thing I say to my students is, if you find yourself constantly in the company of people who say “amen” to everything you say, find other company.

The second pedagogical tool is that I actually use a lot of simulations. I put my students in decision-making situations, where they have to make a presentation to the President on what to do about the crisis in Syria, for instance, or what to do about the crisis in Ukraine. That kind of problem-solving simulation, rather than having them just read about the situation, although they have to do a lot of reading before, makes them engage the kind of complexity of all the interlocking issues with which you are dealing. I found that really helpful because decision-making is not linear—you don’t do one thing followed by another, followed by another. You have multiple audiences and multiple concerns at any one moment when you’re making complex decisions, and so I tease my students when we start. I say, “Look, I’m now going to teach you that those people who you are watching make political decisions are actually not dumb.” I’ve found it to be a great way to teach.

Shushok: In the past several years, you’ve spoken on many college and university campuses. What are the key themes you feel called to communicate with students trying to discern their place in the world?

Rice: The first thing I would say to them is, “you need to find something you are passionate about, not just what your career is going to be, not just what your job is going to be, but something you really love to do.” I explain that at some point, what you love to do and what you are good at doing have to come together.

I have a story that maybe you know, since I was a piano major when I went to college. At the end of my sophomore year, I went to the Aspen Music Festival School. I met these kids who could play from sight what it had taken me all 12 years to learn. I knew I was not as good as they were, and there is a kind of crisis of confidence that comes with that. “What am I going to be?” I think that because I went through it, and went through the conversation with my parents about not having a major, and I couldn’t spend more time in school because they couldn’t pay for more years in school—I think because I went through that and that really devastating moment when you think, “well maybe I’m never going to be good at anything,” which is what students do when they realize that their first passion is not going to work out—I believe I can really communicate with students who are going through that. I spend a lot of time telling them that they don’t have to know what they are going to be doing when they are 40. We have this notion that you can plan your life—you can’t; your life will take many turns. I say find the next important step. I try to convince them that it’s OK to do things that are hard.

This goes back to our first conversation about STEM and the humanities. I wish we could get our STEM students to do more on the humanities side—writing, which is hard for some of them—and for our students who are good in the humanities to do more on the STEM side, even if it lowers their grade point average a little bit.

The final thing I tell them is to find people who are going to advocate for you, who are going to be role
ABOUT CAMPUS / MAY-JUNE 2015

models and mentors, but don’t be trapped into this notion that mentors or role models have to look like you. If I had been waiting for a black, female, Soviet-specialist role model, I would still be waiting! My role models were men; in fact, they were generally old white men because they were the people who dominated my field. I try to reassure them that you find yourself in a field where people would not necessarily look at you and say, “oh, they are in that field,” because we still have gender and racial stereotypes about what people are going to be interested in. When you find yourself in that situation, just push through it. Find good mentors and keep going.

Shushok: On a more personal level, would you be willing to reflect a bit about what you believe were the most pivotal moments in your higher education journey? What experiences, in hindsight, mattered most? What people influenced your development? How did your interest in “the world” emerge?

Rice: The first thing that mattered the most is what I said—deciding if I was going to be a piano major. It was good decision; I had studied piano from age three, so it wasn’t obvious what I was going to do. I fortunately then met Josef Korbel—Madeleine Albright’s father, ironically—who was a Soviet-specialist teaching a course in International Politics at the University of Denver. I was a junior and took his course, and I just loved it. He was a Russian, Soviet specialist, so I was drawn to the study of the Soviet Union. That was my first really big leap: leaving one area of study and finding one that I loved.

I think my next big turn was deciding to actually do a PhD I had never thought I was going to be a university professor or an academic. I’m not even the first PhD in my family: my aunt was a PhD in Victorian Literature. As much as I loved her, I remember talking to her one day; we were at our house and I was probably eight years old. She was reading A Tale of Two Cities, and I asked, “Have you read that book before?” She said, “I have read this book 25 times.” I thought, “Okay, that’s not how I’m going to spend my life!” I had this image of academics as people who read the same book 25 times.

I went to Notre Dame, did a master’s degree on the economic side of international politics and then came back and wandered around a bit. It took a while for me to decide if I wanted to pursue a PhD Then of course the next big steps were being appointed to the Stanford faculty, and then at a very young age becoming Provost and becoming interested in—having to manage a university, which by the way, I still think, I’ve been National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, but Provost may have been the best job I ever had.

I think we’re doing a very good job of attracting international students to our campuses, and that’s probably experientially the best thing we can do for our own students. They get a chance to get to know people from other cultures, and maybe that gets them interested in other cultures.

Shushok: If you could go back and do the provost’s role with the additional life experience you have, would you do it differently?

Rice: I don’t think so. I think I had a really great partnership with Gerhard Casper, who was president. We had to do some very difficult things because Stanford had real budget problems. I’ve learned more about how to manage big organizations because I’ve managed the State Department, but I think maybe it’s a little bit the other way around. I think being Provost taught me something I was able to use in being Secretary of State.

Shushok: In these final moments, I would love to hear you muse about your hopes for higher education in the next 5, 10, 20 years for all kinds of institutions and, as part of that, I’d like to hear your hopes particularly as it intersects with our role in the international experience.

Rice: Let me start by saying, coming back from government, I found one really positive thing. I think our students are more public-minded now than they were when I started my career. They want to do bigger things than themselves, they are going to Teach for America in large numbers, they want to go work for non-profits, at least for a while. I think that’s great, it’s fine to do, and it’s great to go into the private sector, but I think it’s important that whatever you do, you have a sense that there is some bigger call, and I find my students very actively seeking that bigger call. That’s a good trend, and we ought to continue to encourage it and make it possible for them.
Second, universities and colleges have been the way to make sure that people could break out of the restraints and constraints of class, because when I stand in a class at Stanford and one of my students is a fourth-generation Stanford legacy and sitting next to him is the student of an itinerant farm worker, I believe we are doing what we need to do. Pretty soon all that is going to matter is they went to Stanford, and where they started is not going to matter—it’s going to be where they are going. We just have to make that true and continue to make that true, and it really means we are going to have to worry about the cost of higher education, and I think we could make a lot of good use of technology to deliver larger classes. We need to be sure that we are not keeping students in college longer than they need to be. If they can do it in three years, encourage them to do it in three years, and save the last $30,000 to $40,000. So, I guess I’m concerned that in 20 years we can still look at universities and say they are an equalizer of, not a contributor to, inequality.

Shushok: I know we are out of time. I think it says a lot about you that you would take this time to share your thinking with About Campus readers. I can’t thank you enough for making space to help us consider how we are creating college and university learning experiences. We are grateful for your service.

Rice: I’m very glad to do it!