

2001 Honorary Doctorate in Humanities

Rollins College

Presentation by Rita Bornstein, President of Rollins College

You easily could have enjoyed success by maintaining the status quo, but instead you chose to challenge "business as usual, " rethinking the way we use the world's resources. Characterized by Forbes as an "individual investor-cum-environmental crusader, "you helped inaugurate an international conversation on sustainable development and eco-efficiency.

You have defined sustainability as "the chance to improve the living conditions of all humans, " and you have invested your time, energy, and resources in making that opportunity a reality. You have called on your business colleagues "to assume more social, economic and environmental responsibility, " and you have acknowledged that progress can occur only with what you have described as "enlightened leadership" - "leadership based on vision and carried by values. "

You have urged us to take the long view. You counsel us to identify risks, but also to recognize opportunities. You advise us to analyze, but then to trust our instincts and rely on our ethical values. And you remind us that "Values such as respect for human dignity, honesty, integrity, and equity of opportunity for all people are as valid and applicable today as they have ever been, and they will be as important in years to come as they are today. "

In recognition of your role as a model for business leaders and citizens everywhere, your practice of "enlightened leadership, " and your contributions to improving the quality of life worldwide, on behalf of the Board of Trustees of Rollins College, I am pleased to confer upon you, STEPHANSCHMIDHEINY, the degree DOCTOR OF HUMANE LETTERS, honoris causa, with all attendant rights, privileges, and obligations.

Dated at Winter Park, Florida this 13th day of May, 2001

Rita Bornstein, Ph.D., President
ROLLINS COLLEGE

Acceptance Speech by Stephan Schmidheiny

I must admit to having friends and relations among the Rollins student body. So, naturally, I tried to mine them for ammunition for my talk today.

I am afraid I received little that could be used in a mixed family audience. There were tales of sorority scholars seeking perfect tans by the pool at the weekends. There were allegations of a growing gustatory gap – of food prices continuing to rise while food quality continues to decline. But then such complaints by students against institutional cooking can doubtless be traced back to Plato's Academy. And of course there were enthusiastic and complicated tales of parties – parties of all types and descriptions, parties on and off campus, parties often ending in unexpected visitations by uninvited Authorities.

At first, such tales seemed a poor foundation for any traditionally inspiring and exhorting commencement address. But giving the matter more thought – and concentrating on the excellence and high-mindedness I know to be contained in this Rollins senior class – I arrived at an interpretation that suits my needs, one that fits in with a theme I had meant to broach today anyway.

The students described to me were not merely laying around the pool or partying. They were exercising their **enlightened** self-interest.

Think about a college, any college. It is organized around classes, professors, lectures, assignments, papers, exams and grades. So a student exercising only his or her short-term, narrow, self-interest might spend four years doing nothing but studying, seeking the highest possible grades.

Yet my Rollins informants and their friends understand that, to paraphrase the Latin adage, “School is short; life is long”. So much of what is important in life – personally, publicly, in business or in a profession – involves one’s relationships with others. You students – as well as studying - have also been honing your social skills, skills that must see you through your lives to come. As I said, you have been acting upon your enlightened self interests.

I am a businessman. I have been successful at it, or I would not have been asked to speak to you today. I have owned many companies and made much money. And I have spent a lot of time wondering what my own enlightened self-interest is as a businessman.

The immediate pressure upon you here has been to attend the occasional class. The immediate pressure in business is to make money. This is not wrong, in that a company cannot survive if it is not profitable.

But the immediate need for profitability and competitiveness should not make us blind to business leaders’ longer-term, more enlightened self-interests.

One of those is running one’s business activities in harmony with nature and the environment. A decade ago I was asked to be chief adviser for business to the secretary-general of the Earth Summit in Rio. I gathered 50 business leaders around me and we considered what we had to say. We invented the term ‘eco-efficiency’. It caught on. Business people like it because they like efficiency. The ‘eco-’ refers both to economics and ecology. The term basically means adding more value to a good or a service while using less material and producing less waste and pollution.

The group I created in 1992 has now grown into the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, a group of 150 of the world’s most influential companies. Their research over 10 years proves that eco-efficiency is not only good for the planet, but good for the company’s bottom line.

That Rio summit was organized around the concept of ‘sustainable development’ – which simply means that humanity should not try to develop in ways that destroy its ability to develop. For example, it should not produce energy in ways that turn a fairly benign global climate into an unpredictable engine of destruction. The basic definition of sustainable development is “forms of progress that meet the needs of the present while not compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.”

Many people make the mistake of seeing this as a green, or environmental concept: saving trees, fish, water, and spotted owls for the future. But today 2.8 billion people – almost half of humanity - live on less than \$2 a day. Sit down and figure sometime how much your recent lives have cost per day – tuition, that questionable food, parking fines, suntan lotion, gasoline, etc – and try to imagine what living on \$2 a day must be like.

So given its concern with present needs, sustainable development is a radical *social* concept. Over the past decade, social concerns have begun to rise higher on the business agenda than environmental ones. This was sparked perhaps by the sweatshop scandals you have read about. But it has also been sparked by the globalizing of the market. The major companies find themselves doing business in poor countries among poor people. What are their responsibilities to those people?

There are, of course, ethical and moral responsibilities – perhaps religious responsibilities. But I leave those to your individual consciences and to late-night discussions. Let us look at the business case.

Enlightened business leaders are realizing that they cannot do good business in countries where most of the population are poor and getting poorer. Not only is there a limited market for products, but people who have little education, little health care, poor housing, and no transport are not the sort of people to build businesses as employees or entrepreneurs.

So business needs to help establish a global market which contains the maximum amount of opportunity for all. Right now, the so-called global market is biased toward rich countries. These nations often erect barriers against the products of poor countries – most notably textiles. Many rich countries dump subsidized grain on poor countries, so that their farmers cannot make a living. These are narrow, unenlightened actions.

The World Business Council has drawn up check-lists for companies producing codes of Corporate Social Responsibility – operating within the global norms of human rights, labor rights, and environmental protection.

So enlightened business leaders are beginning to do business in harmony with the environment and in harmony with social realities, not only for moral reasons but for hard-headed business reasons.

Let me go out on a limb and make a prediction. By the year 2015, when most of you will be well past having made your first million, business will have found ways to bring the poor billions into the marketplace in ways that benefit them, that help them make money and be prosperous. And we shall have a global market which is not only prosperous but fair to all.

Do I really think my prediction is going to come true? I am not sure. Many leading companies 'get it', but there are too many unenlightened leaders in business, government, and citizens' groups for me to bet money that a fair global market is on the way.

So why am I certain my prediction is safe? Here's why. Globalization is not just about the market. Today, borders are porous. People and microbes move through them. The climate is global. China's carbon emissions may flood New York and Miami. Information flows across borders; today's poor watch television. They see how the rich minorities live and what policies they pursue. They will not stand for a global market which creates a growing gap between rich and poor.

So my prediction is safe because if we do not build a fair and equitable global market over the next decade or so, your lives are going to be so miserable, your world will be so riddled with tension, conflict, threats and disorder that you will have forgotten entirely what was said at your college commencement.

Many or most of you will go into business. Do not be narrow-minded until you are 55 or 60, at which point you plan to 'give something back to society'. Do as you have done at Rollins. Be enlightened. Take a broad view. Think long-term. Think global. Make your every action in harmony with social needs and environmental realities. You'll do better business in a better world.

Thank you.