MYSPACE OR OURSPACE?
BUILDING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES
THE CONVOCATION ADDRESS (SEPTEMBER 2, 2008)

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"***Nature is not a place to visit, it is home***" —Gary Snyder

"***We'll give you lots of opportunities to challenge your heart and mind about ways to serve the world***" —Suzanne Cooke

Look around you for a moment—at the people next to you, at the people across the aisle, and at that strange group in the colorful outfits on the other side of the tent. Get comfortable with all of them because these are the people you'll be interacting with over the course of the coming year. They're your community, your academic community. I want to come back to this point in a few minutes because community is really the theme of this talk.

Convocation is a time when an academic community comes together to reflect on a common issue. It's the send-off to the academic year, an acknowledgement that we are a community devoted to listening, inquiring, deliberating, and discussing. Our tradition at Convocation is to invite the author of our summer reading or a prominent scholar on the subject to speak to you. In case you missed it, let me remind you, I'm not Bill McKibben—though I drove by his house a month ago on my way to Middlebury, Vermont. Bill McKibben will be coming in October to speak to you. At that time you'll have the opportunity to learn, listen, inquire, deliberate, and discuss with him the ideas in his book—and even get an autograph. I'm also not a prominent scholar on the subject, least of all economics. But as Director of the First Years Studies program and co-teacher for the Honors course "Ecothinking," I have had a chance to reflect on some of the ideas in **Deep Economy** and provide some context for your discussion this afternoon. More specifically, I'd like talk to you about the way that these ideas connect to your freshman year experience and to the larger

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mission of Rivier College. Our goal, at Rivier, we say, is to transform hearts and minds to serve the world. But who or what is the world? What in our hearts and minds needs to change? And what kind of change do we need?

It may seem strange that we assigned you to read a book with the word "economy" in the title. Economics, after all, usually has to do with numbers and trends we have little control over and even less understanding of. But the root meaning of the word is something much simpler. Economy comes from the Greek "oikos" or home. Economics is about household management, and as we've come to learn, the home we badly need to manage is the one right here—earth. As the poet Gary Snyder says, **Nature is not a place to visit, it is home**. Economics is about the choices we make that have an impact on our home. Economics is the measure of what we value and the value that we put on things. Look at the recent price of gas and oil. Why did oil go from $40 a barrel to $140 and gas from less than $2.00 a gallon to nearly 4.00? While there are lots of factors, one important one was a perception of scarcity led us to put a higher price on oil because of the value we attach to it. What is the real "value" or price of a barrel of oil or a gallon of gas? That's about as useful as asking what the real value or price of your SUV is today or the real cost of the [and here I'll quote the description] *"Singer22 Exclusive" Mike & Chris Dylan Black Leather Jacket as seen on Kristin Cavallari, Angelina Jolie, and Jessica Simpson* (by the way it's $425, if you really want to know.) We know that China suddenly put a very high value, therefore price on having clean air in Beijing for the Olympics—let's see if that value stays. Thus, the price you're willing to pay is a measure of the value you place on something. Bill McKibben reminds us that what you will value and spend your money on in the future will have an enormous impact on your community—not just your local community but also the global community. As the next generation of consumers—I mean, really big consumers—you are the most powerful group on the planet. If you decide that Yao Ming sneakers are really hot and you really want them, you'll pay the price, any price to get them. And if you decide that clean air and clean water are really important for your children and the world's children, you'll probably put a high value on them and be willing to pay the price, any price to make sure they're available. That's economics.

Of course, it's sometimes hard to understand the impact we have as consumers when there are so many layers between our actions and their consequence—between driving to Wal-Mart to pick up school supplies, or eating half our meals at Burger King and melting icepacks in the Arctic. But we're finally learning the two fundamental laws of ecology--first, that **everything is connected to everything else** and second that **everything must go somewhere**. Remember those two. As Bill McKibben points out in his book, global warming is not the result of doing something badly; it's just the inevitable result of doing too much of something. And that something has to go somewhere, and that something is connected to everything else. Global warming is a product of the philosophy that has led us to think that more is always better. Perhaps you remember McKibben's example of this kind of thinking —that "if two beers make me feel good, then 10 beers will make me feel five times better." While I'm sure that none of you have ever tested the truth of that proposition, trust me that this is one place where the math doesn't work out and the logic is questionable at best. "More," McKibben points out, isn't necessarily making us happy, and "more" for a relative few of us, too often, means less for the many others. That, too, is economics. And that's a problem.

If this were the only message of the book, you'd be justified in feeling discouraged. But the subtitle of the book points to something quite hopeful—**the wealth of communities and the durable future**. McKibben is claiming that thinking again in terms of community—recognizing ourselves as deeply part of human and biological communities, and acting on that realization—can help us to rebuild an economy and a lifestyle that makes sense for the planet and that brings us all real happiness. There is wealth, he says, to be found in community. This seems like a strange concept. We're so used to thinking of happiness in terms of our personal lives and of wealth purely in terms of how much we earn or own. As Bill McKibben points out in chapter 1, the central assumption by which most of us in the West live is that you can tell who I really am by how I spend—by what I drive, wear, own, live in, surround myself with, and, most importantly, . . . **want**.

But this mentality, he goes on to say, has given us the illusion that we are self-sufficient individuals—a process he calls "hyper-individualism" — where personal success can be measured in things and we forget how deeply dependent we are on our various communities for our well-being and happiness. As McKibben points out, it's our very affluence that has isolated us. It's a kind of economic autism, a world, he says, of "more and more individuals in isolation from each other, each following his or her own path." We become so fixated on our own individual success that we tend to forget our connection to others. There's a price to pay for that illusion of individualism. As McKibben goes on to say, "it's easy to be a selfish jerk when you're one in 300 million; it's harder (though certainly not impossible) to be a selfish jerk if you live in a community, if you understand that these are the people with whom you will spend your life." We all want to succeed, but DEEP ECONOMY asks if we can we really do so at the expense of the communities we are part of. Can we really be said to thrive if others aren't thriving or our planet isn't? Would we want to? Most of you know the answer to this if given a choice between your personal happiness and your family's. Some of us would sacrifice a lot, even a kidney, to help those thrive that we are most deeply connected to. But once we get beyond immediate family, it's sometimes harder to recognize our connections, dependence, and responsibility to those in our other communities. It requires a transformation of heart and mind in order to serve the world.

Community is an easy term to use. We are all members of many communities. Today, because of technology, it's even easier to be part of a large number of communities. Let me just ask you, for a moment, to give me a rough estimate of the amount of cell-phone numbers you have stored in your cell-phone: 20, 30, 50, 75, 100? Those of you who have a MySpace or Facebook page are also members of another type of community. Here you can count your "friends" in the hundreds, with ready updates on their status, what they're doing, and where they are.

But as the title of this talk suggests, thinking in terms of "myspace" or "my page" or "my friends" doesn't get us to the type of community that Bill McKibben has in mind. Real communities, after all, are made up of people who may not be interested in the same music, share the same concerns, wear the same clothes as we do, think like us, or even look like us. But they're part of "ourspace." Again, look around you—especially at those people wearing the strange hats in the corner. They really don't think like you or probably share your taste in music. I know; I'm one of them. But they're now part of your community, "ourspace." They have something to contribute, just as you have something to contribute to us. Real community, after all, is hard work—after you've been living in the dorm for a while or even at home as a college student, you'll know the tolerance and compromise it requires. The wealth that McKibben talks about in the book comes from authentic communities where people who recognize their mutual dependence on each other, and their responsibility for each other. We thrive best when we thrive together, when are hearts and mind serve the world, not just ourselves.

But there's another dimension to community, to "ourspace," that we've forgotten. We're not just members of a human community but we're also inextricably part of a biological community, whose overall health determines our overall health.

So now I want to let Prof. Sue Cooke speak to you about this other crucial dimension that makes up the "wealth of community" that we need to draw on.

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I would like to add my "welcome" to that you just received from Dr. Lizotte. As a faculty member in the Biology department and also Chair of the newly formed Green Campus Committee, I was asked to participate in this Convocation to help provide some biological perspective on what is meant by the term "community". I know that this is an exciting day for all of you, and that you were not expecting a Biology lecture this morning, and for that reason I will keep my explanation brief! However, for those of you who

read the book, you can't help but notice the repeated references to biological phenomena, most of which are not unique to humans, including such ideas as evolution of behavior and the carrying capacity of our environment. Additionally, you were exposed to terms like "sustainable" and "efficient" but most people have little understanding of the biological implications of those terms. So here goes your mini-lesson in the Biology of Communities!

If you were to take our Introduction to Biology course, or perhaps a course in Ecology, you would be introduced to the term "community" as part of a larger schema of organization of living things. By the way, this might be an appropriate place to point out that the term "ecology" shares its root meaning with a term Dr. Lizotte was discussing just a few minutes ago…"economics". Two terms that call to mind such diverse concepts actually come down to the same key point…"home". So, in these biology courses, we start by examining individuals, each of whom is a member of a particular species. But since no individuals can exist in isolation, we would then move on to discuss "communities". A biological community is defined as all the living components of a particular geographic region. (That last part is particularly important and I will come back to it!). This includes all the species of animals and plants, as well as the fungi, protists and bacteria. In these communities, "wealth" would be defined in terms of resources: primarily food, water and shelter. A rich, diverse community would normally consist of a large number of species interacting in a complex food web. If you examined the population size of any one of the species, it would generally be very stable over time. In nature, stability, rather than endless growth, is the hallmark of a well-established community.

So, let's return for a moment to the idea that biological communities are geographically limited. In most cases, the species that make up a community each have a relatively well defined "home range", which refers to the distance they regularly travel in the scope of their normal, day-to-day activities. The needs of the individual must be able to be met by the resources within that home range. The ability of the environment to provide for the members of a population or community is referred to as the "carrying capacity" of that environment. Let's consider a troop of chimpanzees living in Africa. Chimpanzees are a social species with an omnivorous diet mostly made up of fruits, leaves and insects. The average home range of a chimpanzee is about 12 sq km. Each day, the troop travels through the home range seeking sources of food and water. It is of no assistance to a troop that 10 miles to their west, a forest of heavily-laden fruit trees might be found. Their needs must be met locally, within their home range. So, can these concepts of "home range" and "carrying capacity" be applied to human communities? The key difference between humans and other species in this regard is that we have overcome the geographical limits on our communities. Though most humans could probably be said to have a defined "home range" (possibly extending between our campus, your family home and the nearest area of shops and restaurants!), in no way must that home range provide for our metabolic needs. We have devised ways to bring food, water and raw materials to us, wherever we may be, from areas of greater abundance or lower demand, in effect creating a global biological community and imposing only a global carrying capacity, at least on humans.

You might ask yourself, is this such a bad thing? At this point, you must address the issue of sustainability. To accomplish the redistribution of resources necessary to maintain this sort of global community, we are heavily dependent on the use of fossil fuels, which are a non-renewable resource. By definition, if something is not renewable, it is not sustainable. Also, returning to the first fundamental law of ecology…everything is connected to everything else…resources removed from one place will have an impact on the local biological communities of that place and that impact could be much farther-reaching than you might first imagine. For instance, removing large fish from the North Atlantic Ocean to supply the world's seafood restaurants with fish sticks has removed predation pressure from smaller fish that don't make good fish sticks but do feed heavily on the newly hatched fry of the larger fish, causing their populations to crash…no more fish sticks! And, the second law…everything has to go somewhere…in a biological community that operates within the predetermined parameters of environmental carrying capacity,

"waste" is not a big problem. The waste of one species is the raw material of another. A perfect balance. This is not true of most current human communities. We are out of balance.

Let's return to the primate troop for a moment. It has been suggested that their whole social structure may have originated due to the need to obtain sufficient food and water while fending off competitors and predators, while at the same rearing offspring that require parental care for a relatively long time period. But, there are other benefits to this type of tight-knit communal living. They can share responsibility for care of the young and also of the elderly, injured or sick. Socially negative behaviors are kept in check because there are consequences to the actions of individuals. The young of the community can play together and learn important skills through these play behaviors. And, maybe most importantly, community living provides companionship and comfort. Many studies of captive primates have revealed that they exhibit signs of depression or even sadness when housed in isolation. Evolutionarily, we as humans are not so far removed from primates! It is not unreasonable to think that many aspects of our communities would mirror theirs. But, as McKibben suggests in his book, when we examine our out-of-balance, global-scale human community, it is lacking many of these benefits provided to members of a more local-scale biological community.

So, what can be done? What McKibben is suggesting in his book follows well with one of the ecological laws we have been speaking about this morning…everything is connected to everything else. He suggests that by making thoughtful changes to our daily lives with the goal of reducing our ecological footprint and negative impacts on the environment (like shopping at a local farmers market instead of buying food at a Walmart Supercenter) we will also be enhancing our local communities. And, by taking actions that build community (like establishing parks and greenspaces where community members can gather for social events), we will also be improving our environment, "ourspace."

In his chapter titled "All for One, or One for All, McKibben points out the basic choice: "For Wal-Mart to prosper, we must think of ourselves as individuals—must think that being individuals is the better deal. But . . . think of yourself as a member of a community, and you'll get a better deal. You'll build a world with some hope of ecological stability, and where the chances increase that you'll be happy."

You probably came to Rivier because you didn't want to get lost at a large, impersonal university. Instead, you chose a College in which you will be a recognizable member of a local community. At times, maybe too recognizable. Your teachers will know who you are—and when you're not in class. Your classes will be small enough so you'll get to know everyone in them. You'll have the opportunity to interact with teachers and classmates daily and learn from them. In other words, you'll have an opportunity to find out what a wealth there is in community. **Rivier and Bill McKibben will be challenging you—us—to think about yourself and your actions in terms of their effect on all your communities. It's a way of thinking that takes into account all those who are part of "ourspace"—the people, creatures, and processes we share not only this local community with, but the planet as well. And it's a way of thinking that asks for a transformation of heart and mind so that we consider how our actions serve the world, rather than harm it**.

This semester you'll have the opportunity to think about the larger community when the Invisible Children program comes in November. In FYS Theology, you'll have the opportunity to explore what community means through the Theology in the City Program. You'll be thinking and writing about the health and wealth of communities in FYS Writing. You'll examine the process by which we allow the illogic of "more is better" to govern our actions in your FYS Reasoning class. You'll have the opportunity to help communities thrive through Campus Ministry volunteer activities. **And this year you'll also have the opportunity to be part of the Green Campus Initiative by helping with things like recycling and waste reduction efforts, energy conservation and an increased emphasis on the use of local or fair trade materials**.

In short, we'll give you lots of opportunities to challenge your heart and mind about ways to serve the world—always expanding your understanding of what that world really is and what it really asks of you. It's not myspace or yourspace. It truly is ourspace, and we only have one chance to make it the best space possible. It's a worthy challenge. Have a great year exploring it. ■