



A CONVERSATION WITH DR. BOB KELLY, NEWEST MEMBER OF THE COLLEGE'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS



As Corporate Vice President of Servers and Tools Business at one of the world's most powerful tech companies, Microsoft, Bob Kelly might not seem like an obvious fit for the board of a small liberal arts college in Wyoming. Yet he would argue that it is actually a perfect fit, despite not being an obvious one. Elected to the Wyoming Catholic College Board of Directors this summer, he recently had the opportunity to sit down with us and discuss the ways in which his own experiences at a Great Books liberal arts college shaped his future, and to explain how he believes others can be similarly shaped during their time at Wyoming Catholic.

WYOMING CATHOLIC COLLEGE: You have a PhD in Literature. How did you end up serving as a vice president at Microsoft, and how did your liberal arts education help you get to where you are today?

BOB KELLY: At the end of the day, I'm a life-long learner. That's what going to a liberal arts high school, college, and graduate school was all about: giving me the foundation for a life-long love of learning. I do feel that my background in literature has given me tremendous insight into the way humans interact with each other, though. The study of literature is really about the study of how people associate with one another, of

how cities are formed, and the results of those interactions. And Microsoft's no different. At the end of the day, it's about getting people to make things happen and about helping them to think through hard problems. You have to have a point of view and you have to argue in support of that point of view. I actually find a lot of corollaries between my grad school days and the work I get to do now.

I always thought I'd be a teacher, so this is an entirely accidental career. But it's been phenomenal, and I find that I've really been more of a teacher in these last five years of my career. So it's come full circle.

WCC: Was it a challenge to undertake such a technical job without a STEM background from college?

KELLY: Yes, it was a challenge. I've never taken a marketing, technology, or business class in my life. In fact, the first time I saw Windows was when I went to Microsoft. Was it hard? Not at all. It's complicated, sure. But it's not *hard*. I approached my job in much the same way that I approached my literary studies. It was just new content. Very early on in my career, I used to get in there and install the software myself, so that I could learn. I'd be in the middle of installing something and it would ask me a question: "Are the DIP settings on your IRQ set right?" And I'd think to myself: "I don't

even know what those words mean.” So I’d stop the software installation and I’d take the box apart—the physical box—and I’d start looking for something that said “IRQ” and “DIP.” I’d get the manual out, and I’d just figure it out. It was never really all that hard for me, and I enjoyed it. It was just new content.

WCC: Do you make a point of hiring students with humanities or liberal arts backgrounds?

KELLY: The short answer? Yes. I often tell people I don’t look at resumes; I look for what I call The Bright Eyes—people who have bright eyes. What I mean by that is that I’m searching for people who are passionate about something; really passionate. I don’t particularly care what they’re passionate about, honestly. I just want to find the passion. When I first started working for Microsoft, we were hiring generalists to do specific jobs. Over the last twenty years, we’ve moved more towards hiring specialists. Because I’m a senior guy, I get to hire a lot of people, so I try to balance that “specialist” tendency out by finding people with interesting backgrounds: Music, Math, the liberal arts, Humanities, and the like.

WCC: Could you tell us what your favorite work of literature is, and why it’s your favorite?

KELLY: *King Lear*. At the end of the day, great stories are great stories. But I’ve always felt that Lear’s story, in particular, captures everything that can be so great about the human condition and everything that can be so horrible about it. It’s the perfect juxtaposition. The form is right; the language is right; the magnificence of it is right. Everything about it is just right. (I was asked this same question one time at work, and gave a similar answer. And at the next “all-hands” meeting, I’m presented with this big, beautiful, old bound copy of *King Lear*. I love bringing some of my literary background into the Microsoft environment.)

WCC: What are some of the things that you feel you are bringing to the Board of Wyoming Catholic?

KELLY: First of all, I decided to do this not so much because I felt that I could bring something unique or necessary to the table as because I’d do anything for Doctors Glenn and Virginia. They’re both such tremendous people, and have both been so very important and formative in my life.

That being said, I do think an important perspective that I bring is the knowledge—the experiential knowledge—that institutions like this one can help to form

the foundations of great business people. You can’t lose sight of that. Sometimes, people think that study is just for the sake of study, but at the end of the day, most of us have to move on and support ourselves and have an impact on what we’re doing and on those around us. Institutions like Wyoming Catholic College can form the foundation for the best business leaders.

I think my knowledge of the tech industry could be an important asset, as well. Technology is shaping our culture right now, and that fact makes firms like Microsoft and Google as powerful as the US government or Hollywood, in many ways. If we ignore what’s happening in the biggest tech companies, we are ignoring where our culture is going. I believe that we have a duty not to bury ourselves in our studies and let technology go unexamined and unchecked. Because if we don’t get involved in the direction technology is going, it will become much more scary.

This past week, I had the opportunity to serve on a panel with a CIO from a company in Australia as part of a conference hosted by the CEO of Avanade (a big tech consulting firm). This woman called herself a futurist, and she was incredible. I was blown away by her breadth of interest: from technology to social issues to education and beyond. At the end of our panel, the moderator asked each of us to share our advice with the audience (made up of the top five hundred people in his company, all technical people). We all had comments, but as it evolved, this CIO brought us around to the importance of education, and to the notion that curiosity is critical, particularly in this turbulent era.

Interestingly, we also came back to the idea that the tech industry specializes too much, and that we need more generalists to counter that trend. Yes, technology can proceed along its own path, and that will take the world in a very specific direction. But institutions like Wyoming Catholic College can give people the foundations to apply truly liberal thinking to difficult business and technical problems; to take a truly moral, balanced view of what tech can and cannot do.

WCC: It often feels as though the mentality is “I can do it, so I will do it.” And the question “should I do it?” isn’t even being asked.

KELLY: Exactly. I’m very fortunate to have worked closely with all three of Microsoft’s CEOs: Bill Gates, Steve Ballmer, and now, Satya Nadella. And one of the things Satya talks about a great deal is the ethics of technology. He’s convinced that we have an ethical responsibility to ensure that the technology we build is