Shaping Our Destiny at Elizabethtown College
President Carl Strikwerda
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The last five years in our nation’s economic history have reminded us more powerfully than any of us would have liked about how little we can control events around us. If you get into your imaginary time machine and go back to August, 2007, economists and business writers were still seriously debating whether industrialized economies had finally overcome the boom and bust cycle of the past. Seriously, they were debating this. Mainstream business forecasters were talking about something emerging called “The Great Moderation”. According to this theory, financial innovations and shrewd governmental de-regulation had created sufficient credit to fuel steady economic growth. Just to remind you what happened next: the Dow was at 14,000 in October, 2007. A year and a half later it was at 6600. Between 1999 and 2007, the average price of a home in the U.S. had gone from $200,000 to a half million. A year and a half later, prices collapsed, one out of seven mortgages in the U.S. was in default, and about that many were under water, that is the owner owed more to the lending institution that the house was worth. The idea of “The Great Moderation” ranks with the CIA’s estimates of Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction and Nikita Khrushchev’s threat to the America--“We’ll bury you”--among recent history’s most embarrassing attempts at prognostication. As we all know, even with the recession having officially ended three years ago, we are still living in troubled economic times, with stubbornly high unemployment, very slow economic growth, and difficult issues of economic inequality and government debt hanging over us.

Just as recent economic history reminds us of how little we can control the world around us, so it can be sobering to consider the future of a college or our own future, especially if one is a college student today. Colleges, particularly private residential ones such as Elizabethtown College, certainly face major challenges. There is mounting concern over the rising level of student debt. Residential liberal arts colleges such as ours face new competition from for-profit and on-line education. College students, too, as many of you here today know all too well, have to grapple with questions about a world that is unpredictable and changing in unanticipated ways. Globalization means that about one out of seven people in the United States works for a non-U.S. company, or more accurately, works for a firm whose ultimate owners are international investors or a multinational company whose headquarters is not in the U.S. Our economic future, in other words, is bound up with countries around the world in a way that was unknown when I, for example, started college 40 years ago. The jobs that many of you in the Class of 2016 will fill by the time you are out of your twenties do not even exist today.

Does this array of unsettling changes, changes that we individually and as a college cannot control, mean that we are at the mercy of events? As a historian, and as a leader who has had to help organizations manage through disruptive change, I want us to think today about how we
can—not control—but shape our destiny at Elizabethtown College. Yes, the challenges that we face may appear daunting. No, we cannot control our fate. What we can do is to look back, and look around, and see the remarkable things that we have accomplished. We can take pride in what we have achieved. We can draw lessons from our own past for our immediate future. We can look carefully at the trends in the world around us and equip ourselves as wisely as possible to meet the challenges we will face. We can build up strengths, not to succeed in the midst of this year’s changes, or next year’s, but strengths that will stand the test of challenges for decades to come. We do not control events. We can strengthen ourselves. Wisely done, such strengths can shape our destiny.

Students of the Class of 2016, and your fellow Blue Jays, the lessons of your own lives and of recent graduates of this college are clear. You have achieved a great deal by hard academic work in high school and by succeeding in being admitted to this College. By coming here, you’ve chosen, not simply to earn a degree, but to learn how to begin educating yourself for a lifetime. By being educated broadly, in a wide range of disciplines, by learning how to collaborate through working closely with faculty and other students, by applying and testing their intellectual insights through internships and civic engagement—graduates of Elizabethtown College have gone on to do extraordinarily well in the worst job market in seventy years. From the class of 2010, we learn that 94 percent of Elizabethtown College graduates within ten months of graduation had a job or were in graduate or professional school. The default rate on federally-insured student loans among Elizabethtown College alumni is one of the lowest in the nation: one percent.

The world around us may look unpredictable, but each of you in the Class of 2016 and your fellow students here can shape your destiny. Many of most successful Elizabethtown College alumni I meet in business, academia, medicine, law, and government service walked through their commencement ceremony right here in the Dell when the web, not to mention Twitter and Facebook, did not exist, and when we lived in a much less globalized world. Yet they have succeeded in becoming leaders in their fields. How? Because their success started right here—in Steinman, Wenger, and High Library, on study abroad programs and Blue Jay athletic teams, and in campus clubs and organizations. They learned how to read critically, to communicate thoughtfully, solve problems creatively, and tackle projects collaboratively. They learned how to live a life of learning new things. No matter what the changes, unpredictable as they may be, the ability to analyze, communicate, and collaborate serves one well. Those alumni also learned that education is not an end in itself. They gained a great gift here, and they’ve achieved much and given back. Leading a life of purpose is the right thing to do in and of itself. It is also often the strength one needs to draw upon in the midst of life’s most difficult challenges.

The world around us may look unpredictable, but we as a college, too, can shape our own destiny. In the face of the daunting challenges around us as an institution, we need to look back on the lessons of our recent past. We have achieved remarkable things. We can do still greater things. In the last thirty years, we have created a much more intellectually rigorous institution, one that that engages its students with a far wider range of opportunities, and introduces them to a more diverse world. We have made this simultaneously a more successful scholarly, scientific, and artistic institution and a college more dedicated than ever to teaching and learning. First Year Seminars, Peer Mentors, the Young Center, the Ware and Leffler Lectures, Scholarship and Creative Arts Day, the Bowers Writers House, and the Momentum Program are just a few of the innovations we have achieved that make this college a more engaging, diverse, and creative community. Our Continuing Education center has become one of the most respected programs
for adult learners in the country by combining flexible scheduling, project-based learning, ethical leadership, and creative course delivery. We have done all this, furthermore, while expanding and improving our campus buildings, providing over 90 percent of our students with financial aid, and educating a far higher percentage of first generation college students—40 percent—than almost any other private residential college in the country. We have made “Educate for Service” a motto that we live out on this campus, that unites the Elizabethtown College community across the nation, and that inspires admiration from many.

We can do still more. We can shape our destiny. While we cannot control trends, we can, like wise students, read them carefully and re-invent ourselves so that we can take advantage of trends as much as possible and protect ourselves against those trends that might work against us. We can re-invent ourselves as an institution for the future. We can take the best of what our faculty and students do together and use “Real World Learning,” a re-invigorated core curriculum, expanded service learning, and cohort advising to re-invent liberal arts education for today’s world. We can continually re-invest in our intellectual capital and creativity. We can thoughtfully and aggressively pursue government grants, faculty fellowships, foundation awards, prestigious student scholarships, and private funds that will strengthen the College and enhance our work. We can make this campus more globally engaged, more inclusive, and more conscious of our obligations to ethical leadership, peacemaking, and environmental responsibility. Inasmuch as we read the trends of our time with insight, engage in thoughtful, constructive criticism, and dedicate ourselves to excellence in all things, from maintenance of our buildings to financial responsibility and intellectual inquiry, we can strengthen our life together and this institution.

We cannot control our present or our future. We can strengthen ourselves to make the most of our opportunities, to withstand the gales of misfortunes, and to forge ahead whenever possible.

Class of 2016, we are proud that you are joining us in shaping your destiny here, on this campus, at this moment in the midst of all the changes in the world. Elizabethtown College, it is honor to walk with you into the future. Together, we can shape our destiny.

Thank you.