CONVOCATION
Elizabethtown College
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Leffler Chapel and Performance Center

“THE ONCE AND FUTURE COLLEGE”

Class of 2019, wise upper class mentors, distinguished faculty, dedicated staff, honorable trustees, and valued parents and friends, welcome to the 116th year of Elizabethtown College.

It is a cliché to say that higher education in America is living through a time of turmoil. It is certainly true that there are major changes going on within higher education. It’s also true that there is a strong current of skepticism about the value of a college degree. And it’s true that, except for a few very wealthy institutions, colleges and universities face major challenges.

Yet I believe that the turmoil created by the changes can be surmounted, that we should be confident about the value of college education, and that the threat of challenges for well-led institutions can easily be exaggerated. Finally, I am convinced that we are more equipped to meet the challenges we face if we look back on what we have accomplished with pride and meet our challenges with resolve. Elizabethtown College has made great strides in its recent history. We will continue to make them as we move forward. Like King Arthur of legend, we have been both heroic and are continually becoming new.

We are the Once and Future College.

First, higher education is certainly going through changes, the ultimate outcome of which is difficult to predict. Yet many of these changes are just that, changes, not a decline in the need for higher education or its importance. A few years ago, for-profit colleges and universities were the wave of the future. As their terrible record in graduating students or getting their graduates jobs has been revealed, they have undergone a severe decline, one well-deserved, in my opinion. From their height, at 14 percent of college students, they now enroll only 11 percent. (They still account for 47 percent of the defaults on federally guaranteed student loans.) As long as states fail to invest more in community colleges and public institutions, there will be a place for creditable, for-profit colleges with high standards. I do not see that for-profit education is going to transform the academic landscape.
Similarly, Massive Open On-line Courses or MOOCs gripped the media’s attention a few years ago. MOOC’s are a great innovation. Thus far, they have not demonstrated that they can provide a low cost education to those who need it most: the millions of under-prepared students in public education who drop out of college every year. These students need more, not less spent on them, and more hands-on attention, not less, in order to succeed.

There is a growing and in some ways exciting growth in competency-based learning. Increasingly, it will not be the case that sitting in class for a specified amount of time—what could be described as the “butts in the seats” definition of student credit hours—will define whether or not a student has learned something. Instead, demonstrating that you have acquired the skills and aptitude to carry out a task or apply a given body of knowledge will define academic achievement. But I do not see that competency based learning will do away with the role of colleges and universities. Instead, it can liberate us to move away from testing merely skills or the acquisition of information and focus more on higher levels of intellectual engagement. The demand for more education continues to grow. Some years ago, Robert Zemsky at the University of Pennsylvania, a well-known critic of American private higher education, argued that colleges should offer three year, not four year degrees. The response from those colleges that have tried offering three year degrees is a resounding failure. Graduates would prefer to earn a second major, complete a minor, get an internship, study abroad, carry out research, learn at a more human pace, and be more thoroughly educated rather than weaken the quality of what they receive as a college education.

Second, why should I have such relative optimism about higher education? The value of a college degree has never been higher. Pundits like to focus on the Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg phenomenon of college drop-outs becoming billionaires. Wiser heads have looked at who they depended upon. As they grew their businesses, they hired--you guessed it--thousands of engineers, programmers, marketers, and accountants, the vast majority of whom have college degrees. We do have a huge problem in this country with income inequality, which affects college graduates along with everyone except the top one percent of wage earners. Earning a college degree is one of the few ways to mitigate the baleful effects of the terrible inequality we are experiencing. The so-called college premium, the difference in earnings over one’s lifetime between having a college degree as opposed to a high school degree is over a million dollars; it has never been higher, and continues to grow.

Third, the threat for well-managed institutions can be exaggerated. A small cottage industry of academic journalists and pundits make their living by making an enormous outcry over every private college that has financial problems. Since small private colleges educate only about three percent of the college students in the country, it’s a mystery to me why there is so much glee or handwringing over any one small private college in financial difficulty. Almost every institution goes through periodic constraints and difficulty. I remember when I was the dean at the College of William and Mary, the Commonwealth of Virginia cut our public funding by a third in less than two years—over $16 million. I had to cancel one-third of the faculty searches that I had authorized. Students, faculty and staff were understandably concerned. I pointed out that my counterpart, the arts and sciences dean at Harvard, had cancelled all 50 of his faculty searches
that year. The small private colleges that have truly floundered have been those that have neglected academic quality and allowed financial and operating issues to go unmanaged. Colleges and universities, including small private colleges, that offer strong programs, have active campus communities, and manage their resources well have weathered the changes and thrived.

Most importantly, our history at Elizabethtown College can teach us a great deal, as can looking ahead into our future. We were not always like we are now. Until recently, we were quite different. I can feel your trepidation, by the way: watch it when an historian starts talking about how things used to be. You know the old saying, “Ask a historian the time of day and you get the history of the watch.” So, let’s not go into the distant past, but only 20 years ago. In going back a bit, I believe we can also get a sense of how we need to keep changing.

Elizabethtown College has long been a college that taught students rigorously and well. But the investments we made in helping our faculty to stay current in their fields and to help them push their students farther were much less. Only 20 years ago, the course load of faculty was four courses a semester, not three. Faculty did not have professional development funds that they were given each year to attend conferences, do scholarship, and support research by their students. The College and its faculty won relatively few grants. We had no Office of Sponsored Research and Programs. To the best of my knowledge, only one Elizabethtown College student had won a Fulbright fellowship at that point in our history. We had no Prestigious Scholarships Program. There were only a handful of mainframe computers, and the campus was not even networked. The College has always had a reputation for active campus life and tremendous service by our students, but we had only a fledgling intramural and recreation program, and no office of Community and Civic Engagement. We offered no master’s degrees, and Continuing Education, as it then called, educated only about 150 students a year. And, if you can imagine the campus this way, there was no Hoover Center, no Masters Center, no Brossman Commons, no Jaywalk, Gibble Auditorium was a dark cavern, there was no Bollman Fabrication Lab, no Hess Archives, and neither the Wenger Center nor Nicarry Hall had been renovated. We also had no annual Ware or Leffler Lectures. And no Momentum program.

I believe that this short lesson in history teaches us that Elizabethtown College has more than kept up with the changes in higher education and the demands of our society for educated citizens. And, we have done so creatively and with determination. And the lesson for the future is: more of the same. We need to continue to invest in what our faculty and students do intellectually, in helping students have a full and invigorating experience on campus, and in preparing students to be the most dynamic citizens in society that they can be.

How might we do that? Historians like me hate to predict the future, since we don’t like to be shown up for being wrong. Nonetheless, I will plunge ahead, inspired by the immortal words of that great American philosopher Art Buchwald, “I don’t know if this is the best of times or the worst of times, but I can assure you of this: This is the only time you’ve got!”

So let’s try to imagine the kind of environment in which we will live and what Elizabethtown College might be like 20 years from now. The demand for college education will be as strong as ever. A huge wave of baby boomers will have retired. As my friend, former Juniata College
president Tom Kepple points out, “ten thousand people retire each day or 3.6 million a year. To put this into perspective we graduate about 1.4 million college graduates each year. The Baby Boomers are not only professors, but doctors, scientists, leaders in business and government and teachers (in fact we will need one million new teachers by 2020). These professions require the kind of skills that are hard if not impossible to learn in a MOOC.”

College education will be more valuable than ever, but what an Elizabethtown college degree provides will change. More of our work with students will be geared to making them independent learners as soon as possible in their college career. Student research will grow, throughout the curriculum and year round. The way we structure our majors and courses will focus on growing students’ ability to carry out independent projects and integrate knowledge. This will be a significant change, but, I believe, will build more, not less on the best that education has always given. How do colleges contribute to learning? We promote learning in the fullest sense of the term—to acquire the powers of mind to ask questions, seek knowledge, and apply, create, compose, write, convey, test, and adapt knowledge that answers those questions. In worrying less about conveying information—which any of our students can get on their IPhone in an instant—and instead fostering the ability to research, integrate, and create, I believe we as educators will become as much facilitators and guides as teachers in the traditional sense.

Secondly, we will focus much more on preparation for careers, but not, I believe, simply preparation for a job. Career Services will grow significantly as an office, but career preparation will be all of our responsibility. From the very beginning of college, we will foster our students’ sense of vocation and the wide range of “soft skills” that they need to succeed in the future.

Third, we as a college will do more with others. We will form consortia and partnerships with other colleges and with other institutions—hospitals, museums, foundations, non-profit community organizations, and businesses—in order to help our students carry out research and do internships, to support the scholarship and scientific work of our faculty, and to improve our graduates’ success in finding meaningful life work.

Fourth, even as technology makes the world more interconnected, the unique value of a college campus like Elizabethtown’s will grow, not diminish. In a world of digital and virtual relationships, bureaucratic structures, and fast-paced change, a beautiful, personalized, human scale campus community is a precious resource. It is also the unique center of a virtual community of those committed to the College. An invigorating community here will stamp graduates for a life time and continue to draw alumni here as the place that nurtures service and learning.

Fifth and finally, lifelong learning will become a major selling point of the College, and indeed, one of the ways in which every college and university is judged. The value of an Elizabethtown College degree should not be frozen the day that the graduate walks across the platform in the Dell or in Leffler Chapel. Like Career Services, the Alumni Office will grow in importance, but connecting with alumni will be everyone’s responsibility. We will foster ways to help our alumni continue to stay current in their fields by connecting our faculty with alumni. In turn, our alumni will become a greater resource for the College, helping faculty and students to stay current with the changing
landscape of professions, politics, science, and the workforce, and helping to enrich the vibrant life of students on campus.

You and I know that the future is unpredictable, but it is also exciting. More than once in its history, Elizabethtown College has accomplished great things. It is poised to do much more. I am so grateful for the opportunity to have all of you join with me in that fascinating journey towards the College of the future.

Thank you very much.