Breadth and Depth  
Elizabethtown College Convocation  
August 26, 2014  
President Carl Strikwerda

Class of 2018, wise upper class mentors, distinguished faculty, dedicated staff, honorable trustees, and valued parents and friends, welcome to the 115th year of Elizabethtown College. We are engaged here in an on-going educational endeavor, one that at its best is broad, encompassing a wide range of knowledge, and deep, where the educated person thinks deeply about what he or she knows, and uses it to have an impact on the world.

What does it mean, you might ask, to be educated broadly and deeply, and what do we mean by saying that one uses his or her education to make an impact on the world? Let me explain by telling you a story, one that began when I was in college. During my first year in college, I worked as a copyboy from 5 to 7 am at the local daily newspaper. I was able to hold the job only by living near downtown and sharing a room with a young man I’ll call Joe who’d just graduated from a liberal arts college with a degree in English and Political Science. Working at 5 am and going to college was crazy; Joe’s hours at a local TV station were crazier. Starting on Thursday night, he worked about 72 hours almost non-stop to help get the weekend news out. The more experienced writers and technicians didn’t work weekends. Joe did and was glad to have a job.

Joe knew that he couldn’t keep working at the TV station. He was not certain where his English and Political Science degree would lead. I had only a vague idea what I would eventually do with my history major. I had just begun college; Joe at least had the benefit of four years of college.

Joe never claimed to be the smartest person, and certainly not to be knowledgeable about everything: “It’s not how much you know, it’s how much you can learn” is the way he put it. He asked questions. He was never afraid to say he didn’t know something. And because of that, he had an impressive range of knowledge about many things. He had learned in college to investigate any new area he encountered—“do your homework,” he called it—to analyze how this area operated, and communicate persuasively to others what he’d analyzed. Investigate any new area encountered—“do your homework,” analyze how it operates, and communicate persuasively. Remember those words.

In part because he saw the problems in the inner city neighborhood in which we were living, Joe chose to get a master’s degree in urban studies. Working soon after for a city government, he noticed that the region he worked in had no radio station. People listened to stations from other areas, even from nearby states. There was a lack of communication and news for whole cities. On the side, Joe learned everything he could about radio stations, licensing, financing—in other words, he did his homework—and put together a plan for a public radio station. Having investigated and analyzed what needed to be done, he, yes, communicated it persuasively to people who could help. Soon Joe was the manager of a public radio station already in his mid-twenties. That radio station’s call letters are, to this day, the initials of Joe’s name.

Just how broadly and deeply Joe was educated came home to me thirty years later when I was trying to get grant funding for an innovative database project that several of my faculty members at the College of William & Mary had created. A National Science Foundation grant had seeded the project, but that money was running out. The database project had the potential to transform how we evaluate foreign
aid, and make aid more effective. Joe had moved out of communications and was running a non-profit database organization. He knew nothing about foreign aid, but he was intrigued by the database project’s potential to make a difference for people around the world. After a crash course learning everything he could about foreign aid and foreign aid databases—investigation and analysis—he agreed to help me. Together, we made phone calls, sent emails, and pounded the pavement in New York City going to foundation offices—all without success.

Then, I found out just how well Joe had learned the qualities of analysis, communication, and asking questions in college and how much he had built on them in his career. Almost by accident, we got a chance to make our pitch to the biggest foundation in the world, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. But, with every charity, hospital, college, university, and worthy cause begging Gates for money, unsurprisingly, it looked like we had failed. Joe and I had a Skype conversation with a grant officer at Gates where, it was clear, she was telling us “no”. I kept telling her all the great strengths of our proposal, to no avail. But Joe, after quickly analyzing the situation, abruptly switched gears. To my horror, he started asking the Gates staffer what she thought the weaknesses of our project were. He listened patiently, and kept on saying “We have more information on that I’ll know you’ll find interesting” and “We have a fix for that that would be helpful for you to look at.” By the end of the Skype call, he’d convinced her to have another video-conference call with us and the faculty members that would tell her more about the database project—just for informational purposes.

Joe and I agreed not to tell my faculty colleagues that we had, in effect, been turned down for the grant. Instead, we simply told them that the Gates people wanted more information, but that they had to demonstrate the projects’ strengths in X, Y, and Z areas—every area the Gates staff had criticized. With Joe’s help, the faculty members enthusiastically tuned up their project presentation, confidently went through the strengths of the project with the Gates team, and sat back beaming. Joe and I waited with bated breath. The Gates staffer leaned back and was silent for a while. Then she said, “That was interesting. Joe, Carl, I’ll get back to you.”

Within a matter of months, we’d gotten a $3.4 million grant from Gates. That led, in turn, to grants from the Hewlett Foundation, a partnership with the World Bank, and the biggest grant that the College of William & Mary had ever received, $25 million from the United States Aid and International Development Agency.

Class of 2018, doing your homework, analysis, and communication—all can help you make an impact on the world. These are not skills that one acquires by taking a short course or filling out a multiple choice test. They are habits of mind, ways of looking at the world and ways of understanding other human beings. Only an education that is broad, one that helps you learn how to learn about a wide and diverse range of knowledge about the human and natural world, and an education that is deep, in which you learn how to think about what you know and about how you need to communicate it—only this kind of education gives you the opportunity to use your talents to the utmost and have an impact on the world.

Those same qualities of breadth and depth of education—investigation, analysis, communication—have impressed me time and time again meeting Elizabethtown College alumni. These alumni have demonstrated that the education we offer is part of a long process that extends for a lifetime. And because these alumni have an education that is both broad and deep, they, like Joe, have demonstrated how to move from one field to another as they encounter new challenges and take advantage of new opportunities.
One alumna, the mother of two young children, supported her husband’s new business. In her early 40s, she found herself a widow. She quit her day job, took over her late husband’s business, and built it into a successful enterprise. In a short time, she became an expert in her field and ended up giving presentations to hundreds of people from around the world.

Another alumna was asked by her Wall Street firm to oversee training new employees, some from prestigious colleges who couldn’t adjust to working cooperatively with others. She moved quickly from analyzing finances to managing people. More than once she had to say to a brilliant graduate from an excellent university, “The competition is out there, not in here. If you can’t work together, work somewhere else.” She is proud to be able to say, “I don’t think I’d ever have to say that to an Elizabethtown College graduate.”

Like Joe, these alumni of the College impress me with their self-reflection. Thinking deeply means asking, “What is it that I don’t know?” This is one of the hardest questions that we ask, and the most vital to learning. Thinking deeply also means asking what we are doing with our education, that is, moral self-reflection. Are we using our education simply to better ourselves, or to act ethically and to help others?

All of these alumni, like Joe, teach us that it is worth it to persevere in order to be open to new possibilities. Elizabethtown College’s own history is one of meeting adversity, overcoming it, and moving ahead. All the challenges that we face as individuals and as a College need to be put into perspective. That great American philosopher, Bill Maher, put it well: “If you think you have it tough, read history books.”

What we do here is life changing. The kind of education that I received in college and that I witnessed in Joe’s ability to make an impact on the world, the kind that I have seen so many Elizabethtown College alumni demonstrate, that kind of broad and deep education is worth dedicating our lives to support. So, Class of 2018, now you know what your goals are: breadth and depth. Learn how to learn. Be willing to learn about a broad range of knowledge. Investigate. Do your homework. But learn also how to think deeply about what you learn. Analyze. Engage in self-reflection. And learn how to communicate persuasively.

It’s an honor to have you as our companions in this community of learners as all of us teach each other and learn together. Thank you.