“Our College, Our Community, Our Commitment”

What is a college? For the first-year students here today, this is a question of curiosity. What is this strange place to which you have committed yourself for the next—and, I hope, some of the best—four years of your life? For the faculty and staff here today, “what is a college?” may be a question of no deep interest. It is obvious that it is a place where students go to class, faculty teach, staff try to keep buildings maintained and wages paid, and where, after some years of striving, degrees are given. (And, in between, of course, students have a lot of fun.)

All of these answers are true, but only scratch the surface. At a time when there other ways to get a degree and a job, thinking about what a college is might help us all learn more from each other, better carry out our mission of education and discovery, and deepen our lives. A college is first of all, a community. Colleges arose in the Mediterranean world in the 12th century as Christian and Muslim scholars sought to protect the precious wisdom that had survived invasion and near-civilizational collapse. These scholars were all too aware that everything they knew had come down from the past. They understood, too, that everything new that they wished to discover was only within their grasp because others had translated, experimented with, studied, deepened, and built upon the learning of the past. Furthermore, in community, ideas flourished. Medieval universities and colleges discovered what still drives the academy today. They forged a balance between commonality of purpose and individual specialization. By being committed as one to a larger institution but concentrating on individual disciplines, they accomplished far more than they would have done alone. At its root, then, a college is a learning community. There was, indeed, once little difference between a council, a corporation, a corps, in the sense of Marine corps, or a college. All were created bodies of individuals, groups of people who had a “corporate” existence. The College of Cardinals in the Roman Catholic
church maintains this sense today, in that it is not an educational institution, but a group of individuals united around a common purpose.

Like any community, the question we face is: what kind of community do we want to be? There is much that the past does not teach us. Or, put another way, there is much that history teaches us about we do not wish to be. We are very different from a medieval university. We do not operate under the supervision of a church or an assembly of religious scholars, as Christian and Muslim universities did for centuries. What the past may teach us most powerfully is how much we have had to change in order to survive, much less thrive. Colleges and universities are some of the oldest continuous forms of organization in the world. The business corporation, for example, is only barely 150 years old; colleges and universities, over 800 years old. Yet we are still here only by changing. When Elizabethtown College first held classes a few blocks away in 1900—in the building now housing Brother’s Pizza— it was markedly different from it is today. Indeed, we are markedly different even from what we were as a college only 20 years ago. We have fields such as environmental studies and neuroscience and languages such as Japanese in our curriculum, we have a much stronger commitment to research and international connections, and we have made an almost revolutionary transformation in the use of information technology. We are still here while many other organizations have declined, because we have embraced change. We have embraced change, not simply to survive, but because we have committed ourselves to excellence. In each generation, this college has sought to be the best that it can be, given its mission and resources. As we strive to become even more successful in our teaching, scholarship, and programs, we should aim to be a leader among colleges in innovation and in our ideals.

We have also survived and thrived because we have engaged the society around us while being faithful to our deepest commitments. Unlike college and universities for most of history, today we involve our students deeply in civic engagement and service learning. We aim to lead in the excellence of both our
intellectual endeavors and in our service. We have also found that guiding students into hands-on research makes them learn more deeply and creatively. Yet, we are not a service agency, nor a research institute. We know that what is special about our learning community is that it is about more than doing. It is, first of all, about thinking: asking questions, engaging in self-reflection, theorizing, and striving for creativity. Colleges and universities learned the importance of this necessary freedom of thought only over centuries of debate and struggle. Society as a whole needs colleges to be places where questions are asked, dissent is encouraged, and creativity and innovation embraced. At their best, this is what colleges have always upheld; when they have not, they have failed to be what their societies need most. Indeed, colleges must model how dissent and debate leads to progress. Only where there is respect for differing viewpoints and faiths, can discussion change minds and win acceptance of new ideas.

In the years ahead, we must continue to change, in order to be the college we want to be. I believe we must fashion clearly an “Elizabethtown Experience” of education, one which emphasizes, not information or simply skills, but synthesis and discovery. We must invest in faculty-student research and fashion an engaging campus community where the arts, internationally known speakers, and the celebration of our own vigorous scholarship and creativity surround us. In our pursuit of excellence in research, the arts, and intellectual creativity, we must interweave appreciation of the diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural communities which make up American society and the world. Only by living out inclusivity and by new, dynamic connections to other countries around the world can we be the college we want to be in educating the next generation to help lead the 21st century.
In doing so, we will also make clear that education cannot be separated from moral values. What is the purpose of our specialized expertise if not put to the right ends? It is always chilling to read about the brilliant, highly educated scientists and scholars who have falsified their research data or, worse still, have served dictatorships and secret police states. Part of our questioning must be aimed at ourselves. Why do we want the knowledge and skills we acquire here? Whether we like it or not, we have values. The question is, which values do we have? If we do not ask ourselves what values we should have, we may simply absorb the values of selfishness. We need ideals, ideals that commit us to using our education to promote peace-making, to respect for life, and to serving our communities. The founders of this college understood this. We “educate for service” when we pour our talents and energy into the finest scholarship, research, and teaching that we can produce and at the same time harness our achievements to serving the greater good.

Our ideals are those which are the best from the past, adapted for a rapidly-changing present. First year students and the most veteran faculty members and staff, please listen. We are a learning community. We survive and thrive by thoughtfully embracing change. We cherish together the values of freedom of thought and creativity. We respect differing viewpoints. We are better because we each develop our own specialized knowledge yet consult, cooperate, and collaborate. We believe we educate ourselves best when we engage with the world around us and reach out across the globe, and yet cultivate our distinctive role as a place of ideas and creativity. We question ourselves at least as much as we question received lessons from the past and the conventional wisdom around us. We know that education is a great responsibility. We want to use it for the right ends. We commit ourselves to leadership among colleges, to service to each other and the wider world, and we seek to inspire others to take up this task with us.
First year students, the Class of 2015, these are ideals worth committing your next four years to and carrying forward into your whole life. You will change us in the four years you are here. You have much to contribute to this learning community. Like you, I am a first year. In a few weeks, I hope you will join me at my inauguration ceremony in this same spot. I look forward to leading this college, to working to shape you into the next generation of leaders, and to inspiring you to do great things. I invite you to join me on the journey ahead. Together, you and all the rest of us will form a great community. Thank you.

WE’RE NOT DONE YET. I WANT THE CLASS OF 2015 TO SHOW ITS STUFF AND TO WELCOME THEM.

Class of 2015 and the rest of you, are going to say three times after me: “Blue Jays. Always. 2015!”

Let’s practice: “Blue Jays. Always. 2015!”

Again: “Blue Jays. Always. 2015!”

Now, this is for real: Shout it out three times: