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Rights, privileges and obligations

Commencement ceremonies are formal and unchanging by design. Nevertheless, last year I instituted a small but significant amendment in the declaration by which Berry's academic degrees are conferred. I added a word: *obligations*. The statement now reads:

"By the authority vested in me by the Board of Trustees of Berry College, I pronounce you graduates of Berry College and confer upon you all the rights, privileges and *obligations* appertaining thereto. You will please come forward and receive your diplomas."

Berry graduates join a privileged minority. Even though Americans are among the most educated people of the world, currently only 28 percent of Americans aged 25 to 29 have earned a college degree.

On average, a college degree results in higher status, higher salaries and a better quality of life. As graduates accept their diplomas, I remind them that they have earned this distinction – but only in part. I appeal to them also to receive and cherish this honor as a gift, because others have made it possible. Others before them sacrificed to build America's remarkable infrastructure – its institutions, political and economic systems, and freedoms. Still others built Berry – the financial base, facilities and programs that students today receive as an inheritance.

Martha Berry stands as an exemplar in this regard. Although she never graduated from college herself, through a lifetime of devotion and determination she made it possible for thousands of others to graduate from college. It is important that we not take for granted her efforts or those of her many partners and successors. Berry students have always worked hard for their education, but they also have

always benefited greatly from the foresight and generosity of others.

For these reasons, Berry graduates have an obligation to build the systems and structures of the future. They need to become the pillars on which communities are built by serving as leaders in local agencies, schools and churches. They should open doors for those who need assistance and direction. They ought to provide a fitting return on the investment that others have made in them. In so doing, Berry's graduates affirm that those of us who are privileged should strive all the more not to act privileged. Rights and privileges should advance what one gives, not what one gets.

Generations of Berry alumni have fulfilled this obligation in countless ways and places. Indeed, Berry alumni are known for their uncommon character and commitment. And many alumni who once benefited from the generosity of others are now generous benefactors themselves as they invest in today's deserving students and thereby sow seeds that will blossom and multiply for years to come.

In a similar way, Berry's faculty members possess significant rights and privileges as well as substantial obligations. A friend at another institution recently wrote about his work as a faculty member. He joked that he hadn't worked a day since he left his law practice to pursue a doctoral degree. While he devotes long hours to his work as a teacher and scholar, he says that it is hard to call it work when you teach courses you enjoy and can read and write about the things that interest you most. I find this same spirit among many faculty at Berry.

Faculty members represent a college's most critical resource: its intellectual capital. Berry's ability to fulfill its educational mission depends directly on the quality and fit of its faculty. Thus, attracting and supporting the

right faculty is a strategic issue for Berry. Top-notch faculty members want to contribute meaningfully and distinctively to a college community that is vibrant and respectful. They also want the flexibility and support to thrive professionally and to arrange their work in a way that maximizes their ability to contribute.

One of the important faculty rights and privileges is encompassed by the principle of academic freedom. As experts in their disciplines, faculty deserve the freedom to think deeply and critically about issues and to imagine new possibilities. Faculty should be free to explore ideas independent of whether they are profitable or politically expedient. The tenure system affirms the importance of scholars being able to question assumptions and state unpopular ideas.

At the same time, faculty members are part of a college community defined by its own identity, values and aspirations. Colleges can and should have distinctive personalities. Just as colleges should respect faculty independence, faculty members joining a college have a reciprocal obligation to respect the institution's freedom to pursue an independent path. Faculty ought to adapt their interests to the mission and vision of an institution.

If Berry graduates have a responsibility to build the systems and structures of future communities, then Berry faculty have a responsibility to provide a curriculum by which students can understand the natural and social systems that define our complex world. If Berry graduates need the generosity, integrity, moral courage and heart to serve as pillars of their communities, then Berry faculty need to serve as guides and examples in this regard. If Berry students are to pursue lives of lasting value and purpose, then faculty must guide and encourage students in the formation of personal growth plans that

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shape their Berry experience. This is the high calling of faculty at a liberal arts college: to serve students as teacher-scholar-mentor.

The work of Berry's staff and senior leaders also is shaped by the interplay of rights, privileges and obligations. Staff members at Berry are highly qualified professionals in their respective fields. As professionals, they too deserve the freedom to think critically about their work and to pursue it creatively. They want to contribute meaningfully and distinctively to the work of a vibrant community and enjoy its respect. They need the flexibility and support to grow professionally if the college is to prosper.

Most students at Berry participate actively in the work-experience program, which continues to provide significant learning experiences that complement the educational experiences offered in classrooms, laboratories and studios. Berry staff members have the uncommon privilege of working side-by-side with the faculty in providing students with firsthand learning experiences. Of course, this privilege also entails responsibility. The centrality of Berry's work-experience program depends on meaningful and creative pathways

whereby students can progress through positions of increasing responsibility.

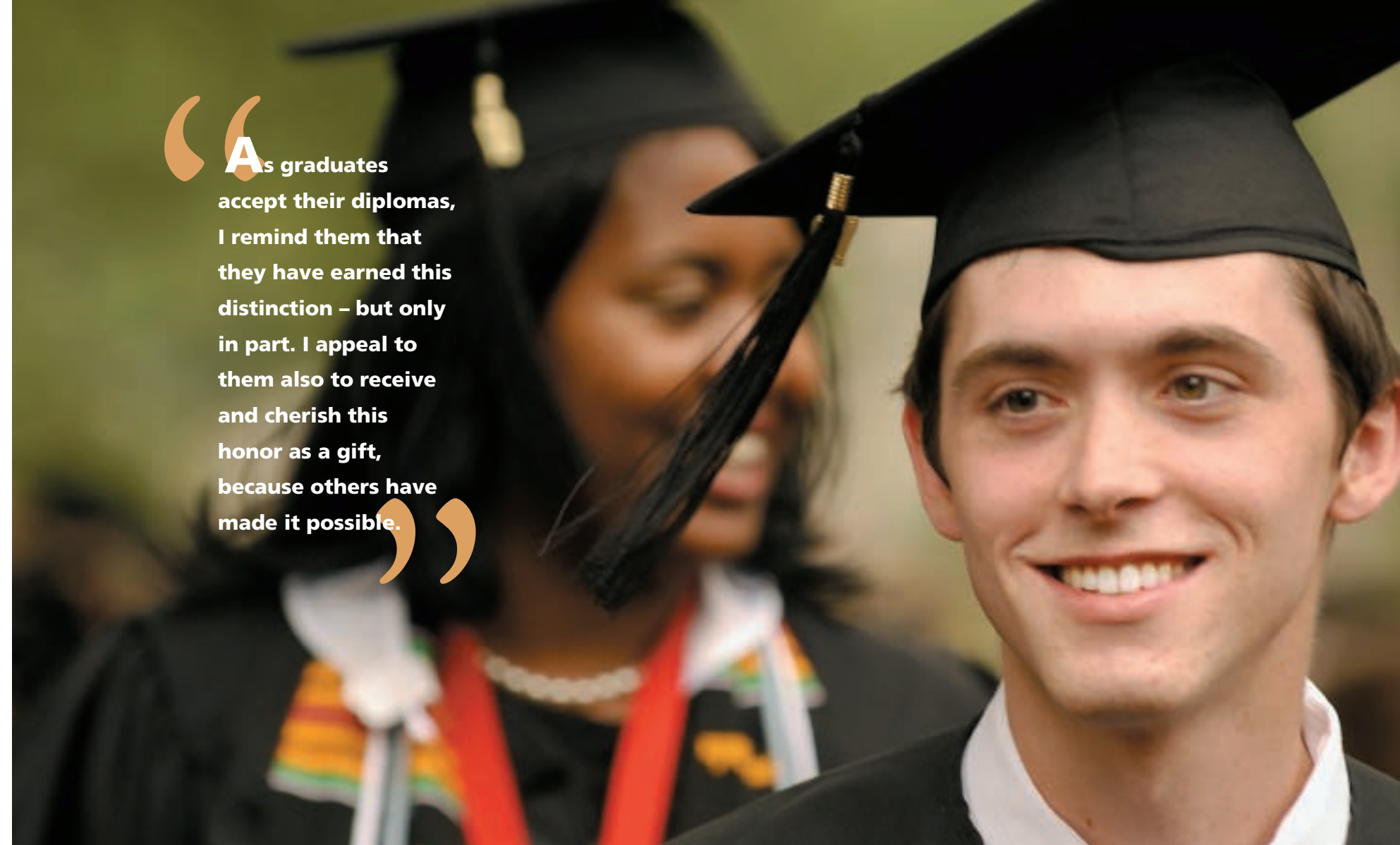
If Berry students are to acquire a sense of direction, seriousness of purpose and confidence born from experience, then Berry staff members need to understand their professional work to be about the development of students as much as the completion of projects and assignments. They must be willing to complicate their own work by handing part of it over to students who, though talented, are still green and unproven. Inevitably, just as students become proficient and truly helpful, they leave because they now are ready for the world beyond Berry. This is the high calling of the staff at Berry: to serve students as educators-mentors who show firsthand the value of worthwhile work done well.

In my time at Berry, I have come to appreciate the rights and privileges that accompany the office of the president. If nothing else, people tend to know my name, and I receive lots of T-shirts in the course of a year. To twist my friend's line: I have not had to work a day since assuming the presidency; it's hard to call it work when you can guide an

institution that you believe in deeply and can pursue intriguing ideas and opportunities wholeheartedly. It's hard to call it work when you spend time with bright and enthusiastic students as well as talented and accomplished colleagues, alumni and friends.

What does weigh on me, however, is the sobering sense of obligation that accompanies the role of president. Berry is a marvelous jewel, a place of unrivaled scope and opportunity coupled with an uncommon educational plan. We like to say that Berry's vision and values are timeless. The measure of our success, then, will be the extent to which we balance inheritance with imagination to enliven Berry's enduring mission. This is the high calling of the president of Berry College: to create an environment in which that essential balance can be both honored and sustained.

As members of the Berry community, let us affirm and embrace "the rights, privileges and *obligations* appertaining thereto." This is the high calling of the Berry community: to live up to the hopes and ideals that have characterized Berry from its beginning and thereby pursue lives of lasting value and purpose. **B**



PAUL O'MARA