



Dr. Stephen R. Briggs

# A good fit

I have spent the better part of my professional life striving to understand what it means for a college to provide students with an exemplary educational experience. Educators have the opportunity to change the way a student thinks about him or herself. We can open new doors. We can challenge and inspire students to pursue a path with purpose and significance. A teacher's legacy is in the life path of his or her students.

As I consider the enormous potential at Berry College to provide such an education, I am mindful that my ideas and aspirations – those things that have led to a sense of fit – have been shaped profoundly by my own biography. I know that this notion of fit is elusive, and I will not pretend to define it. While the fit with Berry has something to do with my professional qualifications and experiences, those have been publicized elsewhere, so allow me to share here instead some other experiences that have shaped me over time and, thus, will influence my efforts on behalf of Berry's students, faculty and staff.

## A special moment

I was first exposed to the power of an exceptional undergraduate experience during my second semester as a student at Wake Forest University. My first semester had provided an opportunity for me to understand, shall we say, that college courses require a different approach to studying than high school courses. Up until that point, studying for me meant reading the book the night before the exam. As I attempted to regain my footing that second semester, my Introduction to Psychology professor approached me about working as a psychology research assistant because she felt I had a strong understanding of the concepts. I was astounded because I did not think of

myself as a standout student who would be invited to pursue something special.

That conversation – and the resulting apprenticeship-like relationship I developed with several of my professors – transformed my self-perception. Because of their confidence in me, I came to have more confidence in my abilities and began to find my way academically.

As I moved through the early stages of my career as a psychology professor, I found myself asking questions about the kinds of opportunities we were offering our students – questions that were based on my own experiences. For me, it was a matter of making good on our promises to students. Questions of this sort often resulted in additional work assignments (proving that no good question goes unpunished), and I discovered that I was as intrigued by improving the way colleges work as I was by my own program of research. In time, I accepted a full-time role in college administration that focused on what matters most to me – marshalling the considerable talent, energy and resources of faculty and staff to provide an exceptional undergraduate experience.

In fact, that is how I eventually found my way to Berry College. Over the years, I have had an affinity for institutions that are highly distinctive, colleges that have pursued their own special purpose and path. I moved to the College of New Jersey for just that reason and was not willing to leave that position except for an opportunity of exceptional fit. Berry College is just that place, and I am more persuaded of that today than a year ago.

## The path to the present

I am occasionally asked whether I have always wanted to be a college president. In truth, it is an idea that emerged only in

recent years. My high school and college friends no doubt find this a curious turn of events. I was relatively quiet and not one who gravitated to the limelight or leadership roles. Over time, however, I realized that I have a talent for laying out issues and analyzing them. I have been able to ask incisive questions, come up with creative solutions and help bring people to consensus.

As a scholar of personality traits, I know that these abilities were shaped by my liberal arts education and my professional experiences, but they emerged also from my own family history.

I was born in Ft. Worth, Texas, but spent my early years in Baltimore with my energies focused on soccer, lacrosse, the Baltimore Orioles and the Baltimore Colts. When I was in the ninth grade, my family moved to Philadelphia, where there was no soccer or lacrosse. To make matters worse, the Colts moved to Indianapolis.

Through most of high school, I worked several nights a week as a hospital orderly. It was an amazing experience for a teenager. I learned to work on a team of competent professionals within a clearly hierarchical system. I experienced the necessary (moving patients and setting up traction) and the distasteful (enemas and bed baths), as well as the life-and-death drama of cardiac calls and the emergency room. I learned the value of worthwhile work done well and lessons that can never be learned in a classroom.

I liked what I experienced so much that I planned to study pre-med at Wake Forest. First-semester chemistry, however, proved to be a dose of reality. Then my psychology professor changed the course of my education and my career path. It's a change I do not regret, although I sometimes wonder what might have been if my introductory science experiences had been more engaging.



When I look back, the interactions I had with faculty mentors as I worked collaboratively with them on research and textbook projects are what I value most about college.

Of course, what I really mean to say is that the experiences I treasure most from college were interactions with Brenda, then a mathematics major at Wake Forest and now my wife. Soft-spoken, petite, gracious and smart, Brenda is from New Bern, N.C., and her engagement to an apparent Northerner was a matter of some family consternation. My heart, however, has always been in the South, and after our marriage in 1978, we lived in Texas, Oklahoma and Florida before moving to New Jersey.

My parents and two brothers live on the outskirts of Philadelphia. My dad retired after 40 years as a pastor in non-denominational and Presbyterian churches. My mom taught school and worked in a library. Both graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, and my dad also graduated

from Princeton Seminary. I sometimes tell my daughters that growing up as a minister's son is good preparation for being a college president because both homes have a lot of windows. Also, it causes you to think early about a sense of calling and helps you learn about the meaning of service and the importance of both truth and grace.

Brenda and I have been active in churches and other ministries throughout our married years. Church families have provided us with nurturing communities for our three daughters: Morgan (20), Meredith (18) and Maddy (15). All three are avid readers, although their other interests are quite varied. I think it fair to say that there is no better antidote to the temptation of pride for a president than to have three daughters. They are not easily impressed, and for good reason.

Although there is little evidence of it in my schedule these days, I enjoy exploring the outdoors (hiking, canoeing and so on),

playing racquetball, traveling, reading and listening to music. I also greatly enjoy meeting and spending time with people, which turns out to be a helpful attribute for a college president.

## A special opportunity

I am delighted by the fit with Berry College and grateful for the opportunity to serve here. I believe that Berry is the rare institution to understand that educating students for lives of meaning and purpose is every bit as important as educating them for career success – and that both endeavors are part of a quality educational experience.

I look forward to nurturing Berry as a place that supports the faculty as teacher-scholars, the staff as mentors and the alumni as advocates as, together, we demonstrate that Berry College has the foundation, the integrity and the will to provide students with the best possible kind of educational experience. ■