

# Purpose & passion

The inaugural address of  
Dr. Stephen R. Briggs

Distinguished trustees and guests, esteemed members of the Berry community, dear family and friends:

As we celebrate another milestone in Berry College's remarkable journey, it is fitting that we gather here in the college chapel. This place is full of history.

Martha Berry had a fondness for occasions such as this, because she wanted students to remember the "hours that meant things." In her lifetime, more than 10,000 boys and girls passed through these doors. Together with her, they recited Psalm 121 and sang the school hymn.

Martha loved to entertain visitors and wanted them to leave the campus amazed by its scope and natural beauty. She designed it to inspire those who lived here, to lift their spirits and create a sense of opportunity. It seems natural to remember her on this occasion, for her presence is still a defining feature of Berry.

Martha's purpose in life was sure. The Berry Schools would educate the impoverished children of this region and open a path to the world where none existed. At that time, there were still whole counties in Georgia without rural schools. Martha hatched a simple but audacious plan to transplant these impoverished saplings into more fertile soil. She created a self-sustaining residential community where boys, and soon enough girls, would learn to be self-sufficient. She grasped intuitively that intellectual skills and practical skills could be combined to powerful effect.

The education she offered was no "free lunch." Students exchanged two days of serious work for four days of serious education. Their handprints are all around us. They helped build this church 90 years ago, along with many of the surrounding buildings. They laid out Berry's paths and

roads. They created our vistas and planted the trees that frame them. Of course, these students never fully paid their own way – generations of benefactors supplemented the students' efforts and enabled the schools first to survive, then to thrive. The Berry educational plan was born of necessity but flourishes today in maturity.

One hundred and five years later, the world has changed dramatically. All of Georgia's students have ready access to public schools and colleges. The issue that confronts Berry students today is not the absence of opportunity; rather, it is the problem of overwhelming opportunity. Revolutionary changes in communication and transportation have created a world characterized by immediacy. When I was a student – and it was really not that long ago – three television networks vied for our attention; now we have on-demand access. Then, study abroad was foreign to our thinking; today, 65 percent of Berry's students arrive having already traveled overseas. Then, we shared, imagine this, a single hall telephone. Today, there are hundreds of phones in this audience, and someone, no doubt, is text-messaging at this very moment.

In this technological and sophisticated age, the idea of an integrated education of the head, heart and hands seems quaint. We must ask the hard question: Is Martha Berry's venerable plan still relevant?

Berry's campus is full of historic buildings, and there comes a moment when you ponder their future. Should we be cost-effective and take down an aging building to make way for a new science building or a Cage Center? Or, is a structure of such value, such as Oak Hill, that it merits preservation as a testament to the past?

In the case of our historic educational



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plan, I believe there is an architectural middle ground between museum preservation and demolition. Adaptive reuse is the process of rejuvenating a venerable structure with an eye toward enhancing its distinctive character and aesthetic appeal. Consider, for example, the transformation of the Cook science building into the lovely Charter School of Education and Human Sciences. And consider the magnificent WinShape Retreat Center, which formerly was one of the most picturesque residential facilities for Jersey cows anywhere in the Southeast.

Berry's enduring educational plan is well-suited to adaptive reuse. Its foundation is robust, its structure is tailored to our remarkable setting and its character meets the needs of students confronted by the problem of overwhelming opportunity.

Last week, I received the annual rating questionnaire that *U.S. News & World Report* mails to college presidents. I learned that Berry's classification has been changed for next year; we now are categorized as a "baccalaureate liberal arts" institution. As such, we will be ranked in a category that includes the nation's top undergraduate colleges – Amherst, Williams and Davidson. In many ways, this is wonderful news. It is an enviable peer group and one that fits our aspirations and the quality of education we offer.

It also raises the question, however, of what we should do to become more like these other institutions, to compete with them on their turf. After much thought, I remain convinced that our great opportunity and primary advantage is Berry's own special identity and character. Berry will not add to its reputation by becoming like some other institution. Instead, Berry will realize its full potential and gain visibility by being Berry at its best. Berry's educational plan has stood the test of time. Indeed, Martha Berry's plan was considerably ahead of its time, for she anticipated the concept of engaged and active learning.

The vision I bring to you today, then, is to celebrate Berry's distinctive plan and place and to find imaginative new ways to present Berry College as a showcase. In so doing, we will continue to build on the sturdy foundation laid by Martha Berry, Gordon Keown and Leland Green, and we will enhance the important features added through the leadership of Presidents Bertrand, Shatto and Colley.

Above all, our first principle must be the good of our students, for they are our passion and purpose. We must apply our considerable assets and energy to invigorating this place on their behalf. Martha Berry urged students to aim high, and she willed them to do their best. We must do the same. She wanted them to be ambitious but to understand also that there is more meaning, more satisfaction and more good to be found in what one gives than in what one gets.

That means we need to talk openly as a community about how to live a life that matters, one that is worthy and purposeful. Because questions of meaning and purpose are inherently religious, they are difficult to discuss in this day when religious belief has been polarized and politicized.

But Berry can be different. Berry's expansive vistas and surprising spires were meant to catch the eye and lift the heart. Martha Berry placed spires everywhere, especially on the chicken houses. In the midst of mundane work, she wanted students to sense the wonder of creation and the worth of work done well before God.

One way for Berry to be strong and relevant is in our willingness to discuss constructively important issues on which we disagree. Our beliefs about human nature, the brokenness of the world, the practice of justice and the basis for reconciliation are all fundamentally religious. They are true to Berry's Christian frame of reference, yet they certainly are not limited to it. These profound issues should be at the center of any liberal arts education.

Let me conclude my remarks by pointing to seven initiatives that we will pursue as a community as we strive to showcase Berry at its best.

First, we must inspire our students to aim



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high. We already encourage students to excel through college bowl, forensics and Model UN competitions, and through our Richards, Kirby and George Scholars awards. Now we must increasingly challenge students to compete for national scholarships such as Goldwater, Truman, Fulbright and Rhodes.

To facilitate these aspirations, we will urge students to engage early on in powerful immersion experiences such as undergraduate research, study abroad, entrepreneurship, community service and project management. By giving students an early start, we set them on a path that will carry them higher and farther here at Berry and beyond.

Second, we will ask each entering student to develop and explore an individualized path for making the most of their Berry experience, and we will ask each graduating senior to describe a path into the world that is worthy of the gifts and advantages they have been given. To do so, we must ensure that the comprehensive Berry experience focuses thematically on questions of significance and purpose. Our liberal learning curriculum must challenge students to grapple with enduring questions in order to confront and complicate what they take for granted.

Third, Berry will continue to expand and strengthen the quality of our core academic offerings. Currently, important content areas in the humanities, arts, sciences and social sciences are represented sparsely. We need to add depth and critical mass in areas that are vital to the flattened world in which we live. We must provide opportunities for students to work directly with exceptional teacher-scholars as they explore their interests and test their abilities.

Fourth, Berry must find imaginative new ways to blend academic study with practical experience. The Berry plan must be both principled and pragmatic. We will invest again in the work program but in a way that prepares students to enter a world that is complex and sophisticated. Berry students once constructed the campus physically; now they can help us build and maintain Berry as a dynamic, entrepreneurial enterprise. In this regard, it is my expectation that every staff

member at Berry will serve as an educator, mentor and role model.

Fifth, in pursuit of these goals, we will make full use of Berry's campus as an incomparable asset. We need to use it comprehensively as a magnificent laboratory, as a tool for recruiting and retaining students, and as a source of extraordinary immersion opportunities. Berry's land holdings have formed an enduring part of its endowment. We must protect and sustain our principal holdings while ensuring an appropriate return in support of our students and our educational mission.

Sixth, we must also unleash the potential of Berry as a place that fosters a vibrant and healthy campus-life experience. We will vigorously support student-initiated activities, we will create new spaces to serve as magnets for student life and we will transform Berry into a showcase for outdoor recreation.

Finally, in all of this, Berry must remain affordable. In conversations this past week, I was reminded again that even though Berry has intentionally kept its price well below comparable private colleges in the South, there still are students who yearn for the quality and character of the educational experience we offer but for whom a Berry education would cost \$60,000 or more in loans. It is the Berry way to find a means for deserving students to enter life with minimal debt if they are willing to work hard and help earn their education.

In a wonderful way, Berry's purpose has come full circle. Whereas Martha Berry aimed to create a path of opportunity where none existed, today we use that path to inspire and educate our students to become like Martha Berry – and like the colleagues and philanthropists who joined in her work and made it possible. Producing students of purpose and passion is our purpose and passion.

I close with a quotation attributed to Martha Berry: "The pursuit of easy things makes us weak. It is the pursuit of the difficult that makes us strong."

Thank you for joining with me on this special day, and may God continue to bless the work of Berry College. **B**