



Dr. Stephen R. Briggs

DAY ONE

ACADEMIC EXPLORATION

SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES

WORK EXPERIENCES

PERSONAL GROWTH

SELF DISCOVERY

GRADUATION AND BEYOND

Why?

PLAN 4WARD

MY YOUNGEST DAUGHTER IS OFF TO COLLEGE THIS FALL, HER DEPARTURE COINCIDING WITH THE ARRIVAL OF BERRY'S CLASS OF 2014, A TALENTED AND PROMISING GROUP OF STUDENTS. For these students, the last year has been full of accomplishments and successes, a long parade of speeches, honors ceremonies, varsity banquets, service awards, proms, acceptance letters, graduation parties and time with close friends. Their GPAs, SATs and APs are now finalized with scholarships to match. Diplomas are in hand, deposits have been mailed and campus move-in is at hand. We parents breathe a proud sigh of relief, tinged with excitement and apprehension as we anticipate the year ahead.

Incoming Berry students arrive with (and are selected because of their) impressive resumes. While it is appropriate to recognize and celebrate fully these accomplishments, the reality is that they have a short shelf life. Not to be a spoilsport, but here's what I say to incoming students in August:

"Three and half years from now, in the winter of your senior year, you will need a resume to send out to potential employers or as part of a graduate school application.

Except for your name, nothing on your current resume will survive as part of your resume as a college senior. Your high school resume, the remarkably strong one that served as the basis for your acceptance to Berry, will provide a solid foundation for the future, but it will disappear from view as you now assemble the structure of your college education."

College is a time of tremendous personal growth and change. Students returning for their senior year are at a different point in their lives than entering students and show noticeably improved time management, work habits and academic competencies. We would be distraught if this were not so. Even sophomores are amused at how much they changed during their first year and how young and wide-eyed the new students look.

To some extent, maturation is inevitable as students exercise independence of judgment and connect day-to-day decisions with real-life consequences. Although predictable, the process of maturation can be messy and unnerving. Too often, students end up drifting through the early years of college rather than exploring, which should be their central task. Carried along by the

current, they are not actively engaged in identifying a destination, choosing a direction, evaluating progress or making mid-course adjustments. What a shame for students to look back on their college years and realize that they frittered away the opportunity of a lifetime.

A decade ago, distinguished Harvard Professor Richard Light wrote a perceptive book entitled *Making the Most of College*. The book summarizes insights gleaned from many years of interviews with graduating seniors. In its opening pages, Professor Light describes attending a professional conference focused on the responsibilities of faculty and deans for shaping a student's overall experience in college. To his dismay, the first person to speak, a dean from an eminent university, announced proudly that his institution recruited great students and then made a special effort to "get out of their way." Light describes this strategy – "find good students and then neglect them" – as astonishing.

Berry takes the opposite tack. One of our core values and initial goals for incoming students is for them to "take ownership of their own educational experience." We are helping them to do that through a new program called *Plan4ward*.

Two years ago, as part of a self-study in preparation for reaffirmation of Berry's accreditation, we established *Plan4ward* to improve the quality of student learning in the areas of initiative, intentionality and integration. The primary objective is for students to demonstrate personal responsibility for their own educational experience – through self-appraisal, goal-setting, planning, reflection and refinement – in a way that encourages social responsibility and service to others. The program assumes that personal responsibility improves developmentally (over time and with experience) as part of a comprehensive process in which students examine what

matters to them, what they are successful at and what will be of lasting value as they strive to identify a sense of purpose and passion. While faculty and staff at Berry can provide encouragement and guidance from the sidelines, students must achieve this integration of the head, heart and hands themselves.

Plan4ward spans all four years at Berry, although most of our work to date has focused on students in the first year. It is widely recognized that the most challenging time for a college student is the first year and that the most difficult transition period during this year is the first semester. Nearly one-third of students nationally do not return to the same college after their first year. Yet, most universities devote their time and resources largely to students in the majors (juniors and seniors) as well as to graduate students. Why is it that first-year students – those who need the most personal attention – are so often relegated to the largest classes offered by an institution?

First-year students at Berry participate in a special seminar class in which 16 students, with the assistance of their first-year advisor, work to assess and understand their strengths and interests. With the advisor, students then begin to challenge and test

their self-understanding through a series of appropriate academic, leadership, service and work experiences. Often this process results in new ideas, new majors and new interests – a series of turns and choices along the path. Rarely can one see very far down the path, either during college or in the first few years thereafter, yet this process of exploring is at the heart of personal growth.

In the middle years of college, exploration is often increasingly focused as students pursue advanced experiences by which to refine their personal and professional aspirations. Students choose a major along with complementary coursework, and they participate in other experiences (e.g., service and leadership opportunities, study abroad and work experiences) that will also shape who they become. In their senior year, students should be acquiring depth in their ability to manage a significant project, organize a team and creatively solve problems to complete a task on time.

In the end, we want our seniors to be able to tell their own emerging story and to reflect on what they have achieved and how they have changed during college. Owning their educational experience will enable them to envision possible next destinations. As a result, they will be better able to write a

compelling personal statement as part of their applications for employment or graduate schools, for they will have an emerging and realistic sense of direction.

In their last year, I often ask seniors about their stories and for copies of their resumes. I enjoy studying and learning about the scope of their experiences at Berry, and I am continually amazed by their accomplishments in a short three and one-half years. Even so, I remind these promising young women and men that these successes are just the starting point. While the college resume has more staying power than a high school resume, it too will be supplanted by the experiences and accomplishments of the next decade. Their college major, GPA, honors and awards, and campus work experiences will all soon fade in importance. What should not fade, and what I hope persists, are the lessons learned related to Berry's core values: a sense of ownership (and pride) in one's work, an understanding of work as service, a commitment to the success of one's team and an unflinching integrity. These are the values on which Berry was founded, and they remain at the heart of our enduring mission. They are the same values I hope my daughter embraces as part of her college experience. **B**

Because

"A goal without a plan is just a wish."

Antoine de Saint-Exupery (1900-1944)