



Dr. Stephen R. Briggs

# Looking forward

## SUPPOSE SOMEONE OFFERED YOU \$1 MILLION TO ACCEPT THE FOLLOWING CHALLENGE:

Work with 10 talented high school graduates and prepare them to live meaningful, healthy, productive and enjoyable lives. Success will be defined by the ability of these young people to hit the ground running with a sense of direction, motivation and integrity. They must be enterprising, self-supporting, able to manage their own affairs, and committed to the well-being of others.

Would you accept the challenge? How would you tackle the assignment? What lessons and experiences would you use to prepare them? What would make an ideal learning environment?

**B**erry College exists to meet the challenge of preparing students to be “life ready.” College offers young people the promise of success. As parents help their sons and daughters move in on the first day, emotions are close to the surface, and hopes are high that the next several years will be a time of significant maturation. Parents want their children to be successful and to do something worthwhile in the years to come. They trust that the Berry experience will prepare their children to live full and responsible lives.

Defined this way, success is a daunting challenge because it requires working individually with students to acquire the knowledge, experiences, character and conviction that will enable them to improve the places where they will live and work. Learning is both intensely personal and a social enterprise. While there are common goals for all students, each student follows a different pathway and emerges with a



distinctive profile. Young people arrive at Berry with their own defining mix of abilities, interests and values. To find a sense of direction, they need to gain insight and perspective about themselves and the society in which they were raised. They also need to become self-motivated learners, to own their own education. As with an aspiring musician

or athlete, real progress occurs when practice (learning) is no longer a required chore but, rather, the very means by which one pursues mastery and excellence in something one loves. There should be delight in the learning.

Employers seek people who can identify, analyze and solve complex problems; work well with others; and communicate clearly and persuasively. They want people who are motivated learners and who show initiative and tenacity. They also want people of integrity, who are trustworthy and dependable, and who understand that good work always involves meeting the needs of others well.

From its inception, Berry has pursued a bold and distinctive approach to meeting the challenge of preparing students for life. Our entrepreneurial founder, Martha Berry, understood that intellectual skills and practical skills could be combined to powerful effect in shaping people known for their work ethic, integrity, resourcefulness



and willingness to serve. She believed in the power of helping students help themselves, and she used the intensity of a residential community as a potent context for teaching life lessons.

Building on this foundation, Berry today combines challenging academics with character-enhancing and career-building firsthand experiences. It values the dignity of work done well and defines the worth of work in terms of how well others' needs are met. The college's demanding academic programs rival those of many of the nation's finest liberal arts institutions, and its student work program is the largest and most sophisticated of its type in the nation, with an emphasis on Berry's core work value of ownership as it relates to one's education, job and community.

While we are immensely proud of the Berry that exists today, we envision still a better Berry in the years ahead. The improved Berry does not involve a change in course but, rather, progress in the same direction. The college's Board of Trustees recently approved a strategic plan for 2013-2022. The plan takes to heart the challenge of preparing students for life; its overarching aspiration is that Berry's residential campus serve as a national model of an academic community that teaches responsibility by giving responsibility.

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In practical terms, the new plan defines six goals. Berry will:

- Graduate students who are “life ready” through the integration of rigorous academic learning with meaningful applied learning experiences and a heart for service.
- Affirm its enduring commitment to provide a high-quality, affordable education for academically prepared students from economically diverse backgrounds.
- Leverage its amazing campus as the context for providing powerful learning experiences.
- Foster a purposeful community where residents (students, faculty and staff) commit to improving the place where they live, work and serve.
- Achieve greater visibility for its targeted educational, recreational and cultural activities.
- Partner with local and global communities to provide appropriate contexts for powerful learning experiences.

Each of these goals encompasses a number of important objectives that will define the annual work and action items of the college for the next decade. The strategic plan also will inform facilities planning and fundraising efforts. In the next few years, there will be an emphasis on developing targeted programs that define for students what it means to be “life ready” as they pursue personal plans based on their own special mix of abilities, interests and values. At the same time, there will be a concerted effort to provide the kinds of places and spaces that spur student achievement, especially core academic facilities for animal science, music and theatre.

The strategic plan is ambitious. The list of projects seems formidable until one considers all that has been accomplished in just the last several years, as is outlined in the article that follows, “Berry at its best.” Berry is on the move, and the future is bright. With undergraduate enrollment at 2,100 students, the college is sitting in a

sweet spot. It is large enough to sustain a vibrant campus culture and offer a range of opportunities, yet it is sufficiently personal to care about the life trajectory of individual students.

Peering into the future, it is intriguing to consider what Berry will look like just one or two decades from now. Given the digital revolution, the speed of communication and the incredible access to information across a dazzling array of media formats, tomorrow's students will face a world of mind-numbing possibilities. Some experts argue that the need for residential colleges will have passed, replaced by more cost effective learning systems delivered digitally. Conversely, it may well be that, more than ever, young people will need thoughtful guides who help them discern how to analyze and use information wisely and how to live full and responsible lives.

In the decades to come, the traditional semesters and course formats of colleges may well give way to multiple avenues of learning involving a mix of self-paced learning modules, short courses, virtual seminars, project-based assignments and field experiences. Students may benefit from video interactions with faculty and students from a variety of host institutions, while also benefitting from the rich learning experiences available on a residential campus. If Berry is to thrive in this changing environment, I believe it will be because it remains true to its enduring mission. Its value has always been its emphasis on an education of the head, heart and hands in an experience-rich environment.

When this new strategic plan is complete, Berry will need once again to find new ways to meet the challenge of preparing students to be “life ready.” Then, as now, it will need to be clear about how it delivers on this promise of success. More than ever, parents and society will want to know how the Berry experience prepares young people for meaningful, healthy, productive and enjoyable lives. That is the challenge of the future. I hope you will join me in embracing it with excitement. **B**