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Convocation Address by Dr. Nancy Marlow -- August 31, 2004

Sep-01-2004

I first want to say that it is truly an honor to serve as Eastern's Faculty Laureate and to be included with those outstanding individuals who held this position before me. It's also a privilege for me to have the opportunity to speak to you, our newest students tonight. I hope that at least one thing I have to say tonight is meaningful for you-if not now perhaps sometime in the future.

I have to admit I've been enjoying the past two weeks. It's fun to open EIU's web page and to be greeted by me. And I must have walked through the Union Walkway at least a dozen times just to look at my picture. In fact, I had my husband take a picture of me standing beneath it.

Second, welcome to Eastern! I hope that you learn to love this place as much as I do. I was in your position about forty years ago-coming here for the first time as a freshman. I came back in the 80's as a professor, and I haven't regretted it for a minute!

You've chosen to come to Eastern for a variety of reasons. Some of you are here to go to college so you can get a good job. Some of you are here to get away from home. Some of you have come here because your friends are here. Others have come here because of scholarships. I hope at least a few of you are here to get an education. There's a big difference between going to college and getting an education. In fact, I know some highly educated people who never had the opportunity to go to college. And, unfortunately, the opposite is also true-there are people who went to college who never got an education.

What does it take for you to get an education? With apologies to a certain ABC network sitcom, I'd like to offer you my eight simple rules for getting an education.

Rule #1: Don't worry about grades.

I'm not suggesting that you all flunk out. However, I have seen far too many students interested only in the grade they want from a course. These students can be identified by such questions as, "do we have to know this for the test?" These are words that can easily make a grown professor cry. Learn because you want to learn-not because you're going to be tested over it.

Further, an "A" average does not make you more educated than someone with a "B" average. My grades were always higher than my brother's. Was I smarter than he was? More educated? Not by a long shot!

If you focus on learning and you decide you really do want to learn, the grades will follow. Ten years from now no one will care about your GPA, but people will be interested in what you know.

Rule #2: Don't go home on weekends.

Yes, I know Charleston is a boring little town with nothing to do. My own children told me that constantly. Interestingly, my daughter is now searching for a job in Charleston. However, my older son definitely prefers Chicago over Charleston .

Why am I encouraging you to spend your weekends here? If you don't, you run the risk of missing out on the full college education experience. A college education involves much more than what goes on in the classroom. Some of my fondest memories of college are the times I spent with my friends. We weren't doing anything special; we were just getting to know each other. Those times I spent on Saturday or Sunday afternoons with my roommate, my sorority sisters, and other friends are priceless.

By the way, there are lots of interesting things to do in Charleston and the surrounding area. For example, you can visit Lincoln Log Cabin, Fox Ridge State Park, play miniature golf, and enjoy Morton Park. I challenge you to find more activities here. Meanwhile, tell your parents you'll be home for Thanksgiving-maybe fall break.

For some of you, homesickness may be reason for heading home on Friday afternoons-even if you won't admit it. Don't worry; that will go away before you even realize it. My first day at Eastern as a freshman, I was so homesick I was ready to call my parents and have them come take me home. My second day was much better. My first trip home my freshman year was-you guessed it-Thanksgiving. I promise you that the day will come when you will be getting ready to come to Eastern and you'll say to your family, "Bye, I'm going home now." Some of you may even end up staying here or coming back like President Hencken and myself-and a couple of others up on this stage.

Rule #3: Open your mind.

This is the time to expose yourself to new ideas, new people, new experiences. If your childhood experiences were anything like mine, you grew up in a neighborhood where there probably wasn't a lot of diversity. This is your opportunity to try to understand how others think.

You don't have to change your core values to appreciate the values held by other people. In fact, challenging your values, your beliefs can strengthen them. If your family members have always been die-hard Republicans, listen to what a friend, a classmate, or a professor who may be a die-hard Democrat has to say.

Opening your mind doesn't mean that you no longer take a stand on issues that are important to you. It means exactly the opposite. By opening your mind to other's opinions, you are better informed about your own and much more qualified to stand up for those beliefs that are important to you.

Rule #4: Try something new.

One of the people I've always admired is my dad, and he certainly epitomizes this rule. About forty years ago, my home county decided to start a community theater. The director asked my dad to audition for the lead role. My dad had never acted before, had never sung (except in church), and certainly had never danced with a hat and a cane! He did all these as the lead in the first performance of the Fulton County Playhouse, and he was great. He went on to act in many of the performances over the next twenty years. After that he decided that it was time for some new talent to take the stage. However, he was asked to return about five years ago take the role of one of the "Sunshine Boys." He decided to try it again-just to see if he could still memorize lines. Once again, he was great. In fact, my aunt (his sister) thought he was really having a heart attack in one of his scenes.

And I have to admit that I am very proud of my youngest child. He set off for a year in France after he graduated from high school. What a great way to try something new!

Last Saturday I saw a plaque in a crafts store I like. It said, "Don't be afraid to try something new. Remember the ark was built by amateurs, the Titanic by professionals."

Rule #5: Take at least one course you don't need to graduate.

I don't care what it is. Just take something that seems interesting to you. Look through the catalog and through the course listing. Find something that you would like to learn more about. It could be a course in music, theater, a foreign language, mathematics, physical education-whatever interests you.

When I was a student at Eastern, physical education courses were required. However, I took a few extra ones. One of them was fencing. Why did I take it? I don't know. I didn't need it to graduate; I had already satisfied my PE requirement. In fact, I can honestly say I have never used those skills since then-except occasionally the vocabulary comes in handy when I'm working on crossword puzzles. In spite of the apparent "uselessness" of the course, I'm glad I took it.

Now don't take this rule too far. I was practicing this speech on my daughter, and she said, "Hey, I did that." She certainly did; she took about 40 courses she didn't really need to graduate.

Rule #6: Make the most of your opportunities.

What are your opportunities? First of all, just being at college is an incredible opportunity-one not available for everyone. Do everything you can to make the most of this opportunity.

On a campus such as this one, you are surrounded by some of the finest minds anywhere. I'm not talking just about the professors, although it's true that Eastern has an impressive group of people on its faculty. I'm also talking about the students. Get to know the students in your classes and listen to what they have to say. One surefire way to make the most of this opportunity is to go to every single class, every single day, every single semester-even the ones you think you don't like. It will pay off.

Rule #7: Get involved.

There are many opportunities for involvement both on- and off-campus. When I look back on my years at Eastern, the most memorable activities were not those things that occurred in the classroom. What I really remember are the events and people related to being a Pink Panther, a student senator, a member of Sigma Kappa.

Experts tell us that much of the learning that goes on at college occurs outside the classroom. I only listed three of my activities. According to Eastern's catalog, there are more than 150 recognized student organizations and clubs. These include academic, social, service, multi-cultural, athletic, and religious organizations. Check them out, and find the organizations that suit you best. They're not only lines on your resume; they are opportunities to expand your education.

Rule #8: Acknowledge that learning is a life-long activity.

Years ago it was common for young women to attend finishing school. I, myself, attended such a program at our local YWCA. I doubt that I was "finished" when that experience came to an end. After all, I was only 13 years old. When are we finished? When one of my children was a baby, I embroidered a small wall hanging for the nursery. It said, "Please be patient. God isn't finished with me yet." A life-long learner recognizes that he or she is never "finished."

Lifelong learning can be one of the most fulfilling activities you can explore. Lifelong learning gives us the opportunity to exercise and enhance our inner "characters." The inner character is that part of us that strives to be unique, different, eccentric. I've always wanted to be one of those slightly eccentric little old ladies who can speak her mind and wear sequins and a hot pink feathered boa to the grocery store.

How dreary this world would be with no characters. Think back to one of your favorite teachers in grade school or high school. I bet that person was a character. One of my favorites was my English teacher my junior year in high school. Her name was Orpha Stutsman, and she used to caress the doorjamb while scratching her neck and reading lines from Emily Dickinson. What a character! I learned so much from her classes.

I've said what I intended to say. Now it's up to you; go out there and get an education! It won't always be easy, but it will be rewarding. And as Dr. Seuss so wisely said, "And will you succeed? Yes! You will, indeed! (98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed.) KID, YOU'LL MOVE MOUNTAINS ! So . . . be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O'Shea, you're off to Great Places! Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting. So . . . *get on your way!*"