

8-30-2006

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Recommended Citation

University Marketing and Communications, "08/30/2006 - Laureate Curry Addresses New Students At Convocation.pdf" (2006). 2006. 228.

http://thekeep.eiu.edu/press_releases_2006/228

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Faculty Laureate Curry Addresses New Students at Convocation

Aug-30-2006

Eastern Illinois University's 2006 Faculty Laureate Lynne Curry spoke to new students at the annual Convocation ceremony Tuesday evening in the Grand Ballroom of the Martin Luther King Jr. University Union. Following are her remarks:

I am deeply honored this evening to join Dr. Kory, President Hencken, Provost Lord, and Student Body President Sean Anderson in welcoming you, the entering class of 2006, to Eastern Illinois University. Along with the EIU faculty and staff, it is wonderful to be a part of this Convocation ceremony, a very special event that has been organized to recognize and celebrate the beginning of a new school year – for all of us, but especially for those students who are joining the University community for the first time: freshmen, transfer and international students. One of the things I love most about my job is the thrill that comes from thinking that life is starting over again in the fall, and knowing that I – like you – have the chance to do, and learn, and experience things in the coming year that will be entirely new to me. I feel that I am very, very fortunate indeed to have made my career within the university community.

And the university really is a *community*. Our coming together here in the Grand Ballroom is one clear demonstration of this fact. Building and maintaining a community requires a great deal of dedication by people working in all aspects of the university. For example, over the past year Provost Lord has been spearheading the major project of rewriting the university's Mission Statement. This has involved, as I'm sure Provost Lord would tell you, much discussion and debate across campus. But revising our Mission Statement has also offered the members of the university community a vital opportunity to take some time out of our busy days to sit down and reflect carefully about what it is that we are all trying to accomplish here at EIU. It is a chance to re-examine – and perhaps revise – not only the work that we do, but why we think we do it. As members of the university community I hope that you, too, will take some time out of these first hectic days and weeks of the school year to put some serious thought into why you have come here, what you hope to achieve, and what expectations you are carrying – of yourself and of your college experience. You may not immediately arrive at the answers, but it is important that you at least begin the process. For without periodic reflection about what you are doing here, you run the risk of spending your time merely going through the motions, robotically satisfying the university's various requirements or perhaps fulfilling the expectations that your family or your peers have for you, rather than making your education the experience of personal growth and transformation that it is intended to be.

I would like to use the time that has been allotted to me this evening first, to point out to you some of the ways in which the university is structured and functions as a community; and, then to suggest to you some ways in which you, as undergraduate students at EIU, fit into the Big Picture. The university is a fundamentally different kind of educational institution than you have experienced before. Understanding what is unique and special about a university education will, I hope, help you to achieve success in your endeavors here at EIU. In admitting you to the university, we have already told you that we think you have what it takes to become an educated person. We believe in your potential. But, of course, being admitted to the university is only the first step, and there is a great deal of work ahead of you. A piece in last week's *Daily Eastern News* pointed out that one in five students who started their fall semester at Eastern in 2004 didn't return in fall 2005. True, circumstances entirely out of our control do have a way of changing even the most carefully laid plans we make for ourselves. But, to an extremely significant extent, what happens to you here at EIU is up to you. Ultimately, your university education will be the result of the choices that you make during your time here. And, keep in mind that it is not a *product* that you purchase when you send in your tuition payment. Rather, a university education is a *process* that you are now poised to begin. It will take time, and much sustained effort on your part, to complete the process. There simply are no quick and easy shortcuts to becoming an educated person. Then again, there are no real shortcuts to any of the things that ultimately make our lives truly worthwhile.

In your career here, you will enroll in courses that are part of your chosen major or minor fields, and you will also take part in courses that fulfill requirements in what is known as the General Education curriculum, or gen ed. Gen ed courses cover a wide range of disciplines, from Accounting to Women's Studies and everything in between. I want to make sure that you are clear about the reason the university requires you to complete course work outside of your major field. It is this: Along with training for what hopefully will be an economically sustaining and personally fulfilling career, we in the university community also expect you to become an educated person, and this requires something more of you. In fact much more, a point I will come back to shortly.

You probably don't realize it, but it is no easy task to design a gen ed curriculum, for the university community must ensure that students graduating from EIU are both conversant in the broad foundational knowledge that glues us together as a society, and up-to-date on the latest developments in the Information Age. There is an awful lot to be taught. But, in addition to the acquisition of knowledge, gen ed courses are also meant to ensure that students are exposed to a variety of academic disciplines. Each discipline, whether it be Economics or Biology or History, has its own set of basic tenets, its own methodologies, its own theories. To put it



History Professor Lynne Curry, EIU's 2006-2007 Faculty Laureate.

simply: People in different disciplines just think differently. By becoming familiar with the varying modes of thought that function in the world, you will not only absorb new information, but you will also be exposed to new ways of understanding and evaluating that information. Therefore, what you learn in your gen ed courses will enable you to look at the world in new ways. Opening your mind to a variety of perspectives is absolutely vital, for without this ability we run the risk of becoming trapped in intellectually unproductive corners. And, if we allow that to happen, then all our various problems—whether they are personal, or political, or social—have no chance of being solved; we just won't be able to think our way out of them. Therefore, a broader and deeper understanding of the world around us is not only fulfilling to us personally, it is also a social necessity if we ever hope to make things better for ourselves and for future generations.

Now, having said that, I want to point out that you may not always like what you are exposed to in your experience here at EIU. What you encounter both inside and outside of your classes may very well shake you out of your comfort zone. And that is absolutely okay. If you stop and think about it, a university education would be a complete waste of your time and money if you came here intending only to affirm what you already know. But, if you do find yourself feeling a bit thrown by the new ideas you encounter here, keep in mind that no one course, no particular professor, no single book or campus speaker, will be the sum total of your education; higher education is not intended to work that way. Our job as your professors is to guide you in learning the information and understanding the modes of thought that reflect our various academic disciplines. Your job as a student is to master the material you encounter so that you will be empowered to decide for yourself what data you think are accurate, which ideas have value, and which are essentially worthless. In the early twentieth century, the eminent Supreme Court Justice and legal theorist Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. wrote about what he called a free marketplace of ideas. Holmes believed that ideas should be free to compete with each other just as products compete for consumers in a capitalist society. Given free competition, Holmes believed, the best ideas will eventually win out. I am suggesting to you, then, that the purpose of a university education is not to provide you with Truth – all conveniently prepackaged and easily digestible for you--but instead to present you with an array of competing ideas, among which you are free to decide exactly what Truth is.

A major part of your professors' responsibilities, then, is to provide both the content and the context of your courses. But another duty we are charged with is to generate the knowledge that is transmitted. Your professors are responsible for teaching, but we also do research. Now, the term "research" encompasses a rather wide variety of activities, all of which we engage in when we're not in the classroom with you so you might not be aware they are taking place. We read books and articles by our peers, we log some serious time in the field and the lab and the archives, we go to conferences to hear the latest developments in our discipline and to present papers so that we can get feedback on our ideas from people who are more informed than we are about a particular subject. We argue and debate with other scholars. And this is a very good thing for you, the students. Think about it, for a moment: If you required major surgery, you would want the person operating on you to be current on the latest developments in that particular surgical practice. If your surgeon were to say to you: "I plan to use the techniques I learned in medical school thirty years ago," you would probably want a second opinion before going under the knife. Similarly, if you found yourself in need of a lawyer, my guess is that you would feel rather uncomfortable being represented in court by an attorney who said: "I know what the laws of Illinois were when I graduated from law school twenty years ago, but I'm not really sure what they are now." And rightly so. You would expect more from professionals, and so it is with the faculty here. We conduct research in order to ensure that the education you receive here at EIU is the most complete and up-to-date it can be, so that it will be the most helpful and meaningful to you. While teaching comes first, we also actively contribute to pushing out the boundaries of knowledge in our own disciplines.

I want to point out that, here at EIU there are ample and exciting opportunities for undergraduates to actually participate in—and contribute to—the research that faculty are currently engaged in. EIU has, in fact, a strong commitment to supporting research done by undergraduates. Each year, for example, we hold competitions in which students can apply for financial support for research projects. Numerous cash awards are given by colleges and departments for the best research papers written by undergraduate students. Time doesn't permit me to talk about these opportunities in detail this evening, but I do strongly urge you to discover what they are for yourself, and to pursue them. If you find yourself intrigued by a particular professor's field of research, then by all means seek out and ask him or her about the options that may be available for you to get involved.

So far I have talked about what a university education is but you may still be thinking: That's okay, but really what's in it for me? And, here is my answer: In addition to helping you pursue a particular career path, a university education does nothing less than shape the kind of person that will become. It gives you the opportunity, not only to earn a living, but to make your life worth living as well. It is very likely that you will change jobs several times during the course of your career. But, no matter what your professional title or job description—or for that matter, whether or not you have a job at all – you will always carry within you the core of the person you will become during your university career. And a very large part of that core will be formed by what you learn—and how you learn to think – while pursuing your studies at EIU.

And here I would like to make a special plea, a request that comes from my experience in twelve years of observing students in a variety of capacities. I am speaking from my heart here. You will have personal freedoms here that you didn't have living at home; you will have unprecedented opportunities to control and direct your own life rather than follow the dictates of your parents or your teachers, or the numerous other adults who have undertaken responsibility for you over the years. But, as liberating as this new personal autonomy is, please believe me when I tell you that the choices you make during your time here—not only in your scholarly efforts, but in your personal behavior as well – are the very essence of the person you will become. You may very well choose to spend your undergraduate years wasting your own and your professors' time and your family's money neglecting your studies, or consistently drinking too much, or repeatedly and willfully engaging in actions that are hurtful to yourself or other people. Such choices are yours to make. But you are at a singular juncture in your life right now. You have an unparalleled opportunity to decide the kind of moral person you are, and your

choices may ultimately turn out to be life-altering. So, I am asking you to value, and remain mindful of, your own personal integrity as you are faced with numerous decisions about how you will conduct yourself here at EIU over the coming years. For, in the end, we *are* what we *do*. I have just one more thought to pass along to you. This evening I have spoken mostly of the opportunities that you will encounter here at EIU. They are many, and they are only waiting for you to take the plunge and discover them. But, I want to close our time here together by pointing out that not only are there benefits that come along with becoming an educated person – there are also obligations. For it is through your university education that you will learn to function as an engaged and responsible citizen in your community, your state, your nation, and indeed as a human being inhabiting this planet. EIU is a public institution, and that means that a substantial portion of your education here is subsidized by the taxpayers of Illinois, and by the American taxpayer as well, via the federal funding that is provided to the university in various forms. As high as the tuition bill seems to you and your parents (I have two children in college, so believe me this is something I understand on a very personal level), trust me when I say that it would be much higher at a private institution. So, you may be wondering, why would some people willingly pay for other people to receive a college education?

The answer is, quite simply, that the citizens of Illinois and of the nation have made a deal with you. They have said, in essence: We will help you become an educated person so that you will use that education in order to improve our society. The United States is a republic, which means that the only form of governance we have is the one we create for ourselves. At the beginning of our nation we made the deliberate – and extremely risky – choice that there would be no monarchy to ensure the stability of the government from generation to generation; there is only the willingness of the people themselves to make it work. If the people fail to do their part, if they are too stupid or too greedy or too lazy to care about governing themselves, then the whole enterprise fails. So, in order to ensure our very survival as a nation, each generation agrees to contribute to the shaping of the next. In today's complicated world, an increasingly crucial part of preparing the next generation involves a university education. And, as new and unprecedented challenges confront us in the pressing global environmental, economic, and social issues of our time, your responsibilities as an educated person extend beyond your own lives, even beyond the borders of Illinois, to our nation at large and, indeed to the entire planet.

James Madison once said: "Learned institutions ought to be the favorite objects with every free people. They throw that light over the public mind which is the best security against crafty and dangerous encroachments on the public liberty." Self-government is very, very hard work, and in the late eighteenth century Madison understood that those who would take away a society's cherished freedoms are counting on people being too ignorant and too apathetic and too distracted by superficial pursuits to care about undertaking the effort. As Thomas Jefferson famously put it, "light and liberty go together."

And so I urge you, from time to time as you pursue your studies here at EIU, to remember what it *really* means to be an educated person, and to recall that, in joining the university community, you are taking on lifelong obligations to others in addition to obtaining once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for yourself. I challenge you to always be thinking about ways you can contribute to making EIU, the Charleston community, the state, the nation, and the world better places than you have found them. Thank you, and good luck to you.