

The Other Curriculum

A Convocation Talk to New Students

Berea College
1997

David Sawyer

I was asked to welcome you to Berea College, and I take that as an honor. And I guess I'm supposed to give you some advice. I also brought some Berea students along who've been here for awhile. When I'm done they're going to tell you what they wish they had known when they were sitting in your seat, just beginning their Berea experience.

Today is Labor Day, and while most of America is having their last day of summer vacation, we Berea folk are laboring, back on the job. We are a labor college, after all. Berea does things differently. You'll notice that while you're here. Some of those things you will like, some of them you will not like. Welcome to Berea College.

Those of us at the college know the official statistics about you, the entering class of '97. We know where you are from, how many of you are from other countries, how many of you are men, women, blacks, whites, Asians, Latinos, and native peoples. We know your ages, which of you are traditional and which are non-traditional students. We know which of you have children, which of you claim a religious affiliation, which of you have transferred from other schools.

But there's a lot we do not know about you. We don't know the most important things about you, really, the unofficial statistics. We do not know how many of you are happy, or came from troubled homes, did chores every morning on a farm, had to make your own money, have suffered some kind of abuse, have watched a parent die, are questioning your religion. We do not know how many of you are gay, lesbian, or bi-sexual. How many of you are virgins. How many of you are glad to be here or how many of you are miserable to be here. We don't know. But you know.

One thing to be said about the entering class of '97 is there is much more to each of you than meets the eye. There is more to everyone you will meet here—faculty, staff, labor supervisors—than meets the eye.

You are going to hear a lot in the coming days about the official curriculum at Berea College—about your classes, major, and labor assignments. Listen up. But what about the other worlds that you'll explore in these years at Berea? What about the course of your personal development, of your life, your loves, your inner growth, your struggles and changes? A lot goes on outside the formal classroom environment. You know that. That's what I want to talk about. I want to talk with you today about "the other curriculum".

I advise you to take the "other curriculum" seriously because the college years hold a key to your future, and they can be confusing years. You are leaving the past, entering an uncertain future, and hoping for a vision, a vision that will be sustaining, bring meaning and happiness, and will provide direction as you sail the small craft of your self across the seas of your life. Here is my counsel to you as you cross the great waters of the college years. There are three pieces of advice that I want you to consider and take to heart.

1. Start Fresh

College is a new beginning. A new place with new friends. People don't know you, don't know much about you at all. They don't know if you were a bully in high school, or got beat up, or were caught drinking at age 14. They don't know if you've been depressed, were a nerd, never had any dates, flirted wildly, or had your heart broken badly. Whether you had sex too young, failed some

classes, were kind of racist, or were stuck up. Nobody knows, you know? You can re-invent yourself here. Start fresh.

2. Leave Stuff Behind

Everybody inherits habits, attitudes, and behaviors from their parents and from their past. Just the way it is. Maybe your parents didn't like white people, or black people, or homosexuals, or immigrants, or Baptists or non-Baptists.

Maybe your parents are worried—those of you who are not already out on their own—that you will start thinking for yourself, develop your own values, make big mistakes, chart your own course. Maybe they are worried that college will change you. You know what? They're right. It *will* change you. It's supposed to.

Don't leave behind anything that you truly value that you've brought from home, or church, or school. But now that you are in college, and it is up to you to decide what to value moving forward. What to keep and what to let go of. If you don't, someone else is steering your ship, and you will be living someone else's life, not your own. Leave every kind of small-mindedness behind. Leave everything that does not serve you and a better world behind. Leave stuff behind.

3. Push Yourself Hard

Maybe you spent all your time in high school with your nose in a book, hard working and studious. Now is the time to push yourself in new ways, hang out with different kinds of people, date somebody, make friends with a professor, a labor supervisor, a janitor. Take some unusual classes, have coffee with some unusual people.

Or maybe you were a party animal, pushed the limits, hassled your teachers, go into trouble, didn't take life too seriously. Now is the time for you to hit the books, get your act together, get to know the basement at the library, hang out with some serious seniors, get to know dedicated faculty members.

Whatever you were before, now that you're in college, and it is time to open up in new ways. If you make a mistake, learn to make a difficult apology. Do something good for the community around the college—tutor a kid, teach an adult to read, help at the Food Drive. Be proud to stay up late with a troubled friend. Know what it is like to make a tough, principled choice. I don't know what you need to do to push yourself hard, but you do. Push yourself hard.

That's my advice, just those three things. Start fresh, leave stuff behind, push yourself hard. When I went to college I tried to take this advice myself. I wanted to leave some things behind. I wanted to start fresh, and to push myself. I did.

Some of the people in my life called African Americans by a word that I hate. I left those people behind. I had some painful relationships in high school. My heart was broken once and that made me want to break the hearts of others. That was a good thing to leave behind.

In high school I had been either a follower or a loner, never out in front, but in college had my first meaningful leadership experience. Leadership development is basically now my career.

I had become bitter about religion, about faith, at age 13. As a sophomore in college I became pretty depressed, and was miserable, upset with life and God. Surprisingly, in college I had an actual spiritual experience. This while I as an angry agnostic!

In college I met my first real mentor, a wonderful sociology professor who invited me to his home, made me feel not so alone, and taught me about Gandhi and Martin Luther King. I did not see

that professor for 15 years. How was I to know that John Stephenson would become the President of Berea College 15 years later and offer me the job I have now?

In short, college was huge for me. I had some wonderful classes, and graduated with both academic and leadership honors. But the truth is that most of my essential learning occurred within the “other curriculum”.

For some of you the next four years will be clear sailing. For others of you, the seas will be stormy, tough to navigate. Yes, each of you has an official curriculum to get through. You know that. But you also have the other curriculum, the curriculum of your personal growth, your values, and the development of your life purpose.

My deepest hope is that you will take both very seriously, and that you will succeed brilliantly. Our troubled world badly needs the person you are becoming.

Start fresh. Leave stuff behind. Push yourself hard.

David Sawyer
Berea College
1997