

Commencement President's Remarks 2012
Steven M Corey, President

A Blinding Flash of the Obvious: The Olivet College Experience is Different... and Better

I recently read an article written by Mark Putnam, president at Central College, a small liberal arts college in Iowa not dissimilar to us. He had assumed his presidency last year just shortly before I did here at Olivet and, like me, he engaged in a process of learning about his college, its faculty and students, and its culture. As he went through that process he compared his direct personal experience at his college to what he was hearing the mass-media say about higher education in general and he had what I like to call, "A Blinding Flash of the Obvious." And I must admit, I've had the same experience here.

"A Blinding Flash of the Obvious?" you say. Hang with me and I'll explain what I mean.

We've all been bombarded by the current dialogue on higher education over the past few years, with a particular increase in intensity over these past few months. The very important goals of the need to increase levels of access to college for more students and more diverse students; the need to ensure that college is affordable and provides good value; and the importance of ensuring that once students enter college that they have positive and powerful learning experiences, attain their degree, and prepare to become the successful leaders of tomorrow are all critical to our individual and collective future.

However, as we've seen more recently, the public dialogue has also all too often digressed into efforts to transform higher education into a homogenized de-valued transaction. This approach converts a valuable educational journey into information attainment through increasingly impersonal modes of information delivery and acquisition. These proposals call for larger and larger institutions and classes where certain public universities need only to serve thousands (or tens of thousands) of students more than they already do; a growing number of open web-based video (so-called) "courses" delivering information disguised as learning to the millions; or the call for standardized testing and outcomes for all majors across all institutions seemingly regardless of the particular objectives of the student, let alone the context of the unique learning environment. They want us to believe that if we don't adopt their ideas, we won't make it, or at best become irrelevant.

My Blinding Flash of the Obvious is that Olivet College shouldn't listen to these self-proclaimed experts, pundits and politicians. Over the past 18 months I've heard and witnessed hundreds of stories from alumni, current students, and faculty that describe the Olivet College experience. This experience is almost universally about relationships, relationships built within a diverse community of learners sharing a common set of values. Stories where through engaging in complex interactions with others, we not only garner the information that we need, but we learn how to think critically, understand and interact with a diverse group of others, and to identify solutions to complex problems that mere information acquisition can't begin to

address. These stories demonstrate that when we care about one another and our collective success, we all benefit.

Like the stories told by Bethany in her comments earlier, these stories evidence my conclusions that the Olivet Experience is different... and better. Here's just a couple:

A story told to me by a former student is about a certain senior business professor (who shall not remain nameless, professor Homer) who's been known to care so much about his student's success that, when he discovered that a student had decided to sleep-in instead of come to class (and thus was in danger of failing) took the entire class to the dorm, knocked on the door, and reconvened class in that student's room. My bet is that this student didn't miss a class after that... and learned, along with the rest of the class, a valuable lesson about caring for the success of others as well as the subject matter for the course.

Or how about another one,... I was standing at the dining hall and looking across toward the Mott Academic Center and saw a small crowd of college students milling around someone as they walked across the square. For the correct mental image, you might consider the way in which a group of kids might gather and follow someone who has a bowl of candy that they're passing out along the way, or like a pied piper moving through town. As they get closer, you realize that it's professor Knapp and her students making their way to lunch. Day in and day out you can see this happen as this group of students yearns to be in community and relationship with this faculty member who has totally committed herself to their development and success.

These are but just a couple of examples from across the decades where the relationships built between students and faculty transcended the ordinary.

In his article, Putnam relays an analogy articulated by American President James Garfield over a hundred years ago. "During [Garfield's] years as an undergraduate at Williams College, Garfield was the beneficiary of both the teaching and leadership of Mark Hopkins, who served as president of the college for 36 years during an even longer career as a member of the faculty. Garfield's admiration for Hopkins is remembered through his still famous quote [where he said], *'The ideal college is Mark Hopkins on one end of the log and a student on the other.'*"

Like President Garfield's notion of the ideal college with a high quality, nurturing and caring faculty member on one end of the log in relation with a student on the other end, the stories of the Olivet College experience are about an education based on the value of relationships; of the power and value of belonging to an educational community of diverse learners, all sharing a set of common values; and stories which cause me to challenge the current common assumptions and to reject much of the conventional wisdom asking higher education to become a transaction, focused on efficiency whereby through the checking of boxes to fulfill requirements we can consider a person educated. We're going to reject that notion and continue to embrace a more personal and less efficient but highly effective relation-based learning experience.

With that I say to our graduates here today, you are uniquely prepared. You have the advantage. Your Olivet College experience has given you a great foundation for success that exceeds that of others. So, let me give you one suggestion and present you with one challenge.

The suggestion: Question the assumptions and the excessive generalizations of the mainstream public dialogue. They ignore the unique experiences of individuals and often don't apply in specific situations. They certainly ignore the unique experiences you've had here at Olivet College. Look for your own Blinding Flashes of the Obvious.

The challenge: Consider the special experience you've had here at Olivet College and translate it into your life as you leave here. While students elsewhere were involved in impersonal information transactions, you were here learning the power of a diverse learning community. You were able to establish relationships that allowed you to respond to others in ways that recognized and honored who they are as a unique person. As you go forth, use this experience to build and value a diverse community around you in the years to come.

So, in closing, know that as you now join the ranks of Olivet College alumni, you're ready for the journey ahead. Work hard... have fun... make a difference... and know that we're proud of you... love you... wish you well... and welcome you back here as often as you'll visit.

Congratulations to each of you.

Reference: Putnam, M (2012). Essay liberal arts colleges should ignore reformers and reinforce relationships. Inside Higher Ed, www.insidehighered.com, April 19, 2012.