

Olivet College Commencement 2014
President's Remarks
Steven M Corey, PhD
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A Relationship-based Educational Experience: It's Special, Unique, and Valued

To our graduates here to today, let me start by extending congratulations on your accomplishments. Within the next hour you'll be transitioning from Olivet College students to Olivet College alumni. As alumni I hope you'll take pride in your alma mater as someone with a vested interest in her success. Each of us want to ensure that our college, and thus our degree, is strong, thriving, and carries currency in the world. With that in mind, let me share a few thoughts with you about the experience you've had here and the nature of your college degree as compared to the education and degrees being conferred at so many other colleges around the country today.

I'd like to start by getting our heads around some of the forces that are increasingly shaping what it means to be a college student, to have a college experience, and therefore what is represented by a college degree. In the end, I think you'll agree, that your experience has been exceptional, your college is one to be proud of, and we need to ensure that an Olivet College experience is available to students for many years to come.

Over the past several weeks, I've had the opportunity to review and study enrollments at colleges and universities across the Upper Midwest. For example, a Rockefeller Institute report signals the end of an era of increasing numbers of high school graduates which peaked in 2011. Following this peak, the number of high school graduates, and thus the traditional pipeline for college enrollments, is expected to decline beginning this year, in 2013-14, and will continue to decline until 2020. This decline is expected to occur throughout most of the United States, with particularly sizable declines in the Northeastern and Midwestern US. This, of course, is the same population of young people that go onto college in the "traditional" sense, like most of our graduates here today.

My own research reveals that at two and 4-year colleges and universities in the Upper Midwest, the total number of enrolled undergraduates has declined by 2-percent from the fall of 2009 to the fall of 2012. Entering freshman classes have declined even further with a 4-percent decline during this same period.

In Michigan, it's even worse. 4-year colleges and universities in Michigan saw a 1-percent decline in total undergraduate enrollments and a 6-percent reduction in the size of the freshman class entering college in 2012 as compared to only 4 years prior. However, these trends don't apply equally to all colleges and universities. The vast majority, two-thirds, saw declines and only one-third of colleges and universities saw their freshman class and their total undergraduate enrollment increase. When you look further, 60-percent of public universities in

Michigan saw declines in their freshman classes; this includes the names we know... Western, Central, Michigan Tech, and Wayne State, to name a few. But just hold on... private colleges saw the most dramatic declines of all with an 8-percent decline in total undergraduate enrollments and a whopping 22-percent decline in the size of the freshman class attending private colleges; that's right, you heard me correctly, the number of freshmen entering private colleges in Michigan declined by 22-percent between 2009 and 2012, the period of time you've been here at Olivet College. It will be no surprise to you then when I tell you that overall market share for private colleges in Michigan, that is the percentage of students who attend private colleges versus public colleges, declined by 2 percentage points from 24 to 22-percent and the percent of freshman entering private colleges declined even further, from 29 to 24-percent, a 5-percentage point drop between 2009 and 2012.

So, to recap, it's clear that the enrollment good times of the past are over for colleges and universities. The combined "cleansing" created by the economic recession of 2008-09 coupled with demographic changes across the country and here in Michigan have resulted in fewer college students, dramatically fewer public dollars to support student enrollments, extreme financial strain on students and families and on colleges and universities, and hyper-alert uber-competitive colleges and universities all scrambling to secure their enrollments, not just for today, but for the future; some might say for "A" future.

"Well, wait a minute," you're probably saying. "What about Olivet College? How has Olivet College fared during this period?" I'm pleased to say, what our graduates here know... because they've been here and have watched it happening,... and that is that Olivet College has something good going on. Now, we're certainly working to get better and, indeed, have a number of initiatives going on to help us get better, more focused,... and also slightly bigger, but Olivet College is one of the few colleges that saw stable total enrollments and an increase in the size of its freshman class. This even occurred during a time when 2012 saw the largest graduating class in the history of Olivet College and during a time when we've been radically re-engineering the way in which we connect to and recruit prospective college students.

Now, while we're currently in the successful minority, these forces I'm describing to you are strong and fierce. They are truly disruptive forces which are causing significant questioning and alteration of what it means to have a college experience, and thus a college degree. Let me just say that a college experience is increasingly varied from institution to institution and across types of colleges and universities. And this variability and segmentation will only accelerate in the years ahead. In short, not all college experiences and degrees are equal. So, as soon to be Olivet College graduates and alumni, what does this mean for your college? What does this mean for you? And, what are you to make of this?

I believe, and I think you'll agree, that Olivet College must clearly understand and articulate what it means to have an Olivet College experience and to be Olivet College educated. For it is only this level of clarity that will enable us to differentiate ourselves, for our graduates to stand ahead and above others, and for graduates and the college to thrive in the competitive world of today and the future ahead.

So recognizing this, in 2010-11, the year when most of today's graduates joined Olivet College, we engaged in a strategic visioning and planning process which led us to plant a stake in a future that embraces, not a transaction or a commodified notion of education, but a relationship-based educational experience where the relationships formed among students and between students and faculty is at the very core. And at last night's baccalaureate we heard several student testimonials in this regard;... it was wonderful.

We also recognized that education, particularly here at Olivet College, is much much more than a transaction; it's a total experience that occurs in the classrooms; in faculty offices; in the afternoons and evenings on the fields of play; on fieldtrips and away courses; at concerts and art shows; in the Greek houses and in the dorms; and in the evenings at the library, Kirk Center, president's house, and yes, even at the social events and parties on campus. It is most certainly not transaction-oriented nor is it a commodity that can simply be reduced to its lowest common denominator and acquired anywhere that offers it at the lowest possible price. Now this is not to say that transaction-based commoditization of education isn't happening at different places around the country, where students are showing up for a class, either in person or online, conducting a transaction in the form of acquiring information, cobbling together an education in a way that can be replicated for the masses, indiscriminant of the development of the whole person, and then departing,... oh, and repeat X-number of times each week; in fact, that's what's being celebrated at most of the other graduations around the country today. And, while this form of transactional education has certain benefits and serves certain types of students' needs, at least at a rudimentary level, it is most certainly not what we do here at Olivet College; and I'll be so bold as to say that the education here at Olivet College is superior, leads to better outcomes, and prepares students, particularly like our graduates here today, in dramatically better ways than a transaction-oriented education ever could. So to those who are promoting a transactional approach to higher education, we stand squarely in the middle of the road against this notion.

A college degree has never been more important than today. The degrees that include a total and comprehensive approach to the development of the person, like yours here at Olivet College, may becoming less common, but are certainly worth the most. Graduates, take pride that not only have you earned your degree, but you've done so at Olivet College, a place that helped you develop not just the knowledge and skills, but the critical thinking and communication abilities necessary, not just for your first job, but for your 5th job and a long career to follow. Olivet College has also helped you explore what it means to be a member of a community, with all its strengths and wonders... and its difficulties and challenges. I say, "explore" because in this regard you're not done. We must commit ourselves, and you must commit yourselves, to a continuous effort of exploration of what it means to be a member of and contributor to the communities we find ourselves in, whether they be here at Olivet College, our families, towns, states, nation, or the greater world. In this, you're also well prepared for your journey ahead.

So, upon your graduation here today, go forth and be proud of your education, your experience, and your accomplishments at Olivet College. They're special, unique, and extremely valuable; not everyone graduating today around the country received what you got. Promote yourself, your college, and the form of education you received. I, for one, think everyone would benefit from the same type of education you received and have devoted my career to helping make that possible; my faculty colleagues over here are doing the same. You can make a difference for others too, by sharing about your experience here and promoting a college education grounded in relationships and a total experience.

Thank you and congratulations to our graduates here today.

Reference:

Lane JE (2013) Are colleges in the Northeast prepared for new economic realities? Rockefeller Institute of Government, SUNY. www.rockinst.org.