

2008 UW Colleges Convocation Address
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**“To My Dear Little Brother:
Everything You Must Know About Your Liberal Education”**

Editor’s Note: This address is an excerpt from Katie’s essay of the same name that won a UW System Liberal Arts Essay Scholarship Award in spring 2008.

To my dear little brother:

You are a senior this year. You have completed 12 years of reading, writing and arithmetic. As graduation day approaches, you near a very crucial turning point in your life. You will soon depart for college to pursue a liberal education. You may not know what to expect in your new learning environment. As your older sister, I will share with you my experiences as a student. The following excerpt comes from my recollection of my first year of college.

“What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.” Ralph Waldo Emerson’s words align with my own ideas about life, specifically college life. College is more than just a pathway to a career, a meager transition between high school and the working world. It is an enlightening experience that creates growth from within you. My first year of college introduced me to a new style of life.

“This isn’t high school anymore. I won’t be there to tell you to do your homework or run home to get the work you left on the kitchen table. You’re on your own kiddo.” My mother’s words felt like watching someone wipe gauze over a numbed wound: I could hear her words, but I could not sense the intense sting of their reality. I knew college would differ from high school, but could I truly handle the responsibility of living on my own and driving myself through my own educational career? If college is nothing like high school, then what is it?

“Here at our two-year campus, we like to develop a close-knit learning community. If I could offer you just a small tip for college: get to know at least one of your professors. You don’t have to each lunch with them every day, but if you can, at least talk to them personally and you will maybe feel more comfortable learning in their class.” I tried to recall the words of Professor Dan Kallgren during one of our Intro to College (ITC) class discussions. In fact, taking part in small relaxed class discussions during ITC helped me the most to open my eyes to the real world and step up to the challenges of my underdeveloped self-reliance. Listening to other college freshmen talk

about the difficulties they experienced and the ways they worked out their problems filled me with a sense of company. I no longer had to face the blunders of college alone. Listening to the way other fellow students dealt with their problems helped me face my own. The concept of college as a learning community helped me understand what liberal education entailed. One class that really shaped my mind as a student was Cultural Anthropology.

“Culture: the totality of human experience.” If Dail Murray could profoundly define the backbone of life in any human, then I could define her Cultural Anthropology class as the secret key which unlocked my renewed ambition towards a scholarly lifestyle. Her class beckoned me to dig deeper, try harder, and learn more. Her class taught the art of understanding humanity, humanity on levels I never dreamed I could understand. I not only discovered shocking truths about several different peoples around the world, (how some people have no first name, eat bugs, marry their cousins, sell their daughters, wear nothing but bracelets and earrings, and deathly fear women), but by learning about others, I developed an understanding of myself and how I fit into my own society. The class not only kept me on the straight and narrow with my study habits, but it also allowed for personal character growth as I learned to appreciate people’s differences. While her class could not directly further my understanding of third order derivatives in my calculus class, the knowledge I attained from studying cultural anthropology equipped me with a higher ability to learn.

As I recall my first year of college, I realize my mother was right. It was not high school anymore. High school was behind me, my future career was ahead of me, and college was at work inside of me, giving me the opportunity to grow, to discover new ways of learning, and providing me with the all the tools I needed to better understand and function in the world around me.

When I first started college I had no idea why I had to take classes like Cultural Anthropology, Art History, and Women in Literature or any other class I felt did not connect with my future career choice. The previous excerpt describes my growth as a student when I finally came to an understanding of what to expect in a liberal education. The beauty of a liberal education is that everything finds ways to connect. The more you learn, the more you find ways to make these connections yourself. The more ways you find connections, the further adept you become when you grow as a scholar. By the time you complete your liberal education, you will have changed and grown from the inside. You will have new skills you may have never thought you needed before. You will learn to appreciate more in the life surrounding you. You will no longer see just one side of a statement or story. Gone are the days of high school when you learned what you learned for one purpose: to pass the class and move on to the next level. From now on, everything you learn will make you grow and mature.

Be prepared to teach yourself, and not wait for your professor to hand you all the information you will need to be successful. Part of what makes a liberal education so valuable is that you become responsible for your own success. Be patient with yourself and with your progress, because, while you may not initially understand the importance of a particular subject and its connections with your education and your future, the lessons you learn and the knowledge you attain can never be taken away from you. In your lifetime, you will find yourself reaching back to these lessons and applying them to your surroundings. This will connect you with the world on a higher level and you will be

grateful for the path you chose in your college education which made you a well-rounded person. Keep these thoughts with you as you embark on a higher path of learning and development. Good luck little brother!

Love your big sister,
Katie Jo