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“Why Are We Here?”

Saint John’s University
Convocation Address
August 29, 2006

Why are we here?

As students, my guess is your first response to this question is, “Because my RA made me come.” Rather than referring to why you are here at convocation, I pose the question in a little broader context: Why are you here at college? And why are you here at *this* college?

Your parents might say it’s so you can get a better job. And statistics do show that that’s likely to be true, even if faculty know from personal experience that more years of education doesn’t necessarily equate to higher salaries. Even so, those of us who work here to support you in your education would like to think there is greater value to this experience than just getting a better job.

So why is Saint John’s a good place for you?

You’ve heard the Presidents, the Deans, and others talk about the mission and culture of Saint John’s and Saint Ben’s: a strong liberal arts curriculum, an environment conducive to learning, an emphasis on the personal growth of men and women, an experience of Benedictine values, and the cultivation of a habit of promoting the common good. Although these may seem abstract to you now, I’m sure you’ve already noticed some of the ways these characteristics play out when you were amazed by the beauty of the campus, by being treated as a friend by people you just met, and by being encouraged to explore a variety of experiences.

You can hear these qualities in the writings of some of my former students who I asked to analyze the characteristics of our schools that foster development:

- “Taking Symposium as well as classes from all different areas as part of the core curriculum is a positive aspect for college development because it helps students expand their views, understand other perspectives, see how other views fit in with their own, and to evaluate their own views.”
- “The professors and monastic communities really help [you] in adjusting to your new life. They act as mentors.”

- “The numerous sports and clubs offer opportunities to get to know other students who share some of your beliefs and interests. Yet they also give you a chance to go outside your normal group of friends. This involvement greatly increases the chances of making discoveries about yourself as well as how other people think and view certain situations.”
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These characteristics of Saint John’s and Saint Ben’s do not occur by accident. The nature of our schools emanates from a long, rich, tradition of Catholic Benedictine education as well as the best practices in college teaching and student development. To create the best environment to facilitate your education takes a tremendous amount of work by administration, staff, and faculty. Such efforts *do* produce outstanding results. I know this firsthand because about 20 years ago I was sitting in your seat listening to the convocation address before beginning my own undergraduate education here at Saint John’s. Throughout my four years here as a student, I had experiences that dramatically shaped my life.

Here are some things I learned:

- I learned to love learning. This was, in part, due to being taught by exceptional professors. I remember signing up to take Concepts of Biology to complete my natural science core requirement. While I loved learning about almost every topic, I came out of high school hating biology. But as a result of having an excellent biology professor here, my hated subject became my favorite course that semester.
 - I learned what faith was about in both intellectual and passionate ways. Through weekly student liturgies, events sponsored by Campus Ministry, as well as informal conversations with members of the monastic communities, I discovered a faith that could both be freely open to question, yet vibrant nonetheless.
 - I learned that we need to use the gifts we have for the benefit of others. I chose to become a professor and a researcher of college student development precisely because of my amazing experience here as a student. I wanted to study how four short years could have such an enormous impact on one’s life and I wanted to help create the conditions for this to occur.
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All of these experiences would not have enriched my life had it not been for the professionals who dedicated their lives to create the conditions for me to learn and live in this stimulating environment. But as I said, creating these conditions takes tremendous effort. So, why are *we* here? Why do we (the faculty, staff, and administration) work passionately for long hours?

Well, we are here for you. It's all about you. We are here to help you approach your day-to-day life with increased awareness... to notice things you haven't noticed before... or to see things in a different way than you have seen them before. It's all about you. We focus so completely on you, *but* we do this so that you can ultimately focus on the other. College is time where you are allowed, and often even encouraged, to focus on yourself... acquire knowledge for yourself... learn who you are. But if it ends there, it will be unfortunate. You will have the responsibility of using this gift of your education to benefit those beyond yourself.

I'm reminded of the key line in the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*. After a group of soldiers sacrificed their lives to bring home Private Ryan, the dying captain gave Ryan a mission. "Earn this," he said. This is what you will be called to do with your education... to not take it for granted and to put it to use for the benefit of someone beyond yourself.

So, these years may in fact be "all about you," but only so that the rest of your lives are not *just* about you. Earn this... In time you will have your opportunity to do so, and the most appropriate way to begin doing so now is by making the most of every experience provided for you.

Earn this.

Rodger Narloch is an Associate Professor of Psychology. He delivered the convocation address as 2006 winner of the Robert L. Spaeth Teacher of Distinction Award at Saint John's University.