



Wayfinding:

A Metaphor for Liberal Learning

Convocation Address

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President

Introduction

Welcome. Welcome faculty and staff of the College. Welcome students. Welcome alumni, members of the community, and guests. Today we begin, officially and in earnest, a new year of liberal inquiry. It is an honor, a privilege, and a joy to launch our noble work together.

Let me extend a special welcome to those students, faculty, and administrative staff members for whom this is their **first** new beginning at The College of Wooster. Know that you are joining a community of learners that has been committed to the enterprise of liberal education for over 140 years.

Today I will share thoughts about our mission, our common purpose as a liberal arts college, and your role in that mission. I think it is important to remain mindful that our work here together is a **social investment into the future**, not just the future of our students, but of global civil society. This is why we are gathered here. It is why The College of Wooster was founded in 1866 and why it exists today. Though we have a variety of roles in this undertaking, we are each here to engage in this important work in the only way it can be done: **together**.

Our Common Purpose

What is our purpose? Why do we exist? What are we doing here? What justifies our existence, gives purpose to our gathering? It is this:

The College of Wooster is a community of independent minds, working together to prepare students to become leaders of character and influence in an interdependent global community.

That's it. This is why I am here. It is why I get up in the morning and it is what I think about when I go to bed at night. This is why the deans, the librarians, and the coaches are here. This is why all of the wonderful people are here who prepare your food, who take care of the campus and your residence halls, who manage

the technology and business of the College. They are all part of this noble, common project. It is why they have my utmost respect and deserve yours.

Most importantly, this is why each one of your professors is here. They are a brilliant and committed group of people, each of whom has chosen to be at Wooster, devoted to liberal inquiry. Their professional purpose, their calling, is to help each of you graduate from Wooster with greatly expanded capacities as a creative and independent thinker with exceptional abilities to ask important questions, research complex issues, solve problems, and communicate new knowledge and insight.

Wayfinding

Now, I ask you, what are **you** doing here? Kate and Charlie, what is your purpose in being here? Chrystal, James, Rob, and Elizabeth...what are your goals and aspirations? I am asking each of you to reflect on our mission and to examine the extent to which it resonates with your own sense of purpose. Is your reason for being here the same as the College's? Compatible? Harmonious? Or are they discontinuous in some ways?

The pathway of moving from childhood through adolescence to adulthood is a journey of increasing **agency**, of doing things on purpose, not because you were told to do them but because you

have **chosen** to do them. But choice entails reason and reflection. It entails acting on purpose...acting with intention.

Wayfinding is the art of orienting oneself and finding one's way by drawing on a whole set of cues, signals, and signs. It draws upon memory and insight, observation and reflection. It entails listening, experimenting, and finding one's way where the route is not clearly marked. A liberal education both draws out and cultivates a sense of wayfinding.

In my thirty years working with college students, I know that you range across of broad spectrum of clarity and resolve when it comes to the question of what you think you are doing here.

Some of you have a clear vision of your future. You know why you are here and you are eager to get on with it. You have discerned your driving passion and your way is clear. I say, good for you. Along the way, however, remain open to insights and inspiration that can come from quarters you never anticipated. If your quest is to become a writer or a violinist, understand that geology, math, and physics can expand your soul. If you are resolved that medical school or scientific research is in your future, remember that philosophy, literature, history and art will cultivate your humanity in ways that you will draw upon throughout your career, indeed, throughout your life.

Now, let me hasten to add that it is a rare 18-year-old whose vision of their future remains clear and singular. It is much, much more common for you to begin with a sense of your direction, to explore it, while encountering a range of new ideas and disciplines, and for you to change your mind. I am here to tell you that this mode of wayfinding is perfectly appropriate. Most pathways are not clear, straight, and smooth. Most involve turns, bumps, and a fair number of dead-ends. Reflect on the phrase, “I changed my mind.” What a wonderful thing, to change one’s mind. And that is exactly what we are here to do. Many of you will struggle with these changes. In some cases you will realize that the purpose you thought you had was not yours at all, but the aspiration of your parents. In other cases, you have built your identity around a certain vision of yourself and your future. It will be a struggle to liberate yourself from these mantels, but we are here to help. You see, happiness is a function of discovering and cultivating your passions and pursuing them with gusto. A sure recipe for unhappiness is trying to live someone else’s vision for who you are and what you should be doing.

I know many – even most – of you are feeling a little anxious right now, thinking that the persons next to you either know what they are doing here or at least think they know, but you really

have no idea. To you I also say, good for you. That means you are 100% open to the quest you have embarked upon, a quest of wayfinding.

The object of your quest is nothing less than the formation of your identity and the discernment of your future. At Wooster you will be surrounded by wise and caring guides. Each of you has already has a professor who is your advisor and you will likely have many as you find your way. In your senior year you will work with a professor who will advise you on your independent study project. From now until then I encourage you to talk with your professors about your ideas, your questions, your aspirations. As you listen, though, remember that they can only provide counsel; you have to make up your own mind.

There are many routes through Wooster that are already charted for you if you choose to follow them. Our curriculum asks certain things of you, as do the majors and minors you will choose. But I urge you not to treat these as checklists but to make your own meaning of them. Use them to pursue questions, ideas, and topics with significance to you. It is your responsibility bring meaning to your time here, **to create a coherent narrative as an act of will.**

Your project is to create a way through your liberal education which is wholly your own, chosen by you but not chosen alone. This is part of the meaning of independent minds, working together. We want you to take ownership of your liberal education. It is, after all, not something we can give you but something you must earn on purpose. But learning, understanding, and insight are deepened through dialogue. We are all participants in one another's quests, all finding our way in a community of learners.

If you seek clarity within yourself, if you craft, scrutinize, and revise your own strong sense of purpose, you will have a fundamentally different kind of relationship with the faculty, and really, have a fundamentally different relation with the College. You will be a producer of knowledge, not a passive consumer. You will not risk drifting through here, fulfilling requirements that mean nothing to you, and collecting "collegiate experiences" as an entitlement of passage.

Wayfinding, you see, is very different from drifting. To drift is to be pushed along by external forces, without intention, choice, or agency. It is to move without purpose. Honestly, Wooster is not a good place for drifters. Students who struggle here are often those who are checking off requirements, taking

courses without a plan or a purpose. And I assure you, there is no way to drift through an Independent Study.

Instead, your liberal education will be your own; you will create its meaning through your own act of will. Further, and this is the point about the alignment between Wooster's mission and values and your own sense of purpose, if you do this you will be here for the very reason this college exists. **In realizing your purpose, you realize ours.**

Therefore, with great respect for our common purpose and profound optimism for our common future, the 140th year of liberal education at The College of Wooster is hereby convened.