THE COLLEGE OF
WOOSTER

Making Up Your Mind:

The Project of Liberal Education

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, including those who are watching on the live webcast. 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**.

Let me repeat one theme that I explored more emphatically in my remarks to the first-year students at the Wooster Ethic signing a few nights ago. We are a diverse learning community on purpose. For many of you, this is the most diverse community in which you have ever lived or studied. We intentionality seek to welcome students, faculty, and staff who represent a broad diversity of identities – racial, ethnic, religious, gender, national, political, and socioeconomic – because we believe that only by learning with and from people who see the world differently that we can fulfill our mission with integrity.

The respectful sharing of different points of view is essential to our mission; everyone's thinking is improved by critical exchange and listening to alternative points of view. The flip side of this core value is that there is no place in this community for racism, homophobia, religious intolerance, and other kinds of prejudice exist in the larger societies that surround us, and that we find, at times, emerging in our own community. These forms of prejudice do harm, not just to members of our community, but to our very mission. These forms of prejudice preclude, rather than foster, the seeking of knowledge and understanding. They close minds rather than open them. And they can make this a hostile climate for some of our members. This hostility, in turn, undermines their ability to thrive here, to contribute fully and freely even as they seek their own aspirations. To make this point more clearly, one need only revisit our mission.

Our Common Purpose

What is our purpose? Why does the College of Wooster 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 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, and who raise money for Wooster, for your education. This is why the deans, the librarians, and the coaches are here. 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.

Making Up Your Mind

What distinguishes Wooster is that we have tremendous clarity about our reason for being here: the liberal education of

our students. Now, I ask you, what are **you** doing here? Kate and Charles, what is your purpose in being here? Chrystal, Julian, Rob, and Isabelle…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?

Let me say at the outset that it is okay for you to feel uncomfortable or disturbed by these questions. It is okay for you to be uncertain about the answers. The journey you have now begun is a quest for clarity; the road can be difficult, bumpy, winding, challenging, thrilling, and fun.

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. And, of course, I am speaking to you as students who range from seniors to first-years.

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 is perfectly appropriate.

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 mantles, 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. 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 risk, experimentation, and acting on purpose…acting with intention.

The object of your quest is nothing less than the formation of your identity, the discernment of your future, and the making of meaning. One of the precious dimensions of college is the opportunity it affords for you to engage new and challenging books, authors, ideas, and theories; it is through these engagements that you will literally make up your mind. One author I hope you have the chance to engage is the existentialist philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre.

In his novel, *Nausea*, the protagonist slowly comes to realize that purpose and meaning are not inherent in reality, not fixed or given. The opposite, in fact. Unmediated reality is devoid of meaning; it is absurd. When the protagonist glimpses this

realization, he is overcome with waves of nausea: vertigo caused by meaninglessness.

But the nausea is also caused by his grasp of what is entailed by the fact that one's purpose is not given, one's meaning not provided. Why? Because this realization unmasks the burden of ultimate freedom. If meaning is not given, then if it is to exist, it is the responsibility of each person to create it out of nothing. Sartre talks about life as a project; it is the responsibility of each agent to bring meaning to experience, to create a coherent narrative as an act of will.

This is how I would have each of you face the project of your liberal education. Without owning, creating, your own sense of purpose here, the meaning we intend in our curriculum can be lost on you. Moving through it could leave you as the autodidact in Sartre's novel, who seeks erudition by reading his way through the library alphabetically. A curriculum is not a check-list; a Wooster degree is not a commodity to be acquired by fulfilling requirements. 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 to bring meaning to your time here, **to create a coherent narrative as an act of will**. **You have embarked on a four-year project to make up your mind.**

Of course, though the burden of responsibility falls to each of you individually, this is not a quest that can be achieved on one's own. This is the point behind "Independent Minds, Working Together." We want you to take ownership of your liberal education. 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.

At Wooster you will be surrounded by wise and caring guides. Each of you 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. For you seniors, of course, this relationship is upon you. One of the very special things about Wooster is the relationship that develops between seniors and their I.S. advisors, where the mentoring and advising goes far beyond the topic of research.

Many of you will also have very influential relationships with mentors in Student Life. I encourage you to talk with your professors and deans about your ideas, your questions, your

aspirations. Keep in mind, always, that these four years can and should utterly consume your imagination, but that you are also building a foundation that you will be standing on for the rest of your life. Make sure it is strong and seek advice every step of the way about what should go into it.

I offer these remarks on the dawn of a new initiative at The College of Wooster. Everything I have been talking about lies so much at the heart of our mission, that we have fundamentally rethought how we go about advising, mentoring your planning process, and organizing the host of opportunities we offer for you to experiment with your emerging life plans. This summer we brought together the programs and services that support student intentionality and purposeful planning into a new facility in Gault Library that is called APEX. At the conclusion of this ceremony, I invite you all to an open house in APEX; the opportunities it provides for you are profound.

I charge each of you, first-year to senior, to spend time in APEX, talking with the people there to guide you. I am encouraging every one of you to get to know the wonderful people of APEX and all of the opportunities they can help you discover to enrich and enlarge your Wooster education. Seniors, especially, don't let the week go by without stopping in there.

Explore your opportunities. Discuss, craft, and revise your plans. We have built an extraordinary set of resources for you but you must exercise your agency in putting them to work.

Before I conclude, let me announce two. APEX brings together a number of programs that enable students to pursue internships, research consultancies, entrepreneurship, and experiences designed to help students discern their vocational aspirations. All of these programs in some way enable students to begin translating the value of their outstanding academic education into post-graduate trajectories.

By the end of the month APEX will put out a catalogue of experiential learning opportunities. It will direct you to over 100 kinds of opportunities and placements and provide excellent guidance in how you go about pursuing these possibilities. Keep an eye out for it.

Second, I am very pleased to announce that this year we are establishing a fund that will provide $100,000 a year, awarded competitively as APEX Fellowships, to support students as you pursue opportunities to put your ideas to work in the world. You will be hearing more about this program shortly, so pay attention. These funds will support applied scholarship opportunities, internships in those cases where they are not funded by the

sponsoring organizations, well-developed entrepreneurial ventures, and experiential learning opportunities designed to enable you to discern your vocational directions. APEX Fellowships are a strong signal of Wooster's seriousness of purpose in helping you, our students, translate the value of your education into a trajectory beyond graduation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me offer this final thought. If you seek clarity within yourself, if you craft, scrutinize, revise, and experiment with your own 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.

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 143rd year of liberal education at The College of Wooster is hereby convened.