

***Can we talk about freedom?***  
**Remarks by President Bradley W. Bateman**  
**Randolph College**  
**Opening Convocation, August 30, 2017**

Every year I am given the privilege to stand in front of you at this Convocation and to welcome you back to campus for another academic year. I begin by making a short formal statement announcing that the new year has begun (as I did a few minutes ago) and then have the chance to speak to the entire community about our common enterprise. I might choose to reflect on what I believe lies ahead, or where we have just been. You might think, for instance, that this year is a good year to reflect on the fact that we have just completed ten years of co-education.

Now, you might think that delivering this convocation talk is an easy enough task to ask of someone who has been an academic for over thirty years. After all, what do academics do for a living? They “stand and deliver!” But as much as I enjoy lecturing, and as comfortable as I am speaking to large groups of people, I find this occasion to be a particularly difficult one to prepare for. Part of the reason for the difficulty lies in the fact that it represents an especially rare opportunity. Although it may not have occurred to you, this is the only time each academic year when I stand in front of the entire student body to address you together. I meet monthly with the faculty during the academic year, and I also meet every month with the elected members of the Staff Advisory Council and the President of SG. But this is the only time all year when all students are invited to gather together and so it represents my one chance each year to speak to you all together. Anything important I want to say to everyone, I need to say today. There is no second chance.

My intention today is to begin by returning to a talk that many of you have heard me deliver when you were a prospective student. Now that I am entering my fifth year at the College, every student (with a few exceptions) will have applied to the College and have been actively recruited while I have been president. Thus, virtually each of you in the auditorium today will have heard me defend liberal arts education against the tirades aimed at it in recent years by politicians and the media.

In that talk, which you probably heard me give in the Hampson Commons next to the Skeller, I began by repeating the arguments of our detractors, most especially the argument that liberal arts education does not prepare you for a job and that it, thus, amounts to a waste of your time and money. Then, I launched into my counter-argument. I told you that in 2013, thirty percent of the jobs in the American economy involved doing something that no one had even heard of twenty years earlier: I usually mentioned app engineers and big data analysts as examples of occupations that had emerged in the past twenty years. Then I cited a study published in 2014 of work done at Oxford University that predicted that 48% of the middle class jobs available today would disappear in the next twenty years because of digitization. Then I asked you and your parents why anyone would want to go to college and study how to do just one thing, when the chances were at least 50% that the job you were studying to do would not be done by human beings in another twenty years. It is madness, I argued, to believe that

you can choose one narrowly defined major and believe that you will have employment for life on the basis of that major.

I then concluded my talk by saying to you that all the rapid job destruction and job creation taking place in the economy made a liberal arts education more important than ever. I told you that the proof of this was clear from regular surveys that employers fill out asking them what they most want when they hire a new college graduate. The three things, in order, are

The ability to communicate clearly and effectively

The ability to solve problems

The ability to work well in small groups with people who are not like you.

BINGO!! These are, after all, three things that every student at Randolph learns how to do:

Your professors insure that you speak and write well

Every Randolph student learns to solve problems both “critically and creatively”

Every student here works in small groups with a very diverse group of other students.

Thus, in fact, despite what politicians and media pundits have been saying, we are the best place to get a college education. Sure, you might get a job upon your graduation if you attend another kind of institution, but how long will the job exist? What kind of career path will you have? The odds are that your career path across an entire lifetime won’t be a good one if you do not have the broadly defined skills that you gain from a liberal arts education.

But now that I have rehashed my stump speech for prospective students, I want to use this rare opportunity to move past those arguments and tell you the bigger purpose of this education. I want to tell you the real reason that we offer you a liberal arts education at Randolph College.

But wait, you say! Are you changing your story? Did you lie to us? A liberal arts education isn’t the best preparation for a lifetime of meaningful work?

My answer to all those questions is “No, I did not lie to you. Everything I said is true.” This *is* the best possible preparation for a lifetime of meaningful work. I stand by that assertion 100%. There is no better way to prepare yourself for a lifetime of work than the education you will receive here. But that’s not *why* we do this. The fact that it is a great preparation for a lifetime of work is only a happy accident. We provide this education for a very different reason.

We offer you a liberal arts education to give you the opportunity to become a free person. But what, you ask, does it mean to be a free person? In its original context in European antiquity, liberal arts education was designed as the education for people who were already free; that is to say, they were not slaves. These were the people who were the legal citizens (or members of the demos) and they were,

thus, expected to participate in the democracy. This education was meant to prepare people for that responsibility, the responsibilities of citizenship.

Reshaped in the American context, and hammered out over more than three hundred and fifty years of experience, liberal arts education has come to have a more expansive definition. For one thing, we have expanded our definitions of what citizenship means. We fought a Civil War in this country to give legal freedom, civil rights, and citizenship to the enslaved people, but it took us another hundred years to pass the legislation that permanently gave blacks the right to vote. During those hundred years in the democratic wilderness, we also finally decided that women could have the vote.

But even before women or blacks could vote in this country, both groups were offered the opportunity to receive a liberal arts education. But my point here is not yet to dwell on the stains on our national soul that are evidenced in our long inability to realize the dream of political equality and full legal freedom for every person; rather my point is that already at least by the mid-nineteenth century, we did not mean in America that liberal arts education was meant solely for those who had legal freedom and the franchise. By the late nineteenth century, we already meant that liberal arts education is meant to give you the *tools* for attaining your own freedom. For it was almost always the intent of American liberal educators that when they offered this opportunity to people who did not already have the full rights of legal citizenship that a part of the freedom those students would seek would be their own full political rights...one can look, for instance, at schools like Oberlin College and see this explicitly in the objectives of the donors, administrators, and faculty. Schools like Oberlin offered women and blacks a liberal education with every intention that the tools they were providing would be used to seek civil rights and legal citizenship.

But the freedom on offer was only a part of yet a larger sense of freedom.

My own first, rough attempt to explain what we mean by this larger sense of freedom is to say that it is the freedom to shape your own life. That you can choose what you believe, choose what you do for a living, can choose how you understand your own place in the world. Thus, we are not trying to tell you that you should be a Christian, a Methodist, or an atheist or agnostic. Nor are we telling you that you should strive to have a high-paying job or become a lawyer, doctor or banker. We do not believe that you should be a Democrat or a Republican, liberal or conservative. These are all choices that we believe that you must make for yourself.

What we do believe is that to make those choices well and wisely that you need to have a broad understanding of the world. You need to understand science and how scientists reason. You need to understand literature and art. You need to understand history. And you need to understand how social scientists view the world. There is a limit, of course, to what you can learn in four years, but we believe that you can learn enough about *how to* learn while you are here at Randolph that you will be able to continue to think creatively and critically. We believe that you will have acquired the tools of freedom after your four years. At the very least, you will have the tool belt you need, with the first few tools already there for your use.

In the end, you may choose to believe the things you were raised to believe or that you believed when you first arrived on campus; but we believe that you should choose those beliefs for yourself.

At its heart, however, the concept of freedom is much more complex than simply choosing your beliefs. Consider, for instance the fact that just because you have chosen your beliefs doesn't mean that they will be respected by others. It does not mean that the laws of your nation will accord with your beliefs. Thus, you may end up being forced to live under laws and social strictures that violate your fundamental beliefs. Likewise, the culture in which you live and function may not value what you value. Your beliefs may be tolerated, but not embraced, by the dominant culture. Thus, having chosen what you believe, you may find that you need to advocate for the change that you want to see, or work simply to have your own dignity recognized. The barriers to widespread acceptance of your point-of-view may lead to the need for creativity in expressing and sustaining yourself.

This is why so many people with liberal arts educations do such fascinating and interesting things in the world. While many take traditional jobs and pursue traditional careers, and do it in important ways that change and improve other people's lives, many decide to do new things that have never been done before and which change the way that we live together. A wonderful example of this is our own Kakenya Ntaiya who went on after her graduation and founded a school for girls in her home country of Kenya, as well as founding a campaign to stop female circumcision. Kakenya is fighting for the freedom of others. Likewise, I can tell you the story of Carla Alexander, who will receive the Alumnae Achievement award next month. While working as a professional librarian, Carla began volunteering at her community's Free Clinic, which provides health care to the working poor, those who do not qualify for Medicaid because they have an income, but who also do not have health insurance through their jobs. In her work, she discovered that there was an urgent need for palliative care for people with HIV/AIDS, but that the Free Clinic could not find providers who understood what was needed. Despite having been an English major here at Randolph, Carla enrolled in medical school in middle age in order to study what that palliative care would look like so that she could come back to her community to provide it. Not only is she now a practicing physician with a specialty in helping provide a fuller, freer life to those suffering from HIV/AIDS, she is recognized as a world authority on the subject and is widely published.

As you can see, Kakenya and Carla have gone beyond simply selecting their own values. They have also gone beyond simply securing a good income and entering a good profession. They have found ways to create and sustain freedom.

And that is why we provide liberal education here. It isn't simply because it is a great way to build a lucrative career. It is so that you can be free. It is so that you can help others be free. We are part of one of the longest running projects in support of freedom in the history of the world.

Which brings me to the conclusion of my remarks. I started writing these remarks in July, before the eruption of violence in Charlottesville that cost Heather Heyer her life, and which left many injured and the country traumatized. In the immediate aftermath of that violence, I believed that I would need to throw away what I had already written and to start over again. But what would I say? After reflecting on

that question for a week, I realized that the best thing to do would be to go ahead with what I had already started.

The most obvious reason for my decision will, I think, be quite clear to you. The domestic terrorists who gathered in Charlottesville...white supremacists, neo-nazis, and the Ku Klux Klan... want to deny people their freedoms. Their purpose is to deny freedom, civil rights, and full citizenship to others. Because of that, we at Randolph stand against everything they stand for. Although liberal education started 2,500 years ago as an education for people who already had freedom, during the last 350 years it has become an institution devoted to helping people become free. In that project are called to oppose race hatred, bigotry, and all ideas of innate supremacy.

In closing, I want to reflect one step further about our common commitments to freedom and to each other. The freedom we cherish is not something that is available only to a limited set of people; available to some, but not to others. This value has deep roots in many traditions. Buddhists call that root bodhichitta; Christians use the Greek word agape; in Hebrew, one would say chesed; secular humanists simply call it loving kindness. But whatever word you use, and whatever tradition you claim, if you claim that you are a liberally educated person, then you claim equality for all humans. In this belief we must stand together; if we do not believe in loving kindness toward others, then the freedom we espouse has no meaning.

To the upper class students in the audience, I say, "Welcome home!"

To the new first year students and the transfer students, I say, "Welcome to Randolph College!"

To all of you together, I am using my one chance to speak to all of you this year to say, "Welcome to the hard work of seeking freedom for every human."

Thank you.