

“An Education for Career and Community”

**Convocation Address by Michael Poliakoff
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Before the Bluefield College Class of 2017

August 29, 2013

It is an honor to be here today at Bluefield College, on this day of beginnings, when the College embraces a new class of students and a new course of studies. I have to say, as I look at the faces of the new students, that I come close to envy. It is not that I envy your youth or your beauty – though you are a very handsome class indeed. It is something else that you have that you may not even recognize.

It is freedom. You have before you the rare gift of freedom to develop your minds and souls under the guidance of a dedicated faculty. You have the freedom to explore new subjects, to encounter new frontiers, to develop skills you may not have known are hidden inside you. Do not blink! The opportunities you have before you will pass away quickly and will be very hard to find again. *Carpe Diem!* Seize the day and use it to the fullest extent of your abilities.

Over 1600 years ago, the scholar and church father, Gregory of Nyssa, pondered the limits of human understanding. He wrote, *“The true satisfaction of the soul’s desire consists in constantly going on with her quest and never ceasing in her*

ascent, seeing that every fulfilment of the soul's desire continually generates a further desire for the Transcendent." (Commentary on the Song of Songs PG 44.1037 B-C, tr. Musurillo) What does it mean to reach the world of pure ideas, the Forms of which Plato spoke?_ How can a person perceive what it means to go "from glory to glory"? This is the exciting world that you, the Class of 2017, have entered. Accept the challenge to let the divine gift of a discerning heart and mind lead you in an unending quest to prepare for meaningful lives of service. Gaining such wisdom and understanding is not easy.

Which brings me to my point, namely that what this Church Father, steeped in both the Bible and the Dialogues of Plato, had to say 1600 years ago, believe it or not, even has a lot to do with Bluefield's new core curriculum.

It would be all too easy for Bluefield to be like most American colleges, sad to say, and let students simply choose what they like to study. Why, after all, require an aspiring scientist to take a course in literature and American history, or a budding humanist to take mathematics and economics, and laboratory science? Here are some reasons why what Bluefield is doing for its students is very special:

- 1) Bluefield will challenge everyone to be intellectually curious, which means exploring unfamiliar as well as familiar paths

- 2) Bluefield recognizes that intellectual discipline is a blessing, nourishment for the mind and heart
- 3) Bluefield has come together as a learning community and established priorities for its academic mission.

I started this address by looking at matters of heart and soul, because that is what matters most in this world and the next. Mark what Socrates said in 399 BCE to his fellow citizens of ancient Athens:

“Men of Athens, I honor and love you; yet I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting anyone whom I meet after my manner, and persuading him, saying: O my friend, why do you who are a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens, care so much about laying up the greatest amount of money and honor and reputation, and so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul” (Plato, *Apology of Socrates* 29d-e, tr. Benjamin Jowett)

Socrates’ words, of course, also pertain to us, citizens of this great nation, who must be a light unto the world. Think, on this first day of your collegiate studies, of the task in front of us.

But with that clear priority, I would be remiss not to note some very practical issues, too. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, all of you can count – on average, on more than 11 job changes over the next 25 years. Some of these will be small changes within a particular career; others will be dramatic, perhaps even unexpected. Bluefield’s new and expanded core curriculum is the best compass you can have for a global job market that is all-too-dynamic.

Bluefield’s new core curriculum, to which ACTA is proud to award an “A” grade, one of only 22 such grades in the entire nation, shows deep commitment to the future of Bluefield’s students and sets an example for other schools to follow.

Bluefield joins a select group of colleges and universities that have made such a commitment. That list includes Baylor University, Regent University, Pepperdine University, Thomas Aquinas College, the University of Georgia, the United States Military Academy, the University of Dallas, and Colorado Christian University.

On top of the core curriculum requirements prior to this year – which already included expository writing, laboratory science, mathematics, literature, world history, Biblical Studies, Fine Arts, speech and physical education , Bluefield has added two more.

The first is a foundational course in American history. To leave college without an articulate understanding of our free institutions and the struggles to gain and to keep them is to be disempowered as a citizen. America is held together not by a homogeneity of ethnic background or of religious creed but by an idea, an understanding of and commitment to principles of freedom that we all must uphold. But as Thomas Jefferson told us long ago, ignorance and freedom cannot coexist. The author of the Declaration of Independence and Virginia's Act for Establishing Religious Freedom was very clear on this point: "The information of the people at large can alone make them the safe, as they are the sole depository of our political and religious freedom." And further, with an unmistakable tone of warning: "Convinced that the people are the only safe depositories of their own liberty, and that they are not safe unless enlightened to a certain degree, I have looked on our present state of liberty as a short-lived possession unless the mass of the people could be informed." Bluefield College, however, will ensure that its graduates are ready for the very real challenges of community and citizenship. It is only the third college in Virginia to require American history of all its undergraduates. In the spirit of Thomas Jefferson, I hope that this small college will help to spark a most wholesome revolution.

And so also the new requirement in economics. This nation is still in the throes of a great recession. It caught everyone napping in 2008, and many would argue that

we have not learned from these troubles that nearly turned into a catastrophe. As one who has worked in higher education for over thirty years, I am ashamed to say that colleges and universities have not helped create an informed electorate: only 4% of the schools that my organization surveyed require a basic course in economics. Bluefield is different.

There should be no mistake about the significance of what Bluefield is doing for the nation. As a nation we face a crisis of competence and a crisis of character. What do employers around the nation tell us? Of hundreds surveyed, 26% found the writing skills of newly hired graduates of four year institutions “deficient.” When asked what they would like colleges to do more of, 89% said more emphasis on written and oral communication; 70% wanted more emphasis on science and technology; 63% sought more preparation in mathematics and statistics. And test results show that employers are not idly seeking more activity. First in 1992 and then in 2003, the U.S. Department of Education tested a large cohort of Americans for basic verbal and mathematical skills. The results for graduates of four-year colleges were nothing short of appalling. 69% would have difficulty comparing viewpoints in two newspaper editorials. An equal percentage would not be able reliably to compute and compare the cost per ounce of food items. Yet more shocking are the findings of Professors Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in *Academically Adrift*: 36% of the students tested showed little or no cognitive gain

after four years of full-time study at college or university. The United States outdistances every other developed nation in per student expenditure for higher education. Yet it has, overall, little to show commensurate with that huge investment.

But today we do not dwell on these national challenges. Bluefield College has stood apart from these distressing trends.

I am so very glad that Judge Richard Bray, the president and CEO of the Beazley Foundation, is here today so that I can express my personal thanks, as a longtime college professor and in recent years administrator and policy analyst, for what he has done to help colleges and universities strengthen their academic programs and ensure a kind of education that prepares students for the challenges of career and community. Under Judge Bray's leadership, the Beazley Foundation has articulated a vision of excellence that is truly transformative. It is a privilege to be part of this thoughtful yet dramatic change in Virginia's higher education.

Among the sayings of the Chinese sage, Confucius, is a terse piece of wisdom, composed of only two characters. It says, "*Born the same, habits differ*" (*Analects* 17.2). You are here today, Class of 2017, at this excellent college because you worked hard in school. You have shown the habits that put you on a lifelong quest

for the things in life that matter. Continue to work with diligence and vision with hearts and minds that are open and free. All around you, you will find able guides and companions for an education that truly matters.