

## Faculty remarks - Professor Robert Bohrer

On behalf of the faculty, let me extend a warm welcome to the members of the class of 2014 and their family members and friends - welcome to Gettysburg.

When I was asked to give this address I was sitting on a veranda in Vieques, Puerto Rico and I thought it must be a mistaken e-mail. After accepting the invitation, I began with the inevitable question: "Hmm, what profound message will I deliver in my seven minute opportunity?" So of course, I thought back twenty-five years to when I was embarking on this journey and was struck by an irony: I was enrolled at a fine institution, was on the campus but felt as though I was making a huge mistake. After much soul searching and a huge plains thunderstorm, I took a leap of faith, left that school and enrolled at a place that I thought better suited me, so my first piece of advice is please don't be like me!

Seriously, what might seem like the flighty actions of an 18 year-old did have profound implications for me: I switched from the "safe" option of an accounting major to my true passions of history and political science. I worked closely with professors who set me on a path to graduate school and my current career and I met my wife with whom I've recently celebrated 20 years of marriage and we have two children. All of this because of a moment of clarity on a stormy night 25 years ago; I took what seemed to be a huge risk and followed my instincts and never looked back.

How does this all apply to the members of the class of 2014? I hope you see that taking risks is the path to intellectual and personal growth. Given the credentials of the members of this class, you are all used to being at the top of the class and being "right" much of the time - it's okay to be wrong. Ask questions, challenge yourself to be better and go beyond the safe approach. We have a varied and interesting faculty here who will be more than happy to challenge, cajole and occasionally irritate you in the name of growth, but we need you to commit to challenging us as well.

This college was founded by risk takers: Samuel Schmucker was an abolitionist who founded this institution in 1832; the land on which Penn Hall stands was donated by Thaddeus Stevens, a so-called radical member of Congress who had the audacity to believe in equality and helped forge the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Well beyond those historical reference points, we have much more recent examples of members of this community who have taken risks and reaped the rewards. Aimee George graduated two years ago and since then has been to Rwanda and South Africa doing amazing things to bring affordable laptops to children whose countries are facing extreme challenges. Another example is Calynn Dowler, a 2010 graduate. Calynn left for Bangladesh in July to spend a year preparing Bangladeshi women for higher education. Despite her background in German language in European politics - the "safe" area in my field - Calynn applied for but did not receive a Fulbright to study European politics and took a risk to help others in the developing world. I admire her courage to take what seemed to be a setback on the Fulbright and turn it into an opportunity.

Of course, there are many more examples and these are just two with which I'm quite familiar. I urge you to chart your own course by taking that class that doesn't "count" for anything in the curriculum but looks interesting and challenging, take advantage of our wonderful off-campus studies office and explore other cultures and societies (as a special message to the young men, don't be afraid to do this before your Junior year), volunteer to work with the Center for Public Service to make a difference locally or off campus. You chose this liberal arts environment for the opportunities it provides and the sense of community we enjoy. As a faculty and college community we will do all we can to help you take advantage of this environment, but it is up to you to take the risks, be willing to make mistakes and turn setbacks into opportunities.

In this place where the history so central to this country comes together and you are engrossed in the events of getting settled in, seeing your parents off, meeting your roommates and exploring your new social setting, it may all be a little overwhelming. I urge you to take some risks that offer great rewards: strike up a conversation with a stranger, explore opportunities for service to others and challenge yourself to question things you think you "know". Prepare for classes as though they are a major investment, because they are; not just in financial terms but also in whom you are and who you will become. Don't fear failure, but rather always look for opportunities in both your successes and setbacks. From my experience I can honestly say that what seems like a small step at the time may lead to a difference in your life and those of others. Welcome to Gettysburg!