

# Zachary Helm '05 Speech to the Class of 2016



Thank you for that introduction, Mr. McQuarrie. It is a great honor to be here, getting to see so many friendly, familiar faces. Let me start by saying, Class of 2016, welcome, congratulations, you made it, give yourselves a big round of applause!... Oh you're done...I was really counting on that lasting 10 minutes...would have been the best speech!

When I was a sophomore at Erskine, I had a World Literature class with Ryan, ah, I mean Mr. Nored (I don't know how long you have to be graduated to get on a first name basis with him, so I'll play it safe). For our first writing assignment with him, Mr. Nored had us start out by authoring the conclusion to our paper, then the introduction, then the body. My initial thoughts when he suggested this were that this guy was crazy and probably needed a dictionary; I mean he had mixed up the definitions of the words conclusion and introduction! However, I soon came to realize he believed himself to be extremely intelligent (as I am sure many of you know), so I assumed that meant he knew the definitions of introduction and conclusion, which of course meant he was certainly crazy!

But as it turns out I was wrong there, too, and his crazy idea was actually a really good one. His logic was that most people spend a lot of time writing a really good introduction, and as they write the body of a paper they get bored with the topic, start to

rush things, and end up producing a sloppy and weak conclusion. He believed that a good ending could make or break a text and that writing the ending first would help focus the thesis and message of the story. It also allowed the author to pen arguably the most important portion of any piece, the conclu-

sion, when they were full of that early enthusiasm for the topic. It's a writing habit that I have come to embrace, so good news, you can all look forward to the end of this speech, not that you aren't already! More importantly though, the philosophy behind this writing style really resonates and makes sense, not just for writing papers but for life in general; it's not how you start, it's how you finish. This opinion is by no means new age or unique to any one culture.

And while preparing this speech, I took some time to reflect on my own Erskine experience and how different my start was from my finish. I remember the awkward 14 year old who moseyed into Mr. Scates's homeroom full of insecurity, doubt, and a complete inability to carry on a conversation with a girl. Only four years later there was an eager 18-year-old graduate preparing for college, optimistic about the challenges that lay before him, and infused with a quiet confidence about his readiness for things to come. Fortunately for my wife, I still couldn't talk to girls but in time I even sorted that out, though she might disagree! Love you dear!

When I look back on those days, I think of the transformation that occurred in four very short years and see a slow start marked by a furious finish. I think if I were to tell my 14-year-old self how he'd grow as a person in only four years, he'd have laughed me out of the room. The

personal changes that supported this metamorphosis came from lessons I had learned while immersed in the Erskine community. The basis for these lessons stemmed from the core values that were silently preached everyday: scholarship, leadership, stewardship, and relationships.

As was the case with me, these tenets have been instilled into each of you every day of your Erskine career, and in part they are the reason you are the people you are today. You all entered high school as nervous teens; it's okay, we can all be honest here, being a nervous teen is normal. You were full of hopes, dreams, and Random Ideas that would later be expressed in your academic pursuits, extracurricular excellence, maybe even a burgeoning band of triplets. Continued successes in your educational, professional, and personal interests rests in part upon your ability to blend these core values into your everyday habits. It's important to recognize how these core values allow you to shape the world around you and the impact it will have on future generations.

Look no further than the importance of scholarship in shaping how our global community functions. You might argue that scholarship ends in the classroom, but I disagree. Scholarship extends beyond the hallways of Erskine as an approach you take in continuing your everyday self-education. In my own educational and professional experience, it has been a thirst for knowledge that allows my colleagues and me to find answers to challenging questions that will change how fresh water is supplied to future citizens of the world.

As a society, we put a premium on being informed, asking questions, challenging conventional wisdom, learning from each experience so we don't repeat the mistakes of previous generations, and pushing the limits of our knowledge. Don't accept being told what and how to think by

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