

Address to Plenary Session of Undergraduate Research and Creative  
Achievement Day (URCAD) Wednesday, April 23, 2008

Greetings Ladies, Gentlemen, professors and students. I am honored to have been invited here today to speak briefly with you about the role research has played in my life after U.M.B.C.

First let me begin with a story of my early years here on our illustrious campus. When I first entered the pearly reddish-brick gates of the Academic-IV and Sondheim hall “arch” – running late to class from a parking spot out by the silo – I quickly settled into the comfort of the University Center pub and rec room...and had a hard time getting myself *out of it* for my classes; hence the reason why my grades were worse in that first semester than any other. At best I was a mediocre researcher and middling to poor writer when I got here, but my strongest trait was a willingness to learn and adjust. Therein lies the first lesson I teach to my own students every year: We all blossom at different speeds and at different frequencies. Learn with an open mind and be forgiving with yourself.

Fortunately I bloomed somewhere between my sophomore and junior years, and by 1992 was on the path of being a History major with a certificate in secondary education. It was shortly thereafter that I completed my first full-scale research project under Dr. Sandra Herbert, a short 25-page exploration of Alexander MacKenzie’s voyage across the vast north American continent, for which I received high marks...much to my surprise and delight.

After graduation, I left the warm embrace of UMBC and set off to “research” the working world. After two years I promptly realized this wasn’t the best topic I could have chosen, so back I came once more, happy to learn and grow as a student and as a person again. It was during my graduate school years that I got the chance to work closely with many of the fine and fascinating professors of the History department, and it was during those three years that I honed my research skills and refined my writing skills, under the tutelage of Professors Grubb, Ritschel, Jeffries and of course, Boehling. During the school year 1998-1999, I spent an arduous semester in the confines of the National Archives State Department records room, the library of Congress, the graduate school offices and a place I saw rarest of all: my bedroom. After an exhaustive search of eighty-five print sources and two boxes of diplomatic dispatches and letters, and an even more exhausting journey through writing a 170+ page thesis, I passed my thesis defense and emerged with my Master’s Degree. More importantly, I had gained confidence in my ability to construct a well documented, solidly researched magnum opus *which very few people would ever read again*.

So, there we are. Now, based on that comment you are probably thinking that the research you do will not have any impact on what you will do after your tenure here at UMBC, but that is an incorrect assumption.

First and foremost, the ability to conduct solid, sound and complete research requires the formation and mastery of certain skills and traits: namely, patience, diligence, thoroughness, patience, inquisitiveness, and did I mention patience? It requires a certain level of self-analysis and self-understanding, and it requires that you learn how to accurately document

and recognize the thoughts, deeds and ideas of others; that is, give others credit for what they do while discovering your own voice in your own field of study. Researching also develops within the mind of the researcher the ability to discern fact from fallacy, to tease a coherent argument or story from a seemingly incoherent mass of data, and to utilize a healthy level of skeptical thought. There has not been a day that has passed when I haven't used *those* things.

Good researchers dig deeper for truths. Good researchers are less likely to accept trivial or anecdotal evidence used by others to justify spurious or dubious positions. Good researchers also gain a deeper understanding for how we as a culture gather knowledge and truth from the increasingly chaotic mass of information swirling around us in the modern world, as well as an appreciation for how difficult and elusive truth or concrete answers can be. Good researchers find answers no one has yet found, and questions no one has yet thought to ask. Can you really not see how those skills could be useful in so many professions? Of course you can.

I would argue – based of course on solid and reliable research conducted under only the most stringent conditions and controls with the most vigorous methodologies – that the skills you gain *in the process of doing good research* are vastly more important to you than the actual research itself. Let's face it, no one is likely to approach me anytime soon and ask me what reaction the American consulate in Haiti had to the appearance of a German gunboat off the coast of Port-au-Prince in May 1904. The skills and traits I outlined earlier, however, are of vast importance to employers, spouses, and for the patience part, kids. (Any parents out there

know what I mean.) In our culture of 30-second news stories and ultra-condensed thoughts flying by at the speed of light, where the prevalent assumption is that the average person can't hold a thought any longer than the average rock can, I personally believe the world could use more people with the traits of a good researcher. But I digress.

The ability to do good research has other practical applications. I never look up any piece of information without looking at multiple sources. I am also confident that no matter what the problem or issue, I can obtain the information I need to understand that problem or issue if I want to put in the effort. **This is true whether I am trying to ascertain the best way to teach a lesson, making a life-altering purchase such as buying a home, or when I am trying to figure out the best way to raise my daughter.** In short, I use my research skills every day, and I have no doubt that my years of learning good research techniques here at UMBC prepared me to be a smarter consumer of products and ideas. I also know that if I decide to get my Ph.D., I will be prepared.

In my case, research is also directly related to my job. You see, I, like many in the audience here today, am an educator of young people. I teach them every day the very same skills I mastered here at UMBC; how to differentiate reliable from unreliable sources; how to navigate complex ideas, arguments, and concepts; how to appreciate that deeper understandings are better than superficial ones; and if you will forgive my crass and crude vulgarity: how to develop their own inner "bullcrap" radar. Then of course there is the daily research that goes into the writing of lesson plans, be they lecture notes, group readings, or power point presentations. By way of

example, it would have been exceptionally hard to discuss Lady Murasaki's The Tale of Genji with my classes yesterday without some background research into court life during the Heian period in Japan.

Lastly, and most importantly, I teach them that *they*, the young 15-year-olds that they are, are capable of sifting through the ideas, thoughts, and assertions of others and formulating them in a *unique way to make them their own*. If knowledge is the collective property of the whole of humanity, individual research is adding your own voice and your own angle. Who knows, maybe one of you out there will discover the cure for a disease, figure out a new way to tackle social problems like poverty or crime, or break open one of those “history mysteries” by finding new and hitherto unanalyzed historical data. In any case, it will make you a better citizen, employee, family member, and maybe even parent. It has for me.

But it all starts here and now. Congratulations to all of you, and thank you again for listening to my humble musings.

Good day!

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