

2013 Convocation Address

Dr. J. Michael Bitzer

Let me begin by adding a belated “welcome” to all of our students—

even though we’ve been a week into classes,

more than a few weeks into athletic practices and choir rehearsals,

and clubs and organizations are ramping up their activities.

In other words: it’s a busy time of the year,

and it’s only the end of August.

And because we have so much going on in our lives now, we often need short-cuts to manage all that we have to do.

And in our world of tweets and texts, we often live by acronyms:

- ASAP
- OMG
- LOL
- YOLO (if you don’t know what Y-O-L-O stands for, well, S-M-H, because you only live once).

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We even have our own short-cut lingo here on campus:

It's not just Catawba, it's Cat-U!

Which dorm do you live in? Well, if you're in Salisbury-Rowan, you know it as S-R.

But there's are a couple of new acronyms that you will be hearing more about this coming year,

and that's what I want to talk about this morning:

The first is SACS—

no, not SAC, or the South Atlantic Conference that our athletic teams compete in,

but SACS.

SACS stands for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

It is the group that gives Catawba College its accreditation—

or the ability to say “your education and your degree means something.”

SACS gives your education the stamp of approval.

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Every ten years, SACS requires that colleges undergo a reaffirmation of their accreditation—

to make sure we are actually doing what we set out to do.

And as part of this re-accreditation,

Catawba is charged with developing a Quality Enhancement Plan—or, in short-cut lingo, a QEP.

What the QEP is designed to do is enhance student learning—

meaning, whatever we do should bring about changes in:

- Your knowledge
- Your skills
- Your behaviors
- Your values

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In addition, the QEP must relate in some way to Catawba's mission:

“an education rich in personal attention that blends the knowledge and competencies of liberal studies with career preparation.”

That is who we are—that is what we do best—

and that is what we will be focusing on

in the coming year.

Actually, much of this work began 3 years ago now.

In 2010, the Catawba faculty adopted, by a vote of 50-3,

“A Statement of An Institutional Philosophy of Education.”

Don't worry, we have a short-cut lingo for that as well:

“The White Paper.”

What the White Paper presented is a belief in what Catawba graduates—

you, our students—

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should have gained in your education here. What the White Paper lays out is what will make Catawba graduates successful in their lives:

- Catawba graduates must use knowledge of many different kinds
 - We have a new curriculum, that focuses on a variety of areas, such as:
 - Historical & Social
 - Creative
 - Interpretative
 - Quantitative literacy
 - Scientific knowledge
 - To name a few areas.
- In addition, Catawba graduates must have a core set of skills and capabilities that travel with them as they go from one job to the next.
 - Because when you graduate, you could have over 10 jobs over your professional lifetime.
- So you need skills that travel with you, skills like:
 - Communication—written, oral, even visual
 - Critical and Creative thinking
 - Analytical and Problem-Solving Skills
 - Teamwork and Leadership
 - Ethical decision-making

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And it's not just what we, the faculty,

think you need—

it's what employers want and demand in their employees.

Let me give you two examples.

Last December, a survey of employers found that job candidates were lacking most in:

- written and oral communication skills
- adaptability and managing multiple priorities
- making decisions and solving problems

In fact, in this survey, employers want colleges to

and I'm quoting here,

“break down the false dichotomy of liberal arts and career development—because they are intrinsically linked.”

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Employers also said that colleges “should approach career development as career exploration”

and that colleges need to guide and support students “with the right mix of solid liberal arts skills and content knowledge.”

The second example: in April of this year, another survey found:

- 93% of employers surveyed said college graduates’ must “demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems
 - And that these are more important than their undergraduate major”
- 82% of employers want more critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills
- 80% of employers want more effective communication, both orally and in writing

Folks, this is what employers want in today’s college graduates—

Unfortunately, they are not getting these skills in college graduates.

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So what do we do about that?

How should Catawba make you,

our future graduates,

the best prepared to meet what employers want?

That is what the White Paper was written for,

and that is what our QEP should be about.

In thinking about our QEP,

a group of faculty and staff came together to

review our mission statement,

the White Paper, and

considered the strategic plan that President Lewis has presented to the campus.

This group of faculty and staff came together to propose four possible ideas for our QEP.

First, Career Awareness Within Majors:

Our mission is explicit:

blend the skills and knowledge of liberal
education with career preparation.

How intentional are we about career awareness in
the classroom?

What strategies might we employ
to help you, our students,
discover the connections
between what we teach
and what we need to prepare you for?

Just yesterday, a study was released

that said graduates in traditional liberal arts
fields—like English or philosophy—

could add complementary skills, by taking a few
courses in data analysis, marketing, or graphic
design, or doing an internship

and if they do, what could they get?

Nearly doubling the number of jobs they can
compete for upon entering the workforce

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and adding six thousand dollars to their average starting salaries.

Sounds pretty good.

Second, Communication + Digital Capabilities:

Or what one faculty member described as Multi-Modal Communication (MMC, for short)

This addresses some of the top concerns that employers want and are not getting in college grads.

And it could help in other areas as well:

there is a direct link between effective rhetoric and critical thinking, which is another interest of employers.

We could expand beyond written to include oral, visual, even digital communications.

Third, Academic Student Support Services,

or what one faculty member described as a “Center for Academic Excellence & Engagement”

We already have several initiatives that address this idea already on campus:

- The highly regarded Writing Center
- The newly expanded Math Center
- Supplemental Instruction through Student Affairs, and
- Even subject-specific tutoring.

Could we develop a plan focused giving you, the students

a highly-personalized learning pathway

to make you successful and better prepared.

The Center might also provide opportunities to establish new kinds of academic resources.

For example, students could seek assistance for mastering new technologies:

- editing a video
- building a website
- creating blogs
- data visualization

Fourth, Globalization & Foreign Study

We cannot escape the fact that you are
the products of a global environment.

One of the skills that employers clamor for is the
ability to work well with people who are different
than yourself.

Viewing the world macroscopically

and through the eyes of others

would contribute significantly to that ability.

Could we combine globalization with service
learning?

What about internships with companies in the global
marketplace?

Could we combine globalization with digital
communication?

With sustainability and environmental awareness?

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These four possible topics:

- Career awareness in the majors
- Multi-Modal Communication
- Center for Academic Excellence & Engagement
- Globalization & Foreign Study

Could be the focus of what SACS asks of us in our QEP—to enhance student learning.

So what do we want from you, our students?

We want your input.

You have heard what employers want:

now we, the faculty and administration, need to hear what you want.

Over the next three weeks, we'll be asking for input and ideas on these topics—or maybe other topics.

One of the best ways to share your ideas and comments is through Blackboard and the SACS course—

and give us your thoughts about these ideas.

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We'll be having more conversations about this throughout the coming year.

It will be a busy year,

with SACS, QEP, the Strategic Plan,

and many more activities,

consuming our time and our energy.

But what we can't afford, in the life of Cat-U,

are short-cuts to these ideas.

We need the full understanding of how we can better prepare you,

our future Catawba alumni,

to face the world that you will enter.

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And we hope that,

with this year's efforts,

we can say that we are GTG—good to go—for

fulfilling Catawba's mission

to prepare you, our students,

to reach your highest potential.