Greetings

Thank you, Dean Lewter.

President Dorman, Provost Brown, platform guests, faculty, staff, and students, I am honored today to deliver the Convocation address and to welcome the Class of 2019 to Georgia College.

Class of 2019! One thousand, four hundred and eighty students strong! Welcome to Georgia College! You are now official members of the Georgia College Bobcats Family. We have been anticipating your arrival since March, and it is wonderful to see you all together and to begin the new school year.

Introduction

Coming to college is one of the great rites of passage for young adults in this country, and now it is your turn to cross this much-anticipated threshold. Finally you are here! You have accepted your admission to Georgia College, registered for classes, attended summer orientation, and purchased your extra-long sheets, Keurig coffee makers, and Georgia College spirit wear. Now that you have tweeted about the summer reading assignment, posted college pictures on Instagram, packed your things, said good bye to your parents, met your roommate, and spent your first night away at college - now that you have done all these things and you're almost ready to begin your first year - I have a question for you. And that question is not why you came to Georgia College. Today, I am asking you to explore a larger Why: a question of cause and meaning that requires thinking deeply about yourself and the larger world. We will frame that question around three important topics - you, your major, and the career you hope to have. What is your Why? Why did you choose to come to college? Why did you choose the major you’ve chosen? Why have you chosen a particular career path? Why, in other words, are you doing what you’re doing?

Right now, you may be saying to yourself, “I’ve never really thought that deeply about myself or my career.” Or perhaps you’re thinking, “Doesn’t she already know the answers to these questions? Doesn’t she already know why people go to college, major in English or Nursing or Biology, or Accounting, or Dance or Education, or Math, or Environmental Science, or Marketing, or Chemistry?” Some of you may even be thinking, “Now really, doesn’t she know that you cannot pledge Phi Mu or AKA or ADPi or Delta Sigma Theta or Zeta Tau Alpha or any of the other sororities and fraternities unless you come to college? That you cannot continue to be an awesome point guard or a fierce middle hitter like you were in high school or future SGA president if you don’t come to college?” Or, more to the point—“Does she not know my mom? Does she not know my dad? If she knew them, she would not be asking me why I came to college. She would know that there is no way that I could do anything after graduating from high school other than go to college.”

Denard-Convocation Speech 2015

“Discovering 'Why': Georgia College and the Value of a Liberal Arts Education”

Convocation Speech. August 14, 2015

Carolyn Denard, Associate Provost and Professor of English

Georgia College, Milledgeville, GA
Discovering the Personal Why

Okay, I get that, but today I am you a think-deep, why-does-it-matter-to-you question – a question about your passion and what you value. I don’t want you to accept my reason, or your parent’s reasons, or U.S. News and World Report’s reasons, or any of the reasons that are short-lived or come from someone or something else. Those reasons may be good, but they don’t push you to the larger “passion, value, what-matters space” that I am encouraging. You are beginning something big and exciting today, and over the next four years, I want you to remember today – Convocation - when we took a pause, took a step back in the midst of all this excitement, and thought together about “why.” This year, I want you actively to begin to discover your Why—an answer that goes beyond an objective reality, but an answer that says something bigger about the human you—what you value, what has meaning for you. Students who can articulate this, who can actually write down the answer to this question, the recent research of Jordan Peterson tells us, are more likely to remain motivated, finish school successfully, and achieve their goals.

College is just the right time for self-reflection and discovery. Psychologists say that young adulthood (that 18-22 year old time frame that you will be in while you’re in college) is “the most dynamic developmental period of our lifetimes, rivaled only by infancy in terms of rapid development.” A lot is about to happen here in terms of your growth and development in the next few years, and I want you to use the Why question, this Discovering Why title as a way to come to know more about yourself, your goals, and your passion. Knowing why can be very satisfying: it can help you develop self-agency and self-understanding and help you achieve great personal satisfaction in your life; it can help you know what you want to say “yes” to and what you want to say “no” to. It can help you make successful interventions in your life, in the lives of others, and it can help you find solutions and inspire innovations. So, I want you to raise your Why antennae today and keep it up for the next four years in order to intentionally engage in discovering a Why about yourself.

These moments of self-discovery might happen in places you least expect, so you have to pay attention and be open to discovery in the world around you as you seek to find out something about yourself. It might be the why of your fears, your biases, your assumptions; the why of your stresses and anxieties, your self-image and sense of self-worth. It might be in finding the answers to large and small questions that you have been trying to discover about yourself for some time. This quest for personal discovery might be about something as simple or as profound as discovering the why about your name. I mention the last example because I want to share the experience of a young 22 year old cousin that I met for the first time many years ago at a family reunion. Her name is Ardella. And this was a moment of Ardella discovering a why about herself that left a profound impact on me as an observer and probably more than anything else influenced the title of my talk today.

Ardella, who in 1998 was 22 years old, had just finished college and was attending her first family reunion. The reunion had included an opening program revealing the family tree where her great-grandmother, who she did not know and had never met but who shared her name, was at the top of the tree as the family matriarch. During the weekend of the reunion, she met many Ardellas from different families who were 1st, 2nd, and 3rd cousins of hers and all different ages—there was a 50 year old Ardella, a 15 year old, a 5 year old, and most recently a 3 month old. Having been the only girl with that name in her immediate family, in her neighborhood, and in her school in suburban Maryland, this was
something of a shock to her. This “Ardellas- everywhere” moment of the family reunion was beginning to have an impact. At the closing banquet when the evening was almost over, after she had met all these different namesake cousins and heard the loving and heroic stories of her great-grandmother, Ardella stood up and told her family she had something she wanted to say. Then with lots of deep breaths and tears in her eyes, this is what she said: “All my life, I have hated my name. All my life, I have wished that my name had been Jennifer, or Ashley, or Michelle or some other girl’s name that would have sounded cool in middle school. I was always reluctant to tell people my name,” she continued, “and wondered so many times WHY, WHY did my mother name me Ardella. No one in suburban Maryland where we lived had, or had ever heard of, that name. My mother’s saying that was the name of her grandmother never satisfied me; I had not met this great-grandmother, and I had always found a reason not to come to the family reunion. Well this weekend, I have discovered why my mother named me Ardella, and I have come to see how much this name means to everyone here and what a gift of heritage my mother gave me. I will leave here tonight loving my name.”

It was a powerful moment, transformative even. Ardella discovered the answer to an important why question at a family reunion by showing up, being present, and paying attention. I tell this story because it showed me and Ardella the value of knowing why.

In college, you might have a similar personal discover in a history class or during long talks with a roommate or reading a Flannery O’Connor novel, or watching an August Wilson play, or completing an experiment in a biology lab. You might already know deeply and assuredly who you are, and the experience and the choices you have to make at college will only help you affirm again and again who you are and what you value. What I want to do today in this talk is to remind you, at this important stage in your life, to be open for that possibility, lean in to discovering the answer to a why question about you personally that will help you grow during these years, that will help you shape or affirm your personal identity.

**Discovering the Why of Your Major**

In addition to discovering the why questions that lead to self-discovery that are bound to come with college as you learn new things about yourself and as your experiences here-- in class and out-- cause you to question old assumptions, beliefs, and values, I also want to encourage you to discover the why concerning the second most important thing that you will do here: choose a major. I want to make it clear here that the why question about your major is different from the why question about your profession, which I will talk about later. If you want to be a history teacher, for example, there are two why questions implied here: why history and why teaching. If you are a history major, you need to discover why history matters, why the subject matters. If your major is chemistry or geography, or accounting, or nursing, or dance, or English, or whatever major you chose-- and even if you are still undecided and still trying to decide, before you do-- you need to stop and ask yourself an important question: Why? Why does this subject matter to me, and why is it important in the world? What is the contribution of that discipline to our understanding of the world and to ourselves?

I was an English major in college, but when I began as an undergraduate, I had not yet developed a true sustaining answer for why English. All I knew was that I did well in high school English classes, I loved grammar, I enjoyed reading and writing. That was
It wasn’t until I was in graduate school that I finally was able to see the value of English on a broader scale. Understanding that the constructions of reality reflected in novels and plays and distilled in poetry could help us to see our world and understand humanity in ways that, without poetry or novels, we could not see resonated deeply with me. Reading Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* helped me understand something about my father that I would never have understood as fully without reading it. Reading Archie Ammons’s poem “Loving People” helped me understand something clarifying about what to expect from people you love. Literature mattered to me and to the world because of the life lessons it held, and finding the answer to that why question has sustained me all these years, even when I wasn’t teaching English. I am sure that professors in every field have similar stories of why they love their discipline, of why it matters to them and to the world, and would want to share them with you.

Consider Math Professor Robert Blumenthal’s response to the why question about Math. When I asked him the Big Why Question that mathematicians seek to answer, he said this: “The question that continues to intrigue mathematicians is why is it that a purely logical system (math) which is functioning within the human mind resonates so closely with the physical world? Why is it that the human attribute of reason is so closely tied to the physical universe? What does this tell us about our place in the general scheme of things?” Note that it was not solving a hard calculus or geometry or algebra problem that was the source of the big Why question - problems that they can no doubt solve easily - but the answer that mathematicians want to discover is something about the human condition - our place in the universe and math’s relationship to it. When Professor Blumenthal and I talked more about it, it made math seem mystical. It was an exciting conversation, and I left it thinking, “Why didn’t somebody tell me about this puzzle in mathematics earlier?” All these years, I had been just trying to solve algebra problems on the page. I didn’t even know about this other reality. Maybe if I had known that reality, I would have been more engaged with those problems on the page. And sharing this with you now is not to make you think that all of this choosing of a major is way too difficult -- I am just encouraging you, as you embark on this new academic journey, to begin to try to discover answers to bigger questions. That is the discovery enterprise about your major that I want encourage in you—to find out why your major matters to you and why it matters in the world.

**Your Professional/Career WHY**

At Georgia College, we are committed to helping you to not only have a rewarding experience in your major field of interest but also turn that experience into a rewarding profession. We have many ways to help you do that: Career Counseling Center, Internships, Leadership Programs, Scholarships and Fellowships Office, Student Organizations, the GIVE Center. We want you to be proficient in a field, but we also want you to understand the profession you choose in the context of the larger world. We want you also to be able to understand why the work of your profession matters. Again, why do you do what you do? Why does nursing, teaching, writing, dancing, researching, or practicing medicine matter to you? Why does it matter to the world? What is the relationship of these disciplines to your life and the life of others? More and more as you will find over the next four years and as more companies are finding out daily, having the broad knowledge base that provides the why and the in-depth knowledge that provides the competencies is truly what will be the complete package. Employers want graduates who do their work well and who also know...
the larger purpose behind why they do it. There is a difference in being able to say, "I want to be an Accountant in your firm because I have a degree, I have experience, I balance books well, and I understand debits and credits" and being able to say, instead, "I want to be an accountant in your firm because I value accuracy and consistency, and understand how important it is in an organization for the financial accounting to be done efficiently and well." This is just a snap shot of the kind of distinction I am making between knowing the “what” and the “why” of the profession you choose.

Knowing why your work matters helps you do your work better. It is the fuel that will keep you committed and sustain you during the rough times and bring you tremendous personal satisfaction when you experience the good times of meaning and affirmation in your profession. You might not be there yet, but keep your antennae up, keep searching, keep asking yourself the why question that exists behind the work.

Knowing why brings clarity and purpose. In the midst of building competencies over the next four years, we also want you to develop and be able to articulate your purpose. Begin the conversations today that help you get at your Why, not your parents’ Why or the recommended Whys of current job publications, but your Why. And we have a sea of professors, advisors, career counselors, student ambassadors, community assistants, administrators, and staff here who all want to help you do that.

Why a Liberal Arts Education at Georgia College

By now you must saying, “Okay, I get it, but how do I do this? How do I discover why? What are the tools I need to discover the answers to the questions about myself, about my major, and about my profession? What do I need to know in order to answer these questions?” I am happy to say that the tool you need for discovering “why” is exactly what we will offer you here at Georgia College: a liberal arts education. A liberal arts education is a broad approach to learning that exposes you to many subjects which, together, provide the contexts and connections that you need in order to understand what you value and why your work matters. At the same time, a liberal arts education allows you to study more in depth in your major so that you develop competencies that are required for a profession. The breadth and depth of this “T-Shaped” education is widely championed by President Dorman and constitutes a clear visual image, a metaphor for the dual approach to educating students that we follow at Georgia College.

Answering the question “Why?” requires this kind of broad knowledge of many fields: economics, music, art, psychology, and sociology, and a tapestry of courses and experiences that help you make the connections you need to answer your Why questions. Why requires engagement with the world outside of college and time for reflection. Why is about getting closer to human resonance, human meaning, human possibility. Why allows commitment with full understanding—it allows the opportunity for the “aha” moments of our lives.

The liberal arts education that you will receive here includes both the breadth and the depth that support that kind of inquiry. And what I like most about Georgia College is that we are intentional about our mission. A liberal arts education at Georgia College is the “secret sauce” that will distinguish you from other graduates who have not been intentionally engaged in this kind of academic work. We take our mission seriously, and we are willing periodically to self-examine ourselves in order to make sure that the tools in our liberal arts toolkit stay sharp and relevant. This year, in fact, we have just launched a new
Liberal Arts Renewal Project that will allow the entire campus to participate in discussions about how we can better deliver on our mission. We want you to be a part of that, and I encourage you to take part in those discussions.

You will have many opportunities to discover your Why – things like studying deeply in a major and understanding the broader contexts and making meaningful connections - here at Georgia College. But your job is not just to ask why and leave it at that. What I am proposing here is not a passive exercise. The title is Discovering Why, not Asking Why. What I am proposing is that is that you be engaged in an active discovery over the next four years in classes, conversation, in research and writing, in playing and leading, in volunteering, in traveling --fully engaging all that Georgia College offers so that you might come to know experientially the answers to your why questions. And if you are deeply committed with vision and imagination, you might be inspired enough, not just to answer a why question but, to pose the “Why not?” question that can lead to change and innovation, new solutions, and new discoveries.

Ultimately, what we want to develop in you is a healthy curiosity about yourself, your work, and the world. As one commentator on a recent Forbes Magazine article about the value of a liberal arts education sums up nicely: “The most important lesson anybody can take away from college is how to be curious. It doesn’t matter what your degree is in, if you learn how to learn, your personal growth and skill set will continue to expand long after school. If you walk away with a degree but no curiosity, you are basically frozen.” At Georgia College, we don’t want you to become “frozen” learners. We want you to become the kind of learners who are fluid, dynamic, and engaging -- who not only ask the background questions but who are willing to engage in discovering the answers to them.

Why and The Other Wes Moore

When you were accepted to Georgia College, we asked you to read a common book, The Other Wes Moore, which you will discuss in breakout sessions after Convocation today. This book is your first academic assignment, and it is an opportunity, we believe, to put into practice the broad interdisciplinary perspectives provided by a liberal arts education. It allows for the kind of engagement and analysis that we want you to practice during your college years.

The Other Wes Moore is a book so riveting, in its narrative construction, so intriguing in the comparison being made between two men with the same name, who grew up in a similar neighborhood, who are roughly the same age, who are the same race, but with such different life outcomes, that the “Why” question comes automatically. It is the question that drove the author Wes Moore to write the book, and it is the question that he boldly answers by its end. There are many whys in this text, and we get a good look at how these whys—personal, institutional, systemic—impact individual lives and where interventions could be made. We wanted you to read this book because it is an interesting book about individual choices, but also because it is an instructive example of how systemic and community structures-- or the absence of them-- can make or break a life. There are many why questions that Wes Moore raises in this memoir: Why narrative? Why prison vs Oxford University? Why do race, poverty, health care matter? Why is there the allure of drugs and the absence of fathers? And no doubt, many others that you will probably bring to your discussions today after Convocation. I hope that you will have meaningful discussions that
get beyond the linear, objective reality of the book to the broader implications of the two lives chronicled in *The Other Wes Moore*.

**Conclusion**

I have shared with you this morning what I hope will be one tool in your toolkit for how to begin the journey of engaging in a personally meaningful and professionally rewarding college experience. We are so glad that you have come to Georgia College and that you are now part of the Bobcats family. You are the Why of our work. Your being here the next four years will help us affirm, again, why we work in a college environment, why we care about what happens to you while you are here, and why we want you to be successful. We hope that the next four years will be years of important discovery about yourself, about your major, about your life’s work, and that you will be able to apply in the outside world what you have learned and the kind of learning that you will have engaged in here at Georgia College. And when I ask you the why question four years from now, when you are ready to graduate, you will be able to give an answer that is informed, relevant, and inspiring. I hope that you will have been successful in every way – that you will know your personal Why, gleaned through the meaning of your name or through the absence of previous biases or anxieties, that you will know, not only the “what” of your field but, “why” your major field matters to you and to the world, and that you will be on your way to a career filled with purpose and passion. We are here to help you discover the answers to your Why questions, and we can’t wait to get started.

Welcome, Class of 2019, and congratulations!