

As the Somerville scholar, I've been asked to speak to you about the value of my experience and liberal arts education. I'm excited to share with you what I have gained through my time here. I loved so many of my classes in both majors, my minor, Westover and DELL, and I am incredibly grateful for and look up to the faculty who have taught them. Even when there were classes that I didn't enjoy, everyone has at least one, I do see their value, and I appreciate the extra time and effort that many faculty members had to put into those classes for the students who were not as excited as we should have been. It's a lot harder to teach students who are unexcited and just going through the motions, I know that, and I apologize on behalf of all of us.

While I could easily make this a lecture on psychology or criminology or philosophy, or maybe even sociology if I tried hard enough, that's not what any of you were here for. So, let me tell you about the other things that I gained in my time here

I rediscovered a love for learning and, for the first time, actually believed I had a talent for it. I spent a lot of my earlier academic years feeling inadequate and like I was not actually smart. That I was just an impostor who had convinced enough people to tell me I was smart. Choosing to come to school of my own volition has played a huge part in my journey to rediscovering a love for education. I cannot emphasize enough that if I had been forced into this, I would not have succeeded nearly as well as I have, and I would certainly not have loved it. To any parents (or future parents) in the audience, hear me when I say your child will be much more successful if they choose what to pursue on their own, than they will be if you push it on them or make that choice for them. I am living proof of that. Choosing to come here and give learning and school another shot was the best choice I could have made for myself, and the opportunity to curate my education towards things that actually fascinate me has made so much of this journey a joy. I am thankful to everyone who encouraged that little voice in my head that wanted me to push myself. Together, we have actually proven to my incredibly stubborn brain that I do have what it takes to succeed, and I can, and I will.

I also gained many critical thinking skills in my time here and found the strength to question. Though this is not the first and will certainly not be the last time you hear about critical thinking skills in relation to a liberal arts education, their importance cannot be understated. I came to this university fully accepting the worldview and beliefs of my parents, and I am leaving this university with a different set of beliefs and values that I believe because I can defend them. I have learned how to look for and understand the evidence and data rather than simply accept what I am told. I credit those skills largely to my social psychology and philosophy-based courses, and I encourage everyone to explore these areas further, student or not. It makes a world of difference to be able to analyze the world around you and understand the making of a sound argument. I think it's fair to say both of those skills are becoming increasingly important and increasingly scarce, and I would have been a very loud, very ignorant part of the problem if I had not been open to this experience and didn't have so many people willing to pour their knowledge,

time and effort into my growth. A liberal arts education is not just an education. It is a process of self-exploration and growth that is only made possible by a community that cares enough to invest in one another. I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have been a part of that. I would not have become this version of myself without it.

The last, but certainly not least thing that I have gained from my experience here is my voice. No I don't mean my voice was stolen by an evil sea witch when I traded it for legs. There was a time not very long ago when I made myself very small out of fear and discomfort, and sometimes I still want to. What I have learned here is not how to make that feeling go away, though I'm trying, what I have learned is that it doesn't have to stop me. It is with that voice that I want to say how incredibly disappointed I am in the state of the school that has given me so much, and the experience that students coming behind me are having. I see a statistic all over the place, including the homepage of the university website, that 91% of our graduates would choose Lynchburg again. As a soon to be Lynchburg grad, I would not. If this was still the school I came to my freshman year, that answer would be different, but this is not the same institution. I am not a business expert, nor do I claim to be. I cannot speak to the financial situation of this school, but I can speak to conduct. Regardless of financial necessity, there is no excuse for the callous lack of empathy and support continuously displayed in the past year. This is the institution that took a hatchet to the lives of many faculty and staff who dedicated much of their lives to this community. This is the institution that has left those who remained to pick up the slack, created a climate of fear for their own jobs, and allowed stress, overworking, and a continued lack of support to detrimentally affect them. They have been left with fewer colleagues and more students in every class.

This is the institution that then claims that it is more student-focused now. That the changes have been made to not negatively affect students. I assure you, they do. Who do you think makes up the student experience? Faculty and staff. They are who we see, faculty and staff are who teach and support us, who fight for us. Our faculty make all of the difference, and our faculty are drowning. Maybe not all, and those who are don't say it, especially to students, but we are not blind. We see it, we care, we worry. Some of us now second guess something as simple as asking for help, because they already have so much on their plate, and so we don't. Tell me again that it doesn't affect the student experience.

This is the institution that no longer prioritizes languages and arts like theater and music, instead these programs and liberal arts faculty appear to be first to the chopping block. Over half of the programs cut were arts and humanities, and it stands to reason that the faculty cuts followed a similar trend, though many of you may know better than I. Westover is also changing, but how still remains incredibly unclear. Liberal arts? Liberal arts is supposed to be as much about diversity of topics as it is about diversity of people, and when you limit one you limit the other.

On top of all of that, this is the institution where some fail to uphold the standards of transparency they set for others, and then, in the face of scrutiny from students and faculty alike, and acts like you can't tell the difference when the evidence is right in front of you. Students have sought understanding directly from our administration, but failed to receive any real answers.

To each and every one of you, who don't like me standing up here giving voice to this issue, thinking I shouldn't because "it's not my place", "it's not my problem" or "it's not worth it" or you're uncomfortable, if not me then who? Look around you, not just at the state of our school, but at the state of our nation, the state of the world. Keep waiting for the right person to say something and see what happens. Protecting and speaking up for those who are mistreated and actively silenced should be everyone's problem, so I will make it my problem, not just because the people in this community deserve it, but because how could we ever hope to make a difference on a larger scale for those who need it if we can't even stand up for our own community. Complacency makes us part of the problem, so don't be. I owe so much to so many people here, and if my voice is the best support I can give to those who have given me so much, that is very little to ask. I hope that the University of Lynchburg becomes an institution that prides itself on its treatment of faculty and staff, recognizing that the success of its students comes from the health, vitality and success of a strong teaching staff, and those who support them. Most of all, I hope this university can find its way back to the liberal arts education that I loved and would recommend in a heartbeat. To the leaders in this room, please move forward from this moment with kindness and transparency, giving our community the opportunity to do the same and rebuild with empathy and understanding.

Lastly to anyone receiving an award tonight, and to those who have supported them, I want to extend special congratulations and recognition to each of you. The fact that you are despite the struggles we have faced as individuals and as a community speaks volumes of your dedication and resilience. Congratulations on your achievements, even if it is not one you get to share tonight.