Perseverance

By Elizabeth Vardaman

My office window in Burleson Hall faces the Quad, and one of my great pleasures early in the fall semester is to watch students and faculty members moving past, unaware of the privilege I am taking to study them. Some students often rush or even run down the sidewalks. Professors stroll by, seemingly exhilarated by the last lecture or the promise of things to come. Many undergraduates plod past, talking on their phones, texting, or listening to iPods. They do not notice the couple holding hands in the green-and-gold swing under the large oak tree (but I do!). The faces of students may be turned up toward the clouds or down toward the announcements chalked on the sidewalks—you know the postures—but every person seems intriguing and compelling from my vantage point in this room with a wonderful view.

Of course, we do not get to know one another when there is a panel of glass between us. But you will not have such barriers in the classroom, and as the unique, multi-faceted person you are, the responsibility is yours to determine when and where you wish to be known. Some students are very private or perhaps shy; they may be fighting a hard, personal battle or have other reasons to maintain distance, while a significant percentage of entering students open conversation with their professors and fellow classmates readily. Many faculty members at Baylor are willing and even eager for you to make appointments during office hours. Our past experience assures us that we will be enriched by meeting you, and you may also be glad you came to see us. We are here to clarify academic issues and help you succeed in our courses, first and foremost, as you experience your initial semester here. But beyond those important introductory interactions, many members of the Baylor staff and faculty are also concerned that you think about how your interests, talents, and skills might intersect meaningfully with specific majors and how those majors might equip you for the profession and career that seem to fit your heart and mind. Our overarching aspiration as a community is—to use our marketing phrase—that you will “find yourself at Baylor.”

That will entail much hard work on your part inside but also far beyond classroom activities. The still, small inner voice does not compete well with all that is “drive-by” or cacophonous. So you may find that the greatest insights into understanding yourself revealed through quiet conversations with trusted friends, or at times when you slow your world down, meditate in church, or engage in reflection, contemplation or prayer. How will you mobilize the courage, the tenacity, and self-scrutiny to become the fullness of the insights you gain? How will you transform the initial failure you experience on a quiz in your favorite class into proactive planning that will ensure better performance on the next quiz? You will spend much of your formative years living out such large and small questions. As Rainer Maria Rilke so famously explained in Letters to a Young Poet:

Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you could
not live them. It is a question of experiencing everything. At present you need to live the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day.

You will, if you are vigilant, ultimately grow into the answers, for college is full of questions and is the privileged time you are being given to begin finding out not only what you want to do with your life but why you are choosing this direction or that profession. If you miss that vital aspect of the journey you are embarking upon here, you will have missed the larger and broader distinctive of a college education at Baylor.

Some students, of course, have encountered significant challenges or turmoil and known the need to be seriously introspective about who they are and where they are going long before entering college. One of our recent engineering graduates is a case in point. When he was in high school, his family was very supportive but because their finances were severely limited, they did not always have the money to pay their electricity bill. Thus, this young man studied by the light in the car many nights. Juan entered Baylor on a Gates Milennial Scholarship and never seemed to get his priorities mixed up. He bid for national scholarships and won two prestigious awards in science and engineering, the Goldwater and the National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship. His definition of fun consisted of weekends filled with not only completing his assignments but also reading supplemental materials and thinking about principles that might apply across disciplines.

Juan also spent time talking to his professors, weighing their advice, and filling out applications for summer programs. His efforts were rewarded handsomely, with five options for summer internships one year (he accepted to M.I.T.). He did his graduate work at Berkeley after maximizing every day, every night, at Baylor. For Juan and many others, college was not about checking off a list of requirements; college was a gift he would not squander. Here he linked his life to the profession he wanted to enter and built strong friendships. He was given opportunity to use his skills on an international mission trip to Honduras where he and others installed a generator and brought electricity to a village. He also played lots of pick-up basketball with friends. His research garnered accolades, and he left here not only with a degree but also with intellectual property, self-confidence, and a very bright future indeed.

Through my years in the dean’s office in the College of Arts and Sciences and in my work with various national scholarship programs, I have had the privilege of coming to know well many students who have maximized their academic journeys here, perhaps failing at something that was the catalyst for discovering their passions, utilizing their best skills and affirming their calling or purpose through prayer, meditation, and determination. One young woman, who won a major award, was a journalism and international studies major here. She spent a year in Armenia as a Fulbright Scholar studying social media and blogs there. She spoke to my University 1000 class before she left for Armenia, encouraging them “to learn about all the different departments, projects, programs and organizations on campus” and to get involved early in a wide variety of programs and service. She stressed that students will not be able “to maintain a perfect balance between the social, academic, spiritual, physical and emotional aspects,” so even they (and you) should strive for balance. Only participating in that program at which you can be perfect may paralyze you and stifle
your creative energy. Ashley has figured out how to manage the perfection gene and is studying this year for a master’s degree in journalism at Columbia.

Another Fulbright Scholar, an ethnomusicologist, spent a year in Nepal, helping establish a music curriculum for the schools and a music association for the teachers. He found his calling in music and culture. I am certain no ambassador for the United States could have done more to serve a country than this remarkable young man did through music in Nepal. Other students have attained equally astonishing results in business, languages, medicine, education, mathematics, social work, international studies, environmental science, literature, linguistics, and other fields. The point is—they have begun the hard work of becoming the selves they were created to be.

The poet-priest Gerard Manley Hopkins (in his poem “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”) understood how important it is for you, in the sanctity of your own heart, to probe for and value your unique place in the larger scheme of things. Hopkins says: “Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells, / Crying What I do is me: for that I came.” Then he elaborates: “I say more: the just man justices; / Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces; / acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is— / Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men’s faces.”

Those aspects of your selfhood that enable you to extend grace or justice to others will push against your fears, imperfections, pettiness, self-deception, and burdens. This is a lifelong tension. We cannot see your internal battles as you enter or leave our classrooms. Your heavy backpack, scholarly airs, or happy-go-lucky façade may be masking a very insecure woman or man, but faculty know that you are human; therefore, we know you struggle, just as we all do. (We were young once, too. We made mistakes. We traveled down wrong paths on our way to the right ones!) And we understand your inner being is a motley assortment of strengths and developmental needs. Sometimes the needs can be very serious, almost overwhelming. We hope you or your circle of friends and family does not experience great personal loss or illnesses while you are a student here, but when tragedy strikes, Baylor has policies and resources to help and many trained professionals extend love and counsel. When I was an undergraduate here, my best friend, my mother, died, and my world turned upside down. My professors, my church, and friends helped me, over many months, to stay the course and eventually begin concentrating again on completing my degree and finding my future.

Baylor is, finally, a special place where you may mature, discuss your faith tradition with others if you wish to, search out your inner callings, and make progress toward your professional dreams. Not everyone maximizes these facets of our school, but many do. Through prayer, through journaling, through encounters with others, through stepping outside your comfort zone, and through wrestling with the challenges presented by scholars and teachers in every division of the university, you may come to a place where you begin to appreciate your own best gifts and ways of being. This is the place to become your best self. Aim high. Even the spires on our buildings are cheering for you. We offer you experiences, relationships, and skills that will become cherished tools for your journey both into the known and unknown.
Here are four suggestions that may provide insight into your skills, talents, values, and character, as well as bring success to your academic experience if you persevere in them. Successful students here have asked me to share these with you:

**Do not put off your studying until late at night. Find a place where you can immerse yourself in your work and not be interrupted for at least two hours at a time during the day.**

Some students choose libraries where they can spread their materials out on big tables. Others say our coffee shops are the best places to work. There are many attractive, quiet spaces in Sid Richardson Bldg. And if you have trouble disciplining yourself, make appointments with the Success Center staff just down the hall; they can help you become proactive in all of your courses. Many successful students also keep a record of how much they study each week, making sure they are staying caught up in all their assignments. Another group of experts who can help you immensely are our librarians. Talk to them about your research assignments. You will be amazed how many resources they can and will provide you.

**Learn to write, speak, and listen well.**

The Writing Center in the basement of Carroll Science Building is open to everyone. If you take rough drafts of your assignments there, experts will help you think through the way you have the material organized, the sources cited, the content developed for various audiences, and the clarity of your grammar. Notice the successful writers in your classes and learn from them as well. Also, push yourself to enhance your ability to make oral presentations. Many of the principles that are essential for effective written work serve you well when you are called on to draft a speech. By practicing your delivery and volunteering to make presentations in classes you will enhance your communication skills immeasurably. Consider joining organizations that will motivate you to take leadership positions and provide you opportunities to learn how to speak effectively, how to listen, and how to mature as a communicator.

**Read, read, read.**

You are a citizen of an increasingly complex society and polarized world. Among your classmates are people who will become voices for civil responsibility, discover medicines and cures, minister to victims of human trafficking, ignite our imaginations in problem solving, serve in our nation’s military corps, create new and more efficient business systems, produce insightful movies, design better technology, cleanse our waters, direct new artistic endeavors, educate our children, improve our state and federal agencies, effect new laws, feed the hungry, lead our churches, lift our spirits, and inspire us once again. Whew! To do these things, we urge you to read deeply in the classic texts that demand concentration and commitment. Read newspapers and journals that agree with and contradict your prejudices. These years at the university are your last best chance to
expand your capacity to think, to open your mind to new and diverse ideas, and to immerse yourself in the great books of all times. Czeslaw Milosz reminds us in “And Yet the Books” that long after he is gone, “books will be there on the shelves, well born, /Derived from people, but also from radiance, heights.” He died before Facebook or Twitter. But I hope he is right.

**Make an appointment to meet a professor.**

Don’t allow yourself to communicate only by email with your teachers. There is a smorgasbord of academic delights your teachers can introduce you to. Perhaps you will want to find out how to become involved in research or what summer internships are available in your field. There are so many things your professors know that will enrich your first year here! And there are so many ways to find yourself at Baylor! Ask us about some of the students we stay in touch with. Almost all professors at Baylor continue to cheer for and advise students whom they have mentored. The poet James Wright expresses in “Blessing” what so many of us feel when we reminisce about “our” students and this place: “Suddenly I realize / That if I stepped out of my body I would break / Into blossom.” (Green and gold blossom, of course.)

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