

Beyond Graduation: The Lessons Learned from Being a Student
in the College of Arts & Humanities

by

Taylor Coffman

Bachelor of Arts in History and
minors in Asian Studies and Political Science

Good afternoon, and welcome to the much anticipated 2015 graduation ceremony!

Robert Orben, an American humorist and speechwriter, has observed that “A graduation is an event where the commencement speaker tells thousands of students dressed in identical caps and gowns that “individuality” is the key to success.” While individuality is certainly an important part of success, I would like to discuss the lessons I have learned at Eastern, that I believe are beneficial to success after graduation.

As a student in the College of Arts and Humanities, specifically the History Department, I have learned many things that will follow me far past graduation. Not only did I learn how to research, analyze, and theorize why people acted as they did in the past, I also learned other valuable lessons. I’ve developed three beneficial life lessons that we can all apply to life after college. These lessons include not being afraid to speak up, either by asking questions or voicing your opinions, never allowing yourself to simply say “I don’t know” when presented with a question you are unsure of, and knowing that in order to grow you must step outside of your comfort zone. These are lessons we should all carry with us as we transition to our new post EIU life.

One of the greatest challenges I faced during my time in college was cultivating the ability to speak up during class. I have always envied students who quickly raise their hands to answer a question or participate in a class discussion. That is just not me. I was always afraid –

and I'm sure I'm not the only one – to say something “stupid,” or to have my thoughts rejected by the instructor. They say there is no such thing as a stupid question, but we all know, there truly are *stupid questions*, and I refused to be the one that asked one of those. However, I learned that asking questions is an important part of the learning process. Ask questions to learn something new. Ask questions to clarify information. Ask questions to help out another student. At least one other person had the same question, and that individual will silently thank you for being the brave soul who dared to ask a question. Asking questions is something that one should not be afraid of, because it is something that is important in all aspects of life and one that transcends the classroom.

I also learned that when you are presented with a question, you should not simply say, “I don't know.” This is something I recently learned but have come to believe is very important. Even if you think you do not know the answer, always recall whatever information you do know about the subject, and try to formulate a response based on that knowledge. Think of it this way, if you are at a job interview and are presented with a problem or question that you are unsure of, you do not want to shrug it off and say “*I don't know.*” You have to find a way to formulate a response based on previous knowledge to give an answer that will communicate your intellect. With that being said, I thank you, Dr. Foy, for requiring me, as well as the rest of the class, to impersonate key figures that we discussed in class and forcing us to give educated answers to all the questions you threw at us. Looking back, it was actually quite enjoyable to formulate how Samuel Adams, King George III of England, George Washington, and Governor William Livingston of New Jersey might have argued about rum, representation, and revolution!

The last, and probably the most important lesson, is that in order to grow as an individual it is crucial to step outside of your comfort zone. If you are constantly living within your comfort zone you are not challenging yourself. Last summer, I studied abroad in South Korea. I was SO excited when I signed up for the trip in February, but when June rolled around and my trip was drawing closer, I wanted nothing more than to cancel my trip and stay at home with my family and friends – my comfort zone. Because my trip was not a faculty led program, I was basically on my own; but once I arrived in Korea I joined a group of approximately 95 other students from all over the world. Still, the first 4 or 5 days I was there, I experienced culture shock--I begged my parents to call the airline and get me a ticket to fly home immediately! Of course, they did not allow me to come home and for that I am very thankful. The knowledge and experience I gained while in South Korea is beyond anything I could have ever learned here in the United States – in my comfort zone. So, I encourage everyone to step outside of their comfort zone. Challenge yourself. Experience the world. Just think, when you leave this ceremony today, you are taking a step out of your comfort zone by heading into the “real world,” and leaving behind what you’ve known so well for the past few years.

So, before I conclude, I would just like to say that what we have gained as students of the College of Arts and Humanities goes far beyond the basic knowledge that we studied in each class. We have learned how to speak and write effectively, how to research, analyze, question; the list goes on and on. Just remember to use everything you have learned during your time at Eastern to your full advantage. Thank you, and congratulations to all the Graduates of 2015!