What Did We Learn?

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It is said that humans never forget anything, that every experience is filed somewhere in the deep archives of our minds. Yet, at the same time, we tend to prioritize some memories over others. There are some things in our lives that are just too significant to be placed on the back shelves of our minds. I think everyone can remember those days in our childhood when we would come home from school and our parents would always ask that same question. “What did you learn today?” Now some days we could tell you exactly what we learned, other days we couldn’t even recall what we had for lunch. Sometimes we would blame such lapses on our own ability to remember or the ability of the instructor to make the lesson memorable. But, the fact of the matter is, we subconsciously deemed some things as not important. Now those days are behind us, but time has not made the question irrelevant. Therefore I would like those of graduating here today to ask the question. What did I learn?

After years of school, surely we must have learned something. I learned how to cite a paper in MLA format, how to conduct scientific research, and how to analyze an argument from a non-bias standpoint. Additionally I learned how to start a project “before” the day it’s due, who not to ask for notes from when I skipped…I mean missed a class, and that reading only the last paragraph of a chapter may not always be the best way to pass a quiz. These lessons are all well and good, but for the most part, they are lessons related to pure academia. For those of us that will be continuing to an even higher level of education, such lessons are paramount. However, beyond academic skills, what can be taken away from all this?
Did we learn anything that can be applied to life beyond the classroom? I learned how to evaluate the positions of people I did not agree with, how to respond to questions I didn’t know the answer to, and how to be dependable as well as dependent on others. I learned who to talk to about my problems as well as who not to talk to about the problems of others. I learned how to connect with those that celebrated me, as well as distance myself from those that merely tolerated me. After 4 years-in Charleston, Illinois-I learned how to get up every day and do whatever needed to be done to make it. I...“We,” here at Eastern Illinois University, learned how to “live.” We learned how to face the complexity that is everyday living and flourish in it. We have learned how to step beyond mere survival and existence. We have learned how to walk in these, our times, and thrive. The fact that we stand here as proud graduates is a testament to the understanding that we are not satisfied with the bare minimum of life, but that we have a desire to be more. We have learned to be more. And that is a lesson so significant, that it will follow us for the rest of our lives.

Now, there are those that would ask how college could possibly teach a person how to “live.” They would question how a campus environment could truly compare to the real world. What could we have possibly learned that could ever prepare us for the society we are about to face? To those who would pose such questions I would like to provide an answer. I say that in learning how to live, we also learned how to resist oppressive intimidation. All of the people that have withstood the test of time in order to receive a degree from this university are well aware of the circumstances before them. Every student at this university is aware of the risk. It is no secret that the job market may be unsteady. It is no secret that economic stability can shift the status of anyone’s life; at any time. No matter what the degree, we know that anything
can happen. Yet, despite this knowledge, all of us refused to embrace the mentality of hopelessness or give into to the terror of the unknown. The fact that we continued to press toward the mark, is proof that we learned to ignore the shadows of despair and the fear of failure.

When we enrolled in this school, we took on the character of EIU. Each and every one of us decided to embrace the identity of the panther. And though the panther isn’t the biggest cat in the jungle it is still a force to be reckoned with. You see panthers have great agility and strength, like Dallas cowboy quarterback Tony Romo. They have strategic hunting methods, like Tuskegee Airmen Charles Hall. They know how to train and take care of the next generation of panthers, like The Sunshine House President and CEO Roseann Drew. And Panthers rest at the top of the tree like Illinois Governor Jim Edgar. Eastern Illinois University has taught us how to be more than de-clawed house cats. We have been taught how to live in this jungle of a world. That is what we learned at school and that is what we will carry with us for the rest of lives.