

## John Whelan Valedictorian Speech Spring 2012



Good Afternoon, Members of the Board of Trustees, President Dugan, Distinguished Guests, Members of the Administration, Faculty and Staff, and Fellow Graduates. I'd first like to briefly thank some people very special to me. Dr. Sorrentino, Bro. Owen, Dr. Galgan, and Dr. Berman—each of you gave me guidance and lessons that went beyond the classroom, and for that I am grateful. I will never forget the example that each of you have set for me. Thank you. More importantly, I would like to thank my family, especially my Mother and Grandmother, for their love and support, without which I would not be here today. I love you.

My fellow graduates, we live in a world driven by specialization and opportunity cost. Whether we are going on to graduate school, the workforce, military service, or other endeavors, the skills we learn over the next few

years will specifically serve the field that we enter. No longer will there be the small 'l' liberal learning that the College offered. For most, literature, history, and philosophy will have to make room for technical training. One can only do something well if one takes the time to know it well, and the world needs professionals. This is dignified work, which one should be proud of.

We should realize on this Graduation Day, however, that it is liberal arts education that made Saint Francis College special. The strong core curriculum, particularly the nine credit requirement in philosophy, gave us the best of both worlds. Philosophy, such as in Plato's *Phaedo*, teaches us that there is meaning beyond our immediate surroundings and more profound questions which must be asked. As helpful as technology may be, our life is not defined by laptops, iPhones, and Blackberrys. Philosophy liberates us from such things. Even though some of us may not realize it yet, this was the hope for our education at Saint Francis.

This is not to say that Saint Francis has not prepared us for the practical life as well. In fact, by having both, we will have the tools necessary to become ethical accountants, ethical businessmen, ethical doctors, lawyers, and teachers, so that we can go into the world to serve Christ faithfully. What do I mean by ethical? I mean that we cannot judge what is right only by what we want or only by what the profession dictates or demands. How could we base morality on such things, especially since technology allows the world to change at such a rapid pace? What is right can only come from what grounds reality, what is immutable, and beyond the changing world (the Forms, if you will). Access to the immutable can only come from right reason cultivated by liberal education.

Besides the ethical considerations, it must be asked: how practical could an education be that is not rooted in the liberal arts? The skill that you spent years cultivating could tomorrow be replaced by a machine or computer program. Studying that which never changes, the common experience of all men throughout time, is the only thing which could provide the adaptability to thrive in such an economy.

We should all be grateful that Saint Francis has done a much better job than other institutions in preserving the liberal arts. The reason why it has done such a good job is because of what some perceive as the Saint Francis' weaknesses. Our College is not, after all, a prestigious university with a large student body, campus, and dormitories, but a small commuter college. Such qualities, not the least among which is our Catholic identity and mission as humbly safeguarded by the Franciscan Brothers, have prevented St. Francis from falling into temptations as other college and universities, even Catholic ones, have. This temptation is to think of the college or university as just a campus, that the edifice of the campus is what defines the institution. But what should really define a college is whether its students' souls are nourished. While St. Francis' campus may not be the marvel that some other colleges' are, through liberal education, it nourishes the souls of its students; because of this *we chose well* for coming here. Hopefully, St. Francis will continue to nourish the souls of its students for many years to come. Congratulations and God Bless!