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From the President: On the Liberal Arts and the Lesson of Steve Jobs

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On the Liberal Arts and the Lesson of Steve Jobs



If you really want to know how Colby is doing these days, spend time with young alumni. I've been doing that for some time now, beginning with my travels to thank Colby alumni and friends for their support of the Reaching the World campaign. It has become a welcome part of my routine, when I go to cities for College-related events, to include in my schedule a breakfast meeting with alumni who graduated one to 10 years ago. Because I have been Colby's president for better than 11 years, I feel particularly connected to this group of alumni and especially interested in what they have to say about their time on Mayflower Hill and how they have fared since they left.

It won't surprise you to hear that the news is mostly good. Almost without exception these young alumni tell me that Colby prepared them well for the challenges they have encountered. What is even more exciting to me is the fact that almost to a person they agree that among their most important advantages are the basic intellectual capacities that we prize so highly at Colby—the capacity to communicate, to think, and to exercise creativity and imagination. Their most common source of sorrow about their time at Colby is that they wish they had taken even more advantage of the opportunities on offer here. All of which adds up—despite some very legitimate and deeply held views about the ways the College could improve—to a solid vote of confidence in the residential liberal arts experience, including the value of learning the intricate social and emotional calculus of living in a small, tight-knit community of very intelligent, and intellectually passionate, individuals.

Listening to them, probing here and there to understand fully their sense of the gains they made as students, I become ever more deeply committed to this kind of education in this kind of setting.

So why am I about to focus this essay on a college dropout? And why, furthermore, did I welcome the Class of 2015 and new transfer students to Colby this fall with a paean to the very same man? Well, because sometimes when the mold breaks you learn something.

Or, to put it another way: think different.

The night Steve Jobs died I read—on my iPad—John Markoff's moving eulogy in the *New York Times* and wrote to a colleague: "In some way I cannot define, I am connected." As we all saw in the days that followed, a great many people felt that way, for different reasons and with varying levels of unease about it.

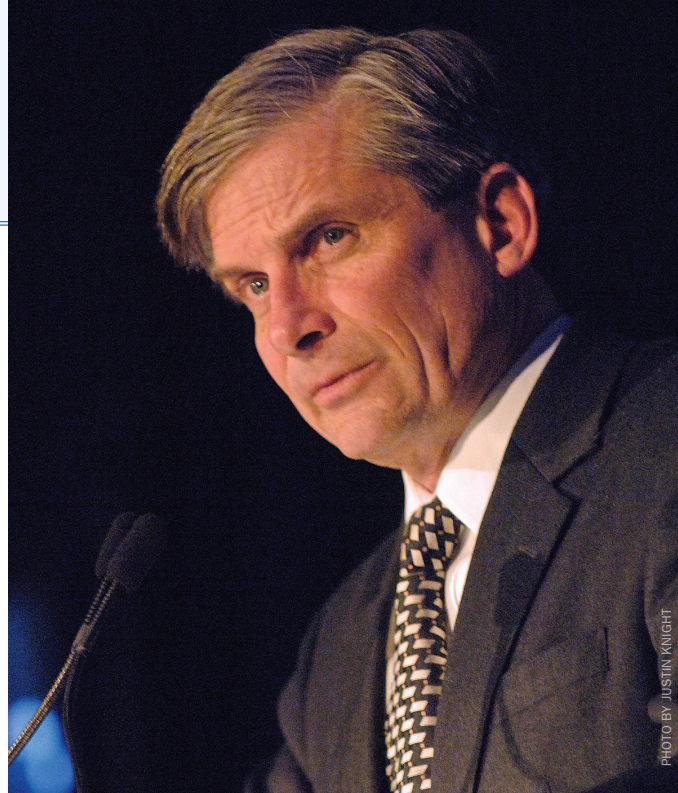
My connection to Jobs was both personal and professional. Not personal in the sense that I knew him; we never met. Personal in the sense that he influenced the way I live my life—hyper-connected, yes, with all the negatives that can entail, but also hyper-aware, hyper-empowered, and hyper-in-tune with the ways in which elegance can be brought to bear on technology's form and function.

The professional connection is equally deep, and not simply because of the iPad that goes with me everywhere. Steve Jobs's life and career have meant a great deal to me as I think about, and tell students about, the value of the liberal arts.

Jobs enrolled at Reed College after high school and dropped out after one semester. He stayed in Portland for a year or so after that and audited a few courses, including an art history course about calligraphy. Here's what he said about that experience in a 2005 commencement address at Stanford University:

[The calligraphy] ...was beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can't capture, and I found it fascinating.

None of this had even a hope of any practical application in my life. But ten years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me. And we designed it all into the Mac. It was the first computer with beautiful typography. If I had never dropped in on that single course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts. And since Windows just copied the Mac, it's likely that no personal computer would have them. ... Of course it was impossible to connect the dots looking forward when I was in college. But it was very, very clear looking backwards ten years later.



Jobs's account of the revelatory effect of his encounter with calligraphy is important for another reason: the critical role that his aesthetic and creative powers played in his success as a leader and innovator. And that points, in turn, to another hugely important dimension of the liberal arts experience at Colby. One of our chief purposes is to help students cultivate their imaginative and creative powers. We do so in part by acquainting students with various expressions of human creativity across time and cultures. This happens most often and predictably in the arts and humanities, of course, which explains why we insist that students have a deep exposure to these forms of knowing and living while they are at Colby. Like Steve Jobs, we too, in a somewhat different sense, are in the business of beauty.

I expect I will have to stop talking to students about Steve Jobs fairly soon. The world he helped create moves swiftly, and the students will have plenty of other fodder for reflection on where they have been, where they are, and where they will go. What I do know, and what the young alums I've met know too, is that the richness of this time here on Mayflower Hill doesn't need Steve Jobs (or me, for that matter) to prove itself. It will become for today's students, as it has for so many generations of students, the root and branch of their future lives. ©

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There's a lot worth considering in that passage: first and foremost, the admonition that you never know what will be meaningful or useful. I think most of the young alums with whom I sit down to breakfast would agree with the spirit of Jobs's reflection and with the corollary proposition that current students' predictions about what they will be doing 10 years after graduation are wrong. Exploration—opening oneself up to brand-new things—is one of the key imperatives of the liberal arts education. And in a setting like Colby's, exploration is a requirement.



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