

Fellow graduates, friends, family members, New College faculty and other UA staff... It is my honor to stand before you today as we celebrate the achievements of the May 2015 graduating class from both the New College Undergraduate Student Program and New College Life Track Program. Today is a day of great excitement as we celebrate the completion of our studies and step forward into our corresponding futures, all of which are bright and full of possibility. Yet, as we spend our last few moments together as a New College community, I find that today also calls for a measure of reflection and introspection as we remember the experiences that we've had while students of this interdisciplinary studies program and the University of Alabama. I do not have adequate words to convey my gratitude for this program, my pride in myself and my fellow graduates for what we have accomplished, and how my experience here has changed me for the better. However, I will do my best to capture the essence of the New College experience. In the spirit, I ask that you would let me share with you a story ...

Four years ago, a bright-eyed, but nervous young woman decided to embark on a journey that she would never forget. She packed up her things, said her goodbyes and arrived at the edge of a great river, let's call it the great Crimson Tidal Waters. Along the shoreline, she spied an array of empty boats. Hundreds of other people crowded around the larger, well-stocked ships. On each hull was a different name, "Engineering, Biology, Music, Philosophy, English, History, and more." The people were directed by guides who called out, "Graduate Study this way! Pre-Law over here! Careers in Business and Industry straight ahead!" The woman hesitantly approached one of them... "I think I know where I want to go," she said... "But I'm not sure of where to begin? I'm fond of the natural sciences, but I'm also drawn to cultural studies, music, and Spanish... What can I do?" The guide replied, "I appreciate your enthusiasm, but each journey is already mapped out with the most direct route to a destination. It's much safer that way, so no one gets lost or turned around. If this is the future that you want, you'll have to choose."

The woman puzzled over what to do... "How do I decide between the things that I love and the place where I want to go?" Suddenly, she spied a guide holding up a different sign. This one said "Canoe of Learning." As each person approached, the guide would escort them to a single person canoe, and help them push off into the water. Curious, she approached the guide and shared her dilemma. "Can you help me?" she asked in final desperation.

Her guide smiled, took her hand and pressed into it a compass and map. "I cannot guarantee that you'll know where you are going, or that you'll end up

where you originally planned to go, but I have faith that your passion will drive you to move forward as you direct your own path. There will be guides to advise and assist you along the way, but we encourage you to explore wherever your Dionysian tendencies take you.”

Over the next four years, the woman explored. She tested her Spanish ability in Latin American countries, studied community medicine in Ghana, interacted with students from around the world, and learned how cultural values shape belief and experience. She developed an interest in maternal wellbeing, and the doula ideology as a nonmedical labor companion that provides mothers with the emotional and psychosocial support to have an empowered birth experience.

While nervous at first about her decision to pursue a career in medicine, her unique experiences helped to confirm and validate her goals. On her journey, she learned that health involves not only the biochemical processes of the body, but also the psychosocial forces that drive it in alignment with cultural values. She fell in love with medicine’s ability to connect people, to bridge cultural divides and foster international partnerships that are sustainable and mutually empowering. While she arrived at the same destination as others who chose a more direct path, she completed her course of study with a worldview that had been changed for the better and an experience that she would always hold dear to her heart....

As I’ve shared this story, my story, with you today, I know that it represents only one out of a wide variety of New College experiences. In our individual journeys, each student has learned to navigate the intersections of traditional disciplines in a way that’s allowed us to follow our intellectual curiosities and passions and develop unique worldview. The members of our 2015 graduating class have studied global policy, organic farming, art as a form of activism, cultural studies, animal behavior, language acquisition, music production, community-based healthcare, sustainable development, and much more. Along the way, our professors and advisors have served as a critical support system, encouraging us to develop depth studies that capture our desire to explore and our passion to enact change. Also, they have realistically kept us on the road to meeting our educational and career goals (unfortunately you *do* have to take a course or two in math or statistics in order to fulfill your general and pre-med requirements). Never in my life have I felt so individually acknowledged and supported in an academic setting as I have experienced as a part of New College. While our course evaluation forms were a nightmare to complete, it was touching to see how professors wanted to know how a course contributed to my “personal intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development.” At New College, *people care...* not just about your progress as a student, but also your development as a person.

Even among our student peers, we are able to share an amazing sense of community and personal affirmation. While our passions may differ, we share the bond of having a desire for adventure and a love for exploratory learning.

With such an amazing support team behind us, it's no surprise that the New College Graduating class of 2015 is filled with such an accomplished group of students. I am surrounded by future Fulbright scholars, graduate students, lawyers, physicians, musicians, producers, sustainable farmers, behavioral animal therapists, social workers, politicians, and the introverted, innovative geniuses that help our world run. My final hope is that each of you would take the experiences you've had in New College, and use it as a guide to continue in your lifelong pursuit of learning. Believe in your ability to accomplish great things, even when you have to forge your own way through the mysteries ahead (and even when people question your sanity for doing so). In this way, you will experience a life that is filled with wonder and appreciation for the endless opportunities that learning and knowledge offer. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail," because "life is a journey, not a destination." Thank you, and in the words of Elle Woods... "We did it!!!"

Amie Lemley, 2015 New College Graduate