



Volume 15

Issue 1 *Sacred Heart University Review*, Volume XV,
Numbers 1 & 2, Fall 1994/ Spring 1995

Article 4

1995

Academic Excellence

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Recommended Citation

Loris, Michelle C. (1995) "Academic Excellence," *Sacred Heart University Review*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol15/iss1/4>

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Academic Excellence

Cover Page Footnote

Michelle C. Loris is Professor of English at Sacred Heart University.

MICHELLE C. LORIS

Academic Excellence

Dr. Cernera, members of the faculty, family and friends of the graduates, welcome to this auspicious occasion which marks our students' achievements of academic excellence.

To the graduates we say ``we are exceedingly proud of you," and tonight, with full hearts, we celebrate and honor your academic accomplishments.

I had been thinking quite a lot about what I should say to you this evening when rather fortuitously one of my students who is a graduating senior came to my office for her final independent study session. As she came into the office and sat down, Becky said to me ``Dr. Loris, I see that you are going to speak to us at awards night." ``Yes I am" I replied. Then earnestly, I asked her, ``Well, what do you think I should say?"

Becky, a very thoughtful and intelligent young woman, stopped to consider her response for a moment and then with a somewhat careful look on her face, she said: ``Well you know it's kind of `tough' out there . . . and all we have is this piece of paper . . . say something positive."

And indeed Becky is correct for the world out there is ``tough." After all, the legacy that has been left to you spans from the horror of the Holocaust to the nightmare of Vietnam. And, as the author Philip Roth tells us, our lives are daily punctuated by facts which are beyond belief.

What happened in Oklahoma is one such fact which leaves our nation stricken in disbelief and grief.

The family of Shannon Lowney, a former resident of Fairfield, Connecticut, could not believe the fact that this young woman was shot and killed at the abortion clinic where she worked.

And Alan Shindler's mother cried in disbelief that her young son, a U.S. Navy man, should have been beaten to death aboard ship because he was gay.

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It is a hard fact to believe that, in Connecticut alone, in one year, more than 24,000 children were involved in incidents of abuse.

I did not want to believe it when a few weeks back, looking at the local paper, I saw the photos of two young African American men, one shot by the other in a drug-related act of violence. I did not want to believe it because the dead young man had, some ten years ago, when he was just ten years old, come to visit my classroom with his aunt who, at the time, was a student of mine.

She had brought her nephew to my class that week because she was taking care of him during a very traumatic time. She explained to me that the young boy's father had been shot in a drug-related incident. This student of mine has since graduated from SHU and gone on to obtain a Master's degree, and in that way she has been able to escape the poverty and misery of Bridgeport's inner city. But I recalled how, when she had been my student, in response to an assignment that I gave which asked the class to write a paragraph describing what the world looked like from their bedroom window, she wrote back only one sentence which said: ``You can never understand what the world looks like from my window."

So yes, Becky is quite right, it is a difficult and even a dangerous world out there. And it is even of some concern that this current young generation has been characterized in the popular media as having been made cynical by too much disappointment and as having become numb to or insulated from their own feelings.

But Becky asked me to say something positive to you. Well, in fact, she herself without realizing it pointed out quite clearly the good news, the ``something positive" that I have to say to you tonight.

And that message is about that piece of paper that you will hold tomorrow and whose academic excellence you celebrate tonight. For you are, regardless of your major or your professional study, as graduates of SHU, you are recipients of a liberal arts education, an education of excellence and an education for life.

This education equips you with the critical abilities that you will need in order to exercise a continuous critique of your self and your society; it provides you with the knowledge and ideas necessary to reflect upon the complexities of the human condition; and it fortifies you with the moral values and ethical principles essential to sustaining the human good in a rapidly changing global and technological society.

First, your study of the humanities, arts, and sciences provides you with the deepening self-knowledge that allows you to place consciousness and feeling against the mendacity and venality that daily assaults your lives.

As liberal arts graduates, you have been taught to hold fast to your desire for authenticity and excellence in all that you are, do, or become. And you can now distinguish and choose between becoming individuals with a materialistic temperament or people with a visionary spirit. You know the difference between those things which inspire the mind and satisfy the soul and those which do not.

As people of ideas and imagination, you understand that maintaining your integrity of self amidst the prevailing carnival of conformity and consumption may challenge you to take risks, even to take the risk of standing alone, to struggle with the difficult and not so easy to answer questions, and to make sacrifices for your convictions in order that you *not* settle for lives of quiet desperation but rather that you live lives of purpose and dedication, fully aware and intensely alive.

Within the context of your liberal arts education, you have come to understand the richness and difference that make up the human self, and you have been taught to honor and celebrate that diversity and difference.

Second, by offering you insight into and a deeper understanding of the complexities of the human condition, your education has strengthened you with intelligence and compassion to stand against the ruination and human calamity that prevail as everyday life.

Because of your education, you are better able to respond to an ever changing post-modern, post-industrial world with an enduring impulse to sustain dignity and respect in all your actions and interactions with each other. The humanistic and liberal ideas that you have been taught empower you to respond to the economic conditions that reveal our spiritual bankruptcy. These ideas teach you the importance of advancing technological knowledge within a moral framework and they enable you to counter the culture of war, violence, and death with a commitment to life.

Finally, your education has equipped you with the moral values and ethical principles needed to resist the dogmatism and fanaticism that debase and degrade our humanity in the forms of anti-Semitism, sexism, racism, homophobia. Because of your education, you can

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imagine and create those attitudes and structures which honor the human spirit and promote the human good. You know, because you have been taught it, that it is in our feelings and in our acts of love and compassion that we impart meaning and value to our lives.

So, to all of you I say, by all means celebrate the excellence of your education, and let that excellence inform all your pursuits, shape all your desires, and inspire in you an enduring passion for knowledge and ideas, as well as a zealous commitment to create human beauty and to sustain human good. For your education teaches you that you are human beings, creatures of God, and that, my dear graduates, makes your life a sacred and a divine thing.

Thank you.