

Your First Exam Question

Dean Drompp, thank you for that very kind introduction.

Hello, everybody. I gotta tell you before I get going that I am absurdly excited, nearly giddy, about the chance to speak with y'all today. Two reasons really. The first one is that 24 years ago I sat where you first-year students are sitting. That was at the Opening Convocation that welcomed the Rhodes Class of 1989! ...Go Lynx! So 20 years or so ago, I had many of the great experiences y'all are getting ready to have. I took the perspective-altering courses, I had the challenging discussions with friends at 1am....I rode the Lynx statue at 2am (fully clothed...that's the best way to do it...because those ears are *sharp*)...I even know by heart the Rhodes Alma Mater that we'll sing in just a few minutes. At every Opening Convocation, I sing it loud and I sing it proud and I sing it with precious little regard for proper pitch. So much so that nobody wants to sit by me anymore. So, because of the fact that 17 or 18 years ago (or something like that) I was sitting where you first-year students are sitting, there IS a very strange time-warp kind of nostalgic thing going on for me today. I will keep the emotions in check because seeing a minor midlife crisis happen at the podium would probably not be the best way for you to start your time at Rhodes.

Reason number 2 that I'm ridiculously excited about this chance to chat with y'all is that in my normal work here at Rhodes I stand a few times a day in front of classrooms with 15 or 20 students in them. As Dean Drompp put it when he introduced me last spring, that's the context in which I tend to, and I quote "do things that many people might consider embarrassing". So I am truly excited for this opportunity in front of a full sanctuary to "do and say things that many people might consider embarrassing".

Since I want to get as efficiently as possible to those embarrassing things and then directly to the alma mater, I'm skipping right to what we traditionally think of as the end of a learning experience, the exam. My guess is that over the summer you've been thinking quite a lot, imagining what college life will be like. If you're anything at all like I was approximately 15 years ago when I was getting ready to start at Rhodes, one of the things you've imagined is what it's going to be like to take your first college exam. I have great news for you!: the chance to compare imagination with reality is probably not more than a few weeks away. But I have more than just that news. I spied around a little bit and I have in my possession a few of the actual questions. Dr. Banerjee is going to ask some of you on his first exam to graph velocity versus time for an object moving along the x axis. On an early exam Dr. Risley will ask some of you to analyze the transitional justice debate as it applies to Rwanda. Dr. Hill will ask some of you about the properties of fungus on an exam....Dr. Hill will ask you on an exam about the properties of fungus. [Someone should ask me about syntax.] All those are exam items that you'll do well to prepare for. But before that, I'm asking you now your first official Rhodes exam

question. It's short but like lots of short exam questions, it can be deceptively difficult. Here it is: What matters to you? It's actually not a rhetorical question. I have green books. You can come up and pick one up afterwards if you'd like to start working on your answer.

You actually don't have to write anything but we really DO want to know what matters to you. And we want to know not to grade your answer or to decide whether we're going to let you graduate. We don't want to know your answer so we can see how well it matches up with ours. We want to know because it is the single most important question you'll address while you're here. We want to know because we actually love seeing the fascinating ways your answer in progress interacts with what matters to us. It is, in fact, crucial to the work of the college that what matters to you becomes a part of this place.

Let me refer briefly to something that initially could seem like an obstacle to your introducing what matters to you into your work here. That is, each semester you'll work with 4 or 5 professors each of whom LIVES a good portion of every day in the topics you'll be studying under her or his instruction. That is as it should be. But here's the risk. If the professor lives in that topic most of every day, there's the real risk that you'll see yourself as a visitor to the topic, or worse, as a tourist. A few years ago while I was visiting Chile I got to visit the Chilean Senate. I had some thoughts about what the senator speaking at the moment was saying. There were some things that mattered to me very much about what she was saying. But it wasn't a situation in which what mattered to me was essential to the activity. There are no such activities at Rhodes. There are obviously phases of good learning, just like there are phases of good traveling, when listening carefully to the people who live in the topics at hand is the most useful activity. But a prominent feature of the Rhodes approach is that those phases have specific direction toward a moment, very early in the process, in which you are invited out of the gallery onto the debate floor and handed a microphone.

At Rhodes we are expected as faculty not just to tell you what matters to us but to incorporate what matters to you into teaching and learning. For us to do that, you have to tell us...and you have to be ambitious about it. Because I'm confessing up here: there are moments when what matters to me pulls me along so insistently that I forget to check with you as often as I should about what matters to you. I'm certain that I have lots of colleagues here in front of me who have completely left that sort of issue in the remote past where it belongs. That is precisely what the great Mexican educator Justo Sierra was trying to do once and for all in 1910. At the inauguration ceremony of the National University of México, he said these words, "The founders of yesterday's universities said to faculty, 'Truth is already defined. Teach it.' We say to today's university students, 'Truth is in the process of being defined. Look for it with us.'" In 1910 Mexico, that was a revolutionary idea. I think it's not entirely a coincidence that the Mexican Revolution broke out less than a year after Sierra uttered the words. The general concept is of course somewhat more common in our institutions now. But this is something

that is a SPECIAL part of the design at Rhodes, where you are not a consumer of an educational product but rather a co-creator of learning outcomes.

Let's be very honest about this. The old model under which faculty defined what should matter, students consumed the truths and repeated them back was frankly a lot easier for everyone. There are plenty of bumps in this far more difficult but far more productive dynamic in which what matters to faculty and what matters to students both have important roles in the learning process.

Just one personal example of the bumps and why they are worth it. I came out of graduate school with a prejudice against including US-Latino literature in courses on Latin American literature. For me US-Latinos were part of, redundantly, *US* culture and I held to the firm notion that to get to my discipline, you first had to cross at least one international border. A few students in our program back then were studying US-Latino things in other courses. They knew a ton about US Latino communities, lit, pop culture that I had no idea about. They kept drawing these awesome links between concepts we were seeing in our readings and points of reference in US-Latino studies. A few of those students who were especially interested in the topic and wanted a US-Latino course in the Spanish program had to be rather persistent because, honestly, I can be a bit obstinate. In our discussions that occasionally sounded like arguments, they were patient (not always entirely deferential, but patient). They listened to my reasons, examined their own thoughts, studied their points of argument, abandoned a few of them, intensified far more of them than they abandoned. 12 years later we have a US-Latino Literatures and Cultures course that has been offered 5 times now. There is no other course I teach that provokes more intense discussions, that intersects better with other things students are studying, nor that links the classroom learning experience with the community learning experience better than that course. It is one of my 3 favorite courses to teach. I am forever indebted to a group of persistent students who thought very hard about what mattered to me but who did so constantly thinking and examining what mattered to them. What mattered to them is now a part of the Rhodes experience available to you. And there are examples like that one all over the college.

We obviously don't modify the curriculum to suit every single individual interest...not even our own. But the U.S. Latino course is a large-scale example of something that is true on a smaller scale every day starting today. The vibrant learning opportunities Rhodes is known for now depend heavily on you. You are now not only a beneficiary of that dynamic learning environment, but you share in the responsibility of keeping the learning environment lively. We are, in fact, relying on your ideas to make the dialogue here even more spirited. I've said that you're not JUST a beneficiary of the Rhodes learning environment but I also don't want to understate what you stand to gain if you make what matters to you part of the equation at every step along the way. If you'll hold what matters to you up to a light and examine it with every degree planning decision, test it and reevaluate with every new reading, put it in intense

dialogue with what matters to others, you stand a far better chance of still being a great learner in a given topic even after a course is over. A course ends and you no longer have to depend on one of us to tell you 2 or 3 times a week what matters in the topic because you already have your own voice in that discipline speaking with confidence about what matters to you.

I could be wrong. But if I'm right and what matters to you really IS the most important exam question you'll need to address, think about how great that is:

The most important exam question you'll have here and it's entirely self-graded, there's no word count, everyone around you is working on a similar question from diverse disciplinary angles and it's perfectly acceptable even recommendable that you share answers.

Finally, your response to this exam question, what matters to you, is completely untimed. We'd like for you to have a good, solid working answer by graduation but you certainly don't have to stop working on it then and you shouldn't stop working on it then. Even if your response to the question were timed, think of the ample time limit you have here. The time limit would be 45 months (or somewhere around 32,500 hours to work on one exam question).

At different moments a few weeks from right now, most of you will find yourself sitting in front of your first college exam and you're going to do great.

45 months from now most of y'all will be sitting in Fisher Gardens at graduation. We sincerely hope that all of you will be sitting at Fisher Gardens at graduation. There you will have put on robes and finery, you will march through a few collegiate gothic arches, through azaleas in full bloom, you'll take your seat, you'll approach the stage, we will call your name, some of your families will ring cow bells and shout the awkward high school nickname you carefully and painstakingly kept secret here for four years. There we will hand you the document that certifies you have performed the tasks laid out in our curriculum, that you have thought about and expressed yourself on those things that officially matter to Rhodes. There is above all that one question whose answer we want you constantly to test. As I said before, you will of course continue to examine the question of what matters to you after you leave Rhodes. If there is some urgency, it is only in the sense that, starting today, you have 45 months to examine and strengthen your answer at a place expressly designed with that activity in mind.

I speak for everyone here in the faculty and staff of the college when I say that we are looking very much forward to seeing and hearing you exploring that question and all the other questions it will lead you to. We are very excited about exploring those questions WITH you. We can't wait each one of us to play our small role in helping you test out your answers! It is really cool that as a primary feature of our jobs we get a whole 45 months to be a part of your exploration of such essential questions. One of the very few sad aspects of our jobs is that we get only 45 months.

Let's make the absolute most of them and let's start in just a few seconds by making the absolute most of the chance to sing the alma mater. Sing it loud, sing it proud for sure because it's yours. YOU can even sing it with attention to proper pitch if that's something that matters to you.

Welcome to Rhodes!

[Eric Henager, Associate Professor of Modern Languages and Literatures Convocation Address, August, 2009]