

## Wildcat Welcome Address — Nick Davis — 9-17-2014

Every other year, it's my privilege to offer a first-year seminar and get to know 17 of you well. This year, I couldn't, so I greedily asked to meet all 1150 first-years and all the transfer students, at least in this preliminary way. In deciding what to say today, I considered what my incoming advisees have been eager or curious or worried about over the years, which likely overlaps with some of your excitements or concerns. I've thought about things I often wish students and faculty spoke about more often: how to approach your choices, what to expect or not expect from college, and how to prioritize and protect your own happiness. I care a lot about all of those things—partly as one of your teachers, and partly because I'm only 36, and though that technically makes me twice your age, my own feelings, worries, and choices as a freshman do not feel so far off.

But first, I'm going to be heinously predictable and talk about movies. You can take the film-studies professor out of the theater, but you can't make him shut up about what he saw. I think you can tell a lot about a college class by what movies came out the year they were born. When I teach those first-year seminars I mentioned, I design them as general introductions to analyzing films from thematic, technical, and political points of view, but I redesign the syllabus every time with a diverse range of movies from the entering cohort's birth year. Since I'm missing my chance this year, can I just say: you guys are awesome. 1996 was awesome. Paul Thomas Anderson made his first movie. So did Wes Anderson. The Wachowskis, born and raised near here, made their first and best movie: it's called *Bound*, and yes, it's better than *The Matrix*. You arrived in sync with *The Rock*, which is basically Michael Bay's only good movie; you should be proud of that, despite every bleak thing that's happened since. More women got behind the camera, like Mary Harron, Deepa Mehta, Cheryl Dunye, and Jane Campion, across a

wide range of genres, mainstream and otherwise. *Scream* silenced the snobs who expected it to suck. Pardon my poetry: it also scared the shit out of all of us. LGBT cinema was in great shape. Some non-English titles made big splashes here, from India and Iran and the Czech Republic. The best part was Hollywood's collective freakout at Oscar time. Like every year, the studios generated plenty of biopics and period dramas and prestige literary adaptations that felt engineered to reap awards. Some were good, some weren't, but voters more or less shut them all down. For the first time, four of five Best Picture nominees were independent Davids that beat out dozens of Goliaths, using low budgets and outsider perspectives to tell unusual stories about unusual people in unusual situations: *The English Patient*, *Secrets & Lies*, *Shine*, and the much beloved and recently rebooted *Fargo*. The cherry on top was that the one Hollywood movie that did get nominated, an extremely good Tom Cruise vehicle called *Jerry Maguire*, had only gotten a middling marketing push from Sony. Genuine, unforeseen public enthusiasm for a film with palpable heart turned it around into a Best Picture nominee and a major moneymaker. It also made Cuba Gooding Jr. only the sixth African American to win an Oscar in 70 years—absurd, though *nine* more have done so in just the 18 years you all have been on the scene. Well done.

I'm telling you this for more reasons than just movie geekery. I would love for you to emulate the moral of the 1996 Oscars, where originality displaced clichés and independence beat out familiarity. There are many ways to do that. If you're on a path others have walked before—perhaps to med school or law school or study abroad—please do it with heart, and some distinct signature of your own. Move people. Move yourself! As Jerry Maguire learned, tenderly and comically, it's not all about "Show me the money." As *Scream* proved, you can meet established expectations *and* show impressive self-consciousness about what you're up to. Or instead, blaze your own trail. Nobody expected a murder-mystery starring a pregnant sheriff in Minnesota

would be a big hit. Or a love story about a mentally ill concert pianist, with Australian actors nobody had heard of. Or a largely improvised drama about an adopted black British woman who learns, to her astonishment, that her birth mother was white. The uniqueness of these premises impressed a lot of people, but their fresh, diligent, creative, and heartfelt executions impressed them even more. Straying from proven recipes often obligates you to work twice as hard to stick up for your individuality, to defend your own drumbeat. It's sometimes a pain in the ass to have that pressure, but the rewards, I promise you, are huge and long-lasting.

Let me drop the movies for a bit and speak to you more directly. I completely understand that many of you have shown up here energized but also exhausted. I totally get that you worry about picking a major that's going to make you happy and academically excited but is also going to get you a job; whoever's paying for college might be worried about that, too. I fully grasp that embracing originality—taking risks on new kinds of knowledge, new forms of expression, but also on new social groups, or on a new identity from someone you were before—is a lot easier said than done. Not just as a faculty member but as a former freshman myself, and as someone who just celebrated a 15-year college reunion, I have things to say about all this.

First: the distinction between “practical” and “not practical” majors is mostly a myth. The difference between majors that will pay off for you—not just financially but spiritually and intellectually—is completely personal. You know who's happy and fulfilled at my college reunions? People who picked a subject they loved, who thrived to the difficulties and relished the rewards that came with mastering *that* subject, and who gave themselves permission to learn about themselves from their studies. That includes Slavic majors who found out they loved not just sounds of language but whole histories of theory and conflict; History and Literature majors who didn't just love reading but liked being surprised by ideas and feelings that turn out *not* to be

timeless, that turn out to be complex, shifty, and specific; and Chemistry, Biology, and pre-med majors who loved science, loved complicated problem-solving and the arts of calculation, and felt inspired by the body and its vulnerability and its care. My roommate majored in Economics because even more than money, he was interested in how people make tough choices in tricky circumstances, and whether individual and collective prosperity can be achieved in tandem or only at each other's expense, and because he knew he could travel the globe and find smart, interesting people everywhere to talk to about all this. Why did I become an English major? Partly because I loved books and movies, yes, and partly because I got the best, most strenuous feedback about my writing in those classes, but also because I worked as a night-shift hotline counselor through most of college, fielding calls from people my age about work stress or relationships or periods of depression or eating disorders or various forks in their personal roads. In those conversations, it really mattered that both I and whomever I was talking to chose our words and arranged our narratives and compared our different points of view with great precision. I felt studying language and storytelling made me better at that. I *cared* about that.

There is no right major, or none that is automatically more “practical.” It is not necessarily better to have two majors than one, especially if you'd like to take multiple courses in five subjects that interest you rather than 12 courses apiece in just two of them. You know what job interviewers will want to hear in four years, no matter how or where you spent your time? A fresh, detailed, and memorable story about why *you* pursued the path *you* did, and why *you* think it's important, backed up by the data of how accomplished you eventually became and how fond an impression you made on the people around you. This is possible in any major.

That reminds me to remind you: *get to know your professors*. Don't just squeeze 'em in when you can: recognize this as part of the point of being here, even if you're shy or struggling.

Everyone struggles at something, even at things you didn't expect to. I rolled into *my* first-year seminar pretty proud of my writing and got B-'s on my first three papers. I pulled up to my first film course and got a B- on my first critical essay. Was I concerned that people suddenly weren't feeling the full funk of what I was turning in? Yes. And you know what? I'm *so* glad for that. I'm not positive I would have been a go-meet-the-professor kind of student, but those early experiences forced me to be, initiating a four-year habit that many of my friends didn't cotton to until much later. It's not just that my grades got better. I learned more, I became more confident, and my professors actually knew who I was. When it came time to recommend me for things, they could describe a whole person they believed in, not just a statistic in their books. 4.0's are fantastic but they're as rare in college as good Michael Bay movies. Put differently, this is *Project Runway*, okay? Maybe you were the best designer in Reno or Austin or Oak Park or Phillips Exeter, but you won't ace every challenge here, and you *want* the judges to tell you what's chic and sophisticated about your work but also what hems are wonky and what elements they've seen too many times before. Standing out to them isn't the same thing as winning every time, or concealing every weakness. I will tell you I have written better, richer recommendations for *some* students who got B's in my classes because they tackled tough projects, involved me in their ups and downs, and impressed me with their effort and integrity than I have for *some* A students who took fewer risks, rested on reflexes that came easily to them, or never said hello.

For those of you unmoved by Academy Awards or haute couture, I'll try one more metaphor. As the evidence before you makes clear, I have not spent much of my life at the gym. I admire athletes tremendously; I've just never been one. But as I now know, the first thing you learn at the gym is that you don't get anywhere sticking to what you can already curl, press, or swim. You build up a sturdy core repeating areas of strength *and* confronting your limits—in

other words, crucially, by forever moving the line of what you think you're capable of. Don't be ashamed of where you're starting, in any area, but don't lift 10lb. weights forever, either, when it's time to test yourself with 20, 50, or 100. And in the gym, too, other people's advice and support is everything: the spotter who looks out for you, and shares the weight when necessary, so you can afford to be more fearless; the trainer who says, "You can do that fancy exercise a million times, but it won't help you unless your foundation's in good shape first. Let me help."

Northwestern is full of spotters, trainers, and workout buddies. Take advantage of us. Look out for each other. Cheer each other on. Be proud of people who can do things you can't. Be proud of yourself for getting better over time at things some of your peers and, eventually, some of your mentors might never be so good at. Also, don't expect that to happen tomorrow. College is a long game. It took years to make *Fargo*. You can't lose six pounds or develop a six-pack in a day. Be patient with yourself. But at the same time, show up to play. Challenge yourself. Northwestern is a wonderful school full of talented students, expert faculty, and invigorating resources, human and otherwise, you won't find many other places. It is my joy and privilege to teach here, and I hope you come to feel that it is yours to learn here. You have plenty of time to find your way here, and to surprise yourself, and to figure things out. That said, nobody wins *Project Runway* who waits to the last minute to start draping fabric, and nobody, to my huge chagrin, gets a toned and healthy body just by standing near the equipment. Your tuition is a very, very high gym membership. Believe me, the faculty knows and respects that. But it is not a layaway payment on something that's automatically yours when you finish. It is a contribution you have made to sustaining an intellectual, interpersonal community of the highest caliber, full of rare and precious equipment that you should start using. After all, you've earned it *and* paid for it *and* everyone here is rooting for your success. Join the team. Swing away.

I want to say two more things, and then I'll go. One is about your passions. You've heard a bit about some of mine: movies, books, teaching. Maybe yours involve sports, music, dance, cooking, prayer, foreign languages, favorite blogs, friends you miss. Whatever it is, I urge you to acknowledge that thing you love, that calms you down, and that makes you feel like you're *you*. Honor it. Protect it. Surely like a lot of you, I arrived to college with a list of extra-curriculars that trailed me like a comet tail, and an accrued sense that being hyper-involved was important. And that wasn't wrong. But here's something else, equally true: when I got to college, which I'd been looking forward to; when I was suddenly living on my own, which both stimulated and scared me; when I was figuring out who I liked and didn't, and what I valued and didn't, and how I agreed or disagreed with who I'd been just a year before, *I wanted to be my own extra-curricular*. I didn't just want to do well in college, although I wanted that very much. I also wanted to be happy there. I had four classes, I had to work a job, and I had roommates to get acquainted with and a new place to settle into. I also had a movie I wanted to see every Friday afternoon, because that felt like home base to me, like a meal, like a hug. That all felt like plenty. I dropped every other extra-curricular for a whole year, except getting to know myself, and falling in love with new friends, and learning a whole new routine. I'm not assuming that's necessarily right for each of you—maybe a particular class or extra-curricular *is* the thing that will keep you excited, involved, and at even keel—but I'm saying it's okay to ask yourself the questions. How much do you feel like handling? Where is the right balance of striving and nesting? What will you miss the most if you somehow convince yourself you don't need it, and how can you keep it nearby? Conversely, what will you *not* miss if you let it go... 🎵 *Let it go...* Maybe that "perfect girl" is gone. Maybe the cold never bothered you anyway—which is a good thing, because girl, you're in Chicago now. Or maybe that perfect girl (or guy) is just around the

corner, but a little different than before. Or she's exactly the same as ever, because that's been working out great, and good for her! Just give yourself room to find out who she is—who *you* are—and how you can challenge and uphold her at the same time, among all this new company.

The last thing is, I wish you all a wonderful experience at Northwestern—I truly do, and I speak for the entire faculty in saying so. Even more than that, I wish you an authentic experience. We wave a lot of purple on this campus and shake a lot of pom-poms, especially during Wildcat Welcome, because we who live and work here for more than four years truly believe it's a special place: one that can nourish, accommodate, and expand *your* specialness. It doesn't mean we think it's perfect, and I do not expect you to love it this instant the way I've come to love it after eight years. You'll spend time this week pretending to sing alma maters you don't know the words to, professing school spirit that may not feel organic yet, and describing what your major is despite not being sure what your major is—often to folks who just finished telling you, “You don't have to know yet,” before asking you anyway what yours is. I hope you're having a great time, but it's okay if it's dizzying, even a twinge inauthentic at the start. After all the introductions and ID cards and ice cream socials, college really starts, and something even closer to truth comes out. Enjoy everything you can. Investigate new areas. Ask for what you need. Ask about things that don't feel right. Say what you really think. Speak who you truly believe you are, and be open to who other people truly are. Throw us a ball; we're here to throw it back. It's my honor to “meet” more than 1200 of you collectively today, but I recognize that's not *really* what's happening. It's my deeper honor, in fact my life's thrill, every year, to start meeting 1200 distinctive, three-dimensional individuals over time. We're all excited about that. So be well, have fun, settle in, and see you soon.