

## **Wendy Alexandra Varisco**

Welcome class of 2018. I am excited and grateful to be here today to share this special occasion with friends and family on our beautiful campus.

Like many of you, I remember four years ago the anxiety and uncertainty that came with moving away from my home and coming to a place where I didn't know anyone except my new roommate, who texted me a few days before moving in. It was easy to feel lonely, missing home during periods where my fear of the unknown was strong. The transition to college can be intimidating and scary. Investing in undergraduate education isn't easy. It may seem trivial now, but we faced hard choices in that first semester. As classes became harder, we didn't always know if we could succeed; we didn't know how much of ourselves we were willing to risk. We feared we wouldn't develop into the persons we wished to become after leaving home for the first time.

Choosing an unconventional small university added to that challenge for some of us. When I describe my own St. Andrews experience to other people, they are often surprised by my explanation. Most have never heard of Laurinburg, and the fact that our entire university is smaller than some people's graduating high school class is shocking to many. But then I get to tell them why my experience was like no other, and why I take pride in representing this institution. The St. Andrews experience cannot be found on a big university campus and it is not present on the campuses of many smaller schools. Here we have had exceptional opportunities; those provided by deeply committed faculty and staff and those we made for ourselves. St. Andrews is what you make it. The more you invest, the more it offers rewards—for me that included riding on the equestrian team, developing personal relationships with my professors or sometimes having class

outside on a beautiful day. There are so many things about this place that make it infinitely different, that I would have never had the same experience at a larger school.

My sophomore year I was invited to become a Black Mountain Scholar and attended the trip to Black Mountain, NC with my fellow classmates and professors. We visited the original campus of Black Mountain College, wrote poetry on a beautiful wooden porch, and searched the school's archives for pictures and work of the college's past students. It was during that trip I realized I was a part of an institution that was much greater than simply earning an undergraduate degree. At St. Andrews you are not just a name on the class roster, but are instead a valued individual who contributes to the school's community. I was here to gain something more than just an education. I was here to build relationships, make lifelong friends and learn more about myself along the way.

Those of us who have invested ourselves in this university know a "get the grade and get out mentality" didn't get you very far here. So, I hope you used these past four years to earn more than a degree. I hope you took advantage of getting to know the St. Andrews community and that in your time you learned that, much like life, what you put into your educational experience here was what you got out of it.

I took classes that not only strengthened my inner values and beliefs, but also made me critically evaluate them. In freshman year honors, we debated the ethical dilemmas that come with scientific advancement. In Sophomore SAGE, we all examined the complexities of the Romantic Movement in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the critique of a capitalistic society in Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. My junior year I took an introduction to ethics course with Dr. Verhey. It was not a course I had to take

but an elective designed to add breadth to my education, and it pushed me to think critically about real-world problems like never before. As seniors in SAGE 450, we learned about issues regarding food and hunger occurring in our own community. And not only did we study about these issues, but we also learned what *we* could do to make a difference in our community, nation and world.

So you see, by studying at St. Andrews you've made an investment, not only in your education, but in the type of life you would like to lead after leaving this place. You shouldn't feel any less prepared for the real world than someone who came from a big name university—you should be proud because you came from a school that invoked curiosity, inspired change and ignited a fire within to never conform. In a generation where the value of an undergraduate education is increasingly being questioned, know you invested in more than a degree—you invested in the person you have become.

So, you've made an investment in this institution. You've learned to embrace what's different, make a difference in your community, and face your fears. What's next? You may not know the answer, but I can make a suggestion for you. Every time you come to a turning point in your life or a new transition that brings excitement mixed with fear, ask yourself, "Why do you do what you do?"

I learned this question from one of my professors this semester, Tony Deifell. He presented it to our Web and Mobile Publishing class, explaining its inspiration from a line in Mary Oliver's poem, *The Summer Day*: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" "Why Do You Do What You Do?" is a meme Professor Deifell created that went viral online with people holding up signs answering the question. Of course, this led to a class assignment where we had to answer the question

for ourselves. Why do I do what I do? Why did I go to St. Andrews? Why did I study communications? It left me in awe that one question could provoke such introspection at any given moment. It made me realize I wasn't entirely able to answer it, because my future purpose was still unclear. Perhaps, you think you know the answer now. Ask it again in five years. It could completely change. Not only should we ask ourselves this in times of change, but we should also use it as a reminder for when we are feeling content.

If you have been changed by this place then you won't go without asking yourself this question on a regular basis. If there is one thing St. Andrews has taught me, it's you will never write a first draft of a paper that is perfect. In fact, no paper is ever complete, as there is always room for improvement. So don't live your life stuck on the first draft, content without any revision. It will make why you do what you do that much more significant.

For us, class of 2018, we will be transitioning into a world of unknowns that can be frightening. We live in an era of expectancy and instant gratification. One can no longer have a narrow skill set when entering the work force. You are expected to rise to the top of whatever career you choose, but don't sacrifice family, ethical values or work quality while you are on your way.

People want instantaneous gratification—so don't give it to them. Show them that only with time meaningful things are developed. In a world pressed for time, slow down to accomplish meaningful goals and serve something greater than yourself. Take a moment to ask yourself why do you do what you do. I don't expect you to believe having a job or making money isn't important, because I recognize that salaries pay our bills and especially our student loans. ☺

I'm asking you to pause when life gets most hectic, take a breath and ask: Am I happy? Am I fulfilling my purpose? Am I putting the needs of others before my own? And if the answer to any of those is no, then perhaps it's your opportunity to change—to write the second draft of your paper. These are all questions that St. Andrews has prepared us to answer.

Today, a college degree doesn't automatically guarantee financial security. However, because you come from this place, you will already know it is not the degree or the name of the school on your diploma that qualifies you for success—it's the type of student you have chosen to be and the person you have become that makes you stand out. Use every tool in your toolbox that St. Andrews has given you to face new challenges. Remember what this university has taught you: don't be afraid to embrace being different, because the school you went to certainly was! And if ever in doubt, stop and think, "Why do I do what I do?" If answered by a St. Andrews student, I can't imagine being disappointed.