

**Salve Regina University
Convocation Address
September 2019**

Scott Hartley, Author, "The Fuzzy and the Techie: Why the Liberal Arts Will Rule the Digital World"

Students, Faculty, Trustees, welcome to absolutely beautiful Newport, Rhode Island. It is an honor to be here today as we mark the beginning of the journey of the Class of 2023.

We live in an ever more rapidly changing world. When I embarked on my own journey as a Freshman, the Internet was in its infancy, and devices like the iPod hadn't yet been invented. Today we each possess both a super-computer, and a slot machine in our pocket. Our smart phones have become something that both bring the world's information to our fingertips, and yet also threaten our ability to focus, and to engage with the world around us. In some ways it is both, as Charles Dickens wrote, "the best of times, and the worst of times."

Tools like Facebook connect communities unlike ever before in human history. Yet in the platform's immense reach come threats to privacy, and even democracy. The promise of artificial intelligence, big data, and autonomous vehicles herald newfound efficiencies, convenience, and personalization, but codify into code some of the gravest ethical questions.

In the continued relevance of a line from *The Tale of Two Cities*, written in 1859, we might recognize both the importance of history, the persistent value of literature. The more things change, the more they truly remain the same. The more we put stock in the newness of technology, the more the most timeless questions come back to show their relevance.

Today we obsess over learning to code, but we forget code is only as good as the context to which it is applied. Without an education in the humanities, technology is without anchor to true human problems. And without the social sciences, or the study of our systems of interaction and collaboration, technology is without application to our world around us.

We think of technology as timely, and the humanities as perhaps only timeless. Yet subjects like philosophy, psychology, and anthropology are of the most central importance in our world today. At companies like Nissan, where they are attempting to build self-driving cars, they recognize that this requires deep human, and not just technological understanding. It's no wonder therefore, that the leaders of their autonomous car division are anthropologists.

In my job as a venture capitalist, meeting with technology entrepreneurs, I play the role of psychologist. They play the role of theater major, communicating vision and business ideas. As William Shakespeare once said, “all the world’s a stage.”

Never before have we needed thinkers who can navigate the most timeless methods of inquiry, and the most-timely applications of those ideas to the modern world.

We put faith in the objectivity of technology, and in the magic of computer code. But we forget that all is made by fallible human beings, people with wants and needs, personal biases and many blind spots. We presume that fanciful new terms like “big data” mean we are on a path to “right” answers. Sixteenth century philosopher Sir Francis Bacon asked if with enough facts we would no longer need the scientific method. With enough facts, he thought, maybe we wouldn’t need to ask any more questions – we would simply have the answers.

Four hundred years later, we are asking the same. Only now we call facts, “big data.” Again, it seems that the more things change, the more they truly remain the same.

It was Plato who once said that information is *not* the same as knowledge is *not* the same as wisdom. We transform information into knowledge by asking smart questions. The greatest value of an institution like Salve Regina is that it is your safe space to experiment. It is your safe space to ask questions of yourself, your faculty, and your peers.

There are no dumb questions, and the only failure is not to try, something, anything. As Apple founder Steve Jobs said at my own college graduation, “Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish.”

We find information in ones and zeros, but we discover wisdom in the human interpretation in how we ask questions, how we interrogate ideas, how we grapple in ambiguity. It was Voltaire who once said only to judge a person by their questions, not by their answers.

In a world drowning in information we are starved for wisdom because we forget that though Google may contain all the world’s information, it is still US sitting before a blinking cursor. Technology still beckons to us, “what is it that you’d like to know?” WE decide.

WE ask the questions. We exist in the gray area, not black or white. The great value of the Liberal Arts is that it helps us refine curiosity, and grapple in the ambiguity of *real life*.

As you embark on your four years here at Salve Regina University, the world around you will continue to change. In that change is the true excitement of opportunity, the ability to stitch together your passions in truly unique and powerful ways. This process discovery is never a straight and narrow path. Much like Central Park in

New York City, where landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead designed every path to be curved, this unfurling of your own passion is the most valuable thing you can take from your Liberal Arts education.

In fact, where we sit today is tied to this work of Frederick Law Olmstead.

Yet many will tell you that you must choose a path, and that it must be straight. Some people will tell you that your education is an investment, that you are here to find a career. Others will tell you that education is an insurance policy, something to fall back on in the future. And yet others will tell you it's purely for consumption, merely to be enjoyed. The truth is education is all of these things. It is a chance to get to know yourself and what you love to do. And in the nuance, in the overlaps of your passions are insanely great new opportunities.

Take for example Catie Cuan. I met Catie in 2017. Catie was a trained ballerina who had danced professionally at the Metropolitan in New York. Catie also had a passion for robots.

People told Catie that as a dancer she had no business in robotics. But she pursued this overlap in worlds, volunteering for a researcher in Illinois who was studying the intersection of dance and robotics. Robots are often used in hospitals and in end of life care, where trust is difficult. Many people don't like hard plastic robots with jerky maneuvers. But it turns out if you make a robot move like a ballerina, with grace, people trust the robot more. Today Catie is a PhD in mechanical engineering, and she is one of the only robot choreographers in the world. She combined her passions for ballet and robotics. She followed this curved path.

Or take for example Jessica Carbino, a PhD sociologist from UCLA who got a job at Tinder analyzing the billions of data points around right and left swipes. She saw the opportunity at the intersection of social science and technology. Or Katelyn Gleason, who was a theater major and Broadway actress before she decided to become CEO of a digital health startup. She recognized that her job as an actor was to turn words on a page into a story, and that she could be an incredible entrepreneur. After all the job of CEO is chief evangelist, or the storyteller in chief. Today Katelyn has raised \$25 million of investment and has over 50 engineers who work for her. Catie, Jessica, and Katelyn might seem unique, but in fact if you look around Silicon Valley, the top technologists are often not "techies" at all.

Susan Wojcicki runs YouTube. She studied History and Literature. The founders of LinkedIn, PayPal and Slack are all philosophers. The founders of Airbnb were designers from RISD, and Alexis O'Hanian, the creator of Reddit and husband to Serena Williams studied History. The greatest opportunities are in the application of technology to real world problems. So how can you become familiar with both, over your four years at Salve Regina?

In 1959 Charles Percy Snow delivered a lecture at Cambridge University known as the “Two Cultures” lecture. He lamented the growing chasm between the Sciences, or the study of our natural world around us, and the Humanities, or the study of the human condition. It troubled him that students studied Shakespeare but didn’t know the first thing about physics. Others read biology and had never experienced James Joyce. The Sciences and the Humanities, he argued, are not mutually exclusive, but must be explored equally. Today, the greatest opportunities lie at this intersection between technology and the human experience.

The term Liberal Arts comes from the Latin phrase *artes liberales*. One gains freedom of the mind through exposure to a breadth of disciplines. The Liberal Arts are about unlocking the mind through a plurality of ideas. It’s not about picking a major as your destination and putting on the blinders. It is about treating your education as your *passport*. We often debate the merits of one destination over another. Is it better to travel to Bogota or Beijing? Is it better to go into Computer Science, or into Comparative Literature? It’s not an either / or question. It is about collecting a variety of stamps from a variety of destinations, exploring your interests just as you might explore the globe on an around-the-world airplane ticket.

Fill your passport with many different stamps. Travel to places that scare you.

Engage, don’t dismiss, our ever-changing world of technology. But also root yourself in the humanities, because they are the grounding, the historic, the cultural, artistic, and philosophical looks inward at who we are as human beings, together on this planet. When we strip away the world and all its pragmatism, all its posturing for advancement, the humanities are what remain in the dark, and in the disorienting strangeness of experience. They are our perennial guide, and our inward reflection beyond the screen.

In Madrid’s Reina Sofia museum hangs the massive Guernica painting by Pablo Picasso. The painting depicts the horrors of war in splashes of black and white paint. At the top center of the painting is a large lightbulb, technology that shines light and exposure on the haunting and enduring qualities of human nature and human suffering. Technology changes form, but it is merely a new lens through which to view ourselves, our habits and to view our very nature. Today Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat are no different. They force us to grapple with the underlying features of human yearning, intrigue, failure, and circumstance.

Technology merely reflects humanity.

As you embark on this journey, treat your education as your passport, not your plane ticket. Let your aim these four years be to refine your curiosity. In a world obsessed with efficiency and convenience, allow yourself the grace to explore the unresolved, to wrestle with yourself, and your passions. There is an immutability, and a resistance of form, to literature, to history, philosophy, art, craftsmanship, and storytelling in which we must submit rather than merely be entertained. Put down

your phone. Slow down. Look around you at this incredible time and place when you are a student. In a world of devices, invite analog things into your life to teach you about yourself. Succumb to the challenge of learning a foreign language. Invite the joy of mastering a musical instrument. Wade midnight-deep through literature from another time and place. Force adaptation on yourself, and not your tools. For in this struggle you will find grit, empathy, and ex stasis, or the ecstatic state of standing outside of yourself.

Use your four years to ask questions and to push newfound combinations that are uniquely you. Your curved path is no one's but your own. Don't be afraid because there is no failure. Welcome within yourself the true joy in this exploration. I am incredibly excited for you.

Thank you, and congratulations!