

2007 Valedictory

By Heather C. Michael '07

More than a milestone, graduation marks the beginning of a transition period... And in preparation for “what comes next,” we’ve spent the past months looking for jobs, applying to graduate programs, writing cover letters, and of course—surviving those dreaded interviews. Heck, many of us will forever remember senior year will be as “the year of the interview.”

I found *myself* in the hot seat on more than one occasion. But no matter how many interviews I had previously attended, or how thoroughly I had prepared my responses, the interviewer always managed to catch me off guard. More often than not, my interrogator would begin with a casual “so tell me about yourself...” This open-ended request, in particular, always threw me for a loop. Even when I knew it was coming, I never felt quite prepared to offer a well thought-out response.

“Tell me about yourself...” Gosh, where do I begin? I’d hesitate, then instinctually blurt out the first things that came to mind: “Well, I’m Heather... I’m a student at Hamilton College.... Uh...” And I would hope that by the time I’d let this introduction rattle off my tongue, that I’d have thought of something more profound to say about myself.

“I’m Heather, I’m a Hamilton student...” Time and again, I’d catch myself saying it... at interviews and at other introductions. Until recently, I hadn’t really contemplated what these words mean, or how they specifically relate to the question of my identity. But now, as I look ahead, I can’t help but wonder... *why* is it that I’ve placed so much emphasis on Hamilton when attempting to define myself? Clearly I’ve considered my role as a Hamilton student to be a significant layer of my identity—so significant, in fact, that I’ve consistently listed it second *only* to my name.

Only now, as I look back over the past four years, am I beginning to understand the appropriateness of my response. Only now, when I evoke the Heather that arrived here four years ago, and compare her to the Heather that stands before you today can I appreciate how Hamilton has shaped my identity.

I used to believe that *any* liberal arts college would offer me a similar experience— a similar potential for growth and self-discovery. What a foolish assumption... Today when I dissect myself in terms of the roles I play, the challenges I’ve met, and the projects and relationships that I invest myself in, I realize that much of *who I am* can be distinctly traced to my experiences at Hamilton. I have not simply been a student, I have been a *Hamilton* student.

Like so, each of us is a product of our environment— *this* environment. As Hamilton students, we have grown and our characters have ripened. But this process growth has not been one-sided. Rather, we have taken part in a reciprocal exchange. Just as *we* have grown under Hamilton’s patronage, so too has Hamilton grown and changed under ours. Like our own identities, the identity of this institution is not static, but ever-evolving. And as students, we have left our mark upon Hamilton’s changing face. Our environment is as much a product of *us* as we are of it...

We’ve designed new classes, started clubs and organizations, and helped to select new faculty members. Our artwork now resides in Hamilton’s permanent collection; a bound senior fellowship has been added to library’s archives. Our new golden bicycles make the long haul across campus a little easier. And the new Woollcott co-op has added color and diversity to our residential life. We were among the first students to set foot in the new science center, to drink coffee at Opus II, to lounge in the hammocks at the renovated glen house, and to scale the climbing wall at the new Blood fitness center. We served as the guinea pigs for the new point system and for third party catering.

Indeed, we leave a much different Hamilton from the one that greeted us as freshman. School and students, our identities have evolved in tandem.

And the process doesn’t end here. Our identities will forever remain “works in progress.” As we move on to the next phases of our lives, we will continue to accumulate experiences, relationships, and memories. And as waves of new students arrive on the hill each fall, the face of this college will continue to evolve. Nonetheless, we have left a permanent mark. And we will forever carry the mark that this institution has left upon us.

In closing, I invite you to reflect about the last four years and how the Hamilton experience has shaped your character. Doing so not only brings a nice sense of closure, but also provides insight about the process of identity-building. And so the next time you make an introduction and identify yourself with Hamilton, try not to do so with empty words. Instead, do so in remembrance and appreciation of everything that these words embody.

Ladies and gentlemen of the class of 2007, today we add a new layer to our ever-evolving identities. Today we are no longer Hamilton students. Today we become Hamilton *graduates*!

Congratulations.