

## **Noble Acuff**

*Presidential Honors entering class of 1990*

*Graduated summa cum laude in English with a minor in philosophy in December 1992*

First and foremost, I am very honored to have been invited back to Tarleton for the 20th anniversary of the Presidential Honors Program. I would like to thank Dr. Clifford and the rest of the faculty and staff for such a fine event and for their gracious hospitality. The PHP was a very special group of people to be involved with and the program was the focal point of my undergraduate experience. I am so happy to see that the PHP has continued to grow and flourish, and that the core elements and characteristics of the program are as strong today as they were when I was attending Tarleton.

While it doesn't seem like it has been that long since I was an undergraduate at TSU, it dawned on me while I was driving to Stephenville that this year's freshmen were only five years old when I was a student! I also realized that many of the seemingly simple things we all take for granted today, like cell phones, email, the world wide web, and even caller ID were barely on the collective radar screen back then. The geo political situation was different, the business world was different, the state of technology was certainly different, and I'm sure my undergraduate experience was different than it is for students today.

Since I left Tarleton and Stephenville I have been fortunate to live in a number of places around the country. I lived in Colorado for two years after graduation, followed by Austin, Fort Worth, Chicago, and most recently Los Angeles. While it's never easy to relocate, I've often thought about Dr. Clifford's advice to people who were having difficulty adjusting to life in Stephenville: "If you don't like it, do something about it! Learn to enjoy the things about this place that are unique." I recall an anecdote he told in class one day about someone who complained that there wasn't any good Italian food in Texas. Dr. Clifford responded that "that's because there aren't many Italian people in Texas. Have you tried the barbecue or the Mexican food?" As I've moved around the country and found myself in so many different cities I've tried to remember his advice. I've made the most of each new situation and my appreciation for each place has been much deeper as a result.

Much of my moving around has been prompted by my career; I've worked in the Information Technology industry for the past ten years and have had some great opportunities to work with a wide range of companies and clients. The IT industry is, as most people imagine, a very technical field largely populated by engineers and technicians. Interestingly enough, the qualities we look for in a job candidate are often of a very non technical nature. It is a given, of course, that an applicant for a technical job has to be competent in his or her technical discipline. Above and beyond that, though, we're always trying to evaluate the foundational skills: Can he or she communicate effectively? What about writing abilities? Does he or she have well developed critical thinking skills? How does the candidate approach a novel situation? Can he or she attack a problem rationally and logically to solve something that's never been encountered before? Ironically these are exactly the kinds of skills that are often *not* heavily emphasized in technical degree programs such as engineering and computer science, the two undergraduate disciplines that train a large percentage of IT industry.

Last year I made the decision to return to school as a part time MBA student. I am fortunate to have the opportunity to attend the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business. The part time program that I'm part of is ranked fifth in the country—needless to say there are a lot of very motivated, intelligent, and talented people in the program with me (they remind me of PHP students!). Our professors often focus their lectures on describing the kinds of skills successful executives, business leaders, and entrepreneurs need to possess. While graduate business school is certainly focused on the development of a technical skill set (e.g. accounting, finance, quantitative analysis), most of the overarching abilities the program hopes to instill in us are decidedly non technical: critical thinking skills, ethics, communication skills, and the ability to lead others. Again, these are not always subjects at the top of the list for undergraduate business programs. The graduate faculty realize that, much as the world is a very different place now than it was when I was an undergrad at Tarleton, ten years from now the world will have changed even more dramatically. The technical skills we learn today may largely be obsolete by 2015, just as many of the technical skills we focused on in 1992 are obsolete today. However, the critical thinking, leadership, and communications skills we learn today will serve us in good stead for the rest of our careers.

This is precisely why a liberal arts education is so important. Aside from all of the less directly applicable benefits, such as opening your mind to a broader world and developing an appreciation for some of the subtler aspects of life, the four years we spend in college are often the last opportunity we have to develop many of these critical thinking abilities that are so vital throughout the rest of our lives. I have found that when you work in a technical discipline, you are constantly updating your technical skills through corporate training, directed self study and professional development programs. However, it will be very hard to convince your employer to send you to a seminar on Plato, or give you the opportunity to read and discuss Shakespeare. Your company will be even less likely to let you spend a couple of hours debating sensitive political topics like flag burning and free speech, or to let you spend your afternoon writing a paper on the history of the world since 1919. These are opportunities which present themselves in an undergraduate liberal arts curriculum that are, unfortunately, largely unavailable to you later in life unless you return to the university.

Technical skills certainly play an important role in our society, and establishing a career is understandably near the top of most undergraduate's list of priorities. Universities obviously play an important role in developing these skills, but hopefully not to the detriment of the liberal arts and the less immediately "marketable" disciplines. Especially for the best and the brightest, there will always be opportunities to build your technical skill set—remember, I'm an IT consultant who majored in English and minored in philosophy—but the years you spend as an undergraduate are possibly your last opportunity to formally study philosophy, history, and literature. So I am very happy to return to Tarleton to find that the Presidential Honors Program has blossomed into a directed liberal arts experience; I hope that this trend continues and I trust that future students will be as grateful as I am when they look back on their experiences.