January 2012

Friends,

On this bright, crisp January morning in Indiana, just six months into my new job, I’m realistically optimistic about Earlham’s future. By “realistically optimistic,” I mean to draw a contrast between the sort of upbeat but naïve optimism borne mainly of wishful thinking, and a stronger confidence that flows from better recognition of where the real challenges lie, and what it would take to meet them, and from more finely-tuned awareness of where the College’s strengths lie.

My deepening awareness of Earlham’s strength has come most immediately from getting acquainted with the people who are Earlham. Last week I hosted dinner #13 (of 26 scheduled) with eight or so first-year students and their advisers at 712 College Avenue. The conversation always goes its own unexpected way at each dinner, and I learn a lot about our students — their aspirations, their anxieties, their personalities and their wit! One important theme that has emerged when we talk about why they chose Earlham is “authenticity.” Again and again, our students — who are very savvy at seeing through the current marketing gambits of higher education — testify to the power of Earlham’s authenticity. I’m also nearing the halfway point on my one-on-one meetings with all three hundred plus campus employees — staff, teaching and administrative faculty — and these conversations have also given me deeper insight into the many strengths of the College. Above all, I’ve been struck by the inner resiliency of those I’ve met, and their unmistakable devotion to Earlham and its mission. Recognition of Earlham’s authentic identity, and devotion to Earlham’s educational mission, will be absolutely essential for meeting the challenges that await us. By these measures alone, we have every reason for confidence.

The momentum created by our October inaugural celebration and forward-looking Board meeting continues, as the College Planning Committee prepares to update the entire community on its work at this week’s Convocation, and the College prepares to move forward on construction of two new building projects. We will break ground this coming spring on renovation and new construction of Natural Science facilities in Stanley and Dennis, and we plan to begin construction soon thereafter of a new Fine Arts building just south of Runyan. By the time of the June Board meeting, we also expect to have a preliminary version of the College Planning Committee’s vision for Earlham’s future, charting directions for the College in five key areas: (1) the academic program, (2) co-curricular programs, (3) globally-informed education, (4) education for peace and social justice and (5) preparation for rewarding post-Earlham careers.

This combination of new construction supporting two essential components of Earlham’s educational program, along with the College’s thoughtful, intentional plans for its future, is essential if we are to meet the challenges posed by an increasingly competitive enrollment environment. The persistence of a weak national and global economy, the rising costs of education, uncertainty among some about the value of a liberal arts education, and the presence of many worthy competitor colleges and universities, many right here in the Midwest — all of these factors pose admissions challenges for a national and international liberal arts college
like Earlham with deep commitments to academic excellence, educational access and affordability, and robust diversity. The College Planning Committee, under Tom Hamm’s guidance, is making real progress assessing these challenges, soliciting community insights, and formulating models for possible action. As many of you know, Tom is Professor of History, College archivist, and author of the acclaimed Earlham College: A History, 1847 to 1997. I am confident that Earlham will be able to position itself in the coming months to meet head on the challenges we face. We are also in the midst of a search for a new Vice President for Enrollment and Communications, a position that will bring together for the first time under one umbrella Admissions, Financial Aid and Marketing/Communications. We’re excited at the new opportunities this will afford for communicating the distinctive and compelling nature of an Earlham education to prospective students and their parents.

Fortunately, in the midst of all these “weighty” matters, things of even greater significance have been taking place on a daily basis. Students have been creating plays, performing musically, competing athletically and pursuing a whole host of diverse interests and activities. And by means of such things — along with some classes and the help of our stellar faculty — they are actually being educated. Imagine that! I’ve been amazed by the energy and commitment of our most recent class. Later this spring, at a series of dinner celebrations with the senior class, aided by a retrospective video and an open microphone (risky, I know — but I can’t resist!), I hope to learn more about the fondest Earlham memories and inspiring post-Earlham aspirations of the class of 2012.

As I meet more of our new students individually and get to know upper-class students involved in musical groups, athletic teams, clubs and organizations, and student government, I’m reminded of one of the most significant contributions you, as a graduate or close friend of Earlham, can make to the College’s future. I suspect that if each of you were to guide toward the College a single prospective student who might just find Earlham to be the “right fit,” we would probably meet our admissions goals easily. Understanding the strengths of Earlham takes time because its very best qualities are subtle and nuanced, and are best understood only through living in their midst — yet our culture wants to rush the anxiety-driven college admissions process more and more, affording students less and less time to think carefully about which among the nations many fine colleges will be the best fit.

One antidote to this would be a good, extended conversation between an Earlham alum, parent or friend, and an academically strong prospective student searching for the kind of values that make us the distinctive community we are. I’ll close, then, with an encouragement to each of you to seek out such a conversation whenever opportunity knocks. Just remember — someone probably had a conversation like that with you.

And it changed your life forever.

Sincerely,

David Dawson

P.S. If you would like to receive this letter by e-mail, along with other Earlham e-mail announcements, please send your name and e-mail address to alums@earlham.edu.