

2014 Patrick Henry College Alumni Scholarship Recipient  
Kendra Olson  
2017 graduation (expected)

### **STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE**

My mind buzzed with plans when I stepped onto the Patrick Henry College Campus at the beginning of my freshmen year. I knew I was entering a student body filled with over-achievers and talented intellectuals. While I never considered myself an intellectual, I had a knack for doing well no matter where I was just from sheer determination and a good work ethic. I was confident that if I worked hard enough I would excel at PHC. I knew God wanted me there to study political journalism. I took for granted that He would bless my efforts to achieve excellence. I was right, He did want me to excel. But not the way I imagined. In fact, the biggest lesson that my time at PHC has taught me is God's definition of excellence is not the same as mine.

I constantly reminded myself why I was there. PHC was a tool that would help me to be the best journalist I could be. I was not paying all that money to have friends and a good time. Studies always came first. In my mind excellence was being successful and performing well. It could be measured, graded, critiqued, and perfected. Excellence had nothing to do with emotions or relationships. My definition of a good day was based on how much I was able to accomplish. I centered my identity on my grades. I was frequently depressed and struggled with anxiety. But it was okay. I was striving for excellence. One day I would break through and God would be proud.

I neglected relationships in my life. Many upperclassmen and professors reminded me that people were more important than studies. I completely agreed with them. The value of a human life was much more important than my studies. Relationships, however, were not. As far

as I was concerned everyone outside of my close friend group could go on being special in God's eyes without interacting with me. I was a Patrick Henry student. I was going to change the world through media and my excellent journalism skills. I was going to get good grades and big internships and become a news anchor in Washington D.C. I was striving for excellence, not relationships. And then I ate lunch with one of my professors.

Dr. Stephen Hake, my professor of wisdom and eloquence, made a point to eat with each of the students in his section at least once per semester. We were talking about how I was getting along at PHC. I admitted that I was struggling to balance my friends with studies. He told me a story about a past PHC student who graduated with a 4.0 GPA. I was instantly jealous. Then Hake said something that I will never forget. It replayed in my head for the rest of that semester. It haunted me while I stewed over my exams. Just one little sentence. "I saw what she went through to get that, and I would never wish that on anybody."

Why not? By my definition a 4.0 was perfection. And this coming from a professor—someone with his Ph.D. Hake's comment forced me to re-evaluate my motives. I realized I was not striving for excellence; I was striving for achievements and recognition. Did God want me to do my best as a student? Absolutely. But studies and achievements were only part of my life. Even if I did get a 4.0, would God think I was truly excellent? I concluded He would not. Excellence involved all aspects of my life. To neglect one area for the sake of another was not excellence, it was an obsession—it was pride.

I realized that while the Bible did admonish me to do my best, it said nothing about succeeding. God was not concerned about my studies for their own sake. He was only interested in them in so far as they shaped me to become more like Christ. And Christ gave up perfection to serve people. He did have a vocation, carpentry, and I am sure He worked hard, but that was not

His passion. He took up carpentry because of people, not because He wanted to be the best carpenter he could be and eventually get a job in Jerusalem. It was all part of His ministry.

With my definition of excellence, I could hide behind my achievements. With God's definition of excellence, it was not about achievements it was about who I was as a person. God did not see the A on my paper; He saw the attitude of my heart. He did not call me to be the best. He called me to care about what He cares about, to align my priorities with His, to become like Christ. Sometimes that meant being there for someone going through a hard time instead of studying for a test because to God an eternal soul is more important than an A.

Much has changed since I arrived at PHC. I know a lot more. I am a better writer. I can finally pronounce Descartes's name. But the big change is my heart. God used PHC to show me that excellence cannot be measured in grades and degrees. I still want to be the best journalist I can be. I still believe the education I am getting at PHC will equip me to succeed in that field. However, my motivation has changed. I want to be a journalist, not because journalism is so great, but because I believe God has called me to be like Christ as a journalist. It is part of my ministry. I may not graduate with an impressive GPA. I may never work in D.C. That is okay. Because I now understand that excellence is not what you do, it is who you are.