

Keynote Address—Erin Hamrick

“Education is the Greatest Gift”

I can't tell you how scary it is being up here and thinking it was only three years ago when I was sitting out there. The only thing I can say is if you thought high school went quickly...well...welcome to college and welcome to Sarah Lawrence.

I'm here today to tell you that the education your child will receive at Sarah Lawrence is second to none.

My belief has always been that that education is the greatest gift any parent can give to a child and there is no doubt in my mind that the greatest gift we have given our daughter is to be here at Sarah Lawrence.

However, I think it is important for you to know that, when I was sitting where you are, I don't know that I fully appreciated what I've come to understand about the school and their approach to education.

So today I'd like to share with you:

1. How we got to Sarah Lawrence.
2. My professional perspective on what it will take to be “successful,” whatever the future holds.
3. Why, as scary as the future might sound being a parent, it is that your decision to come to Sarah Lawrence is hands down the best decision you as parents will ever make for your child.

So, the story of how we got to Sarah Lawrence started with me saying, “You can go anywhere you like, but you are not going to Sarah Lawrence!” True story! Not that I knew anything about the school except that it was at the top of the “most expensive colleges list.”

That's all I needed to know.

Furthermore, I questioned how some school so small could be the most expensive and “worth it.”

Clearly, I'm standing here, so you know the answer.

Like most of you, my daughter and I attended her high school workshop on getting ready for college.

Several alums were discussing their experiences and one said, “I got such a great education at St. George's (my daughter's high school) that I really didn't learn anything until I went to graduate school.” At which point I leaned over to my daughter and said “Don't think for a moment that I'm paying for four years of college for you not to learn anything until graduate school!”

If you know me, one of my favorite sayings is “never say never.”

Enter a Sarah Lawrence College recruiter who had been talking to my daughter every year at the college fair and, needless to say, we were on our way here for a campus tour.

So, hold the visualization of me being highly skeptical on our first tour of Sarah Lawrence while I take a step sideways.

Professionally, I am fortunate to work with CEO's of some of the world's largest insurance and reinsurance companies. I know the challenges they foresee and they will all agree that talent is at the top of the list. However, the definition of talent yesterday is very different than talent today and it will be equally different in the future.

Back when my husband and I graduated, like many of you, the world was awash in opportunities, as it was prior to the digital revolution.

I wrote an article several years back as an adaptation of a 2011 article that Marc Andreessen wrote, “Software is Eating the World.” My premise was that we all do the same activities we have always done, yet we do them differently—albeit using technology.

Here is a sampling...

- Travel agents and travel agencies are gone, but we still travel

- Music stores are gone, but we listen to music
- Book stores gone, but we still read
- Camera stores are gone, but we still take photos

The purpose of the article was for my clients to think about the activities they do, modify their strategies for the future, and think about the type of “talent” they will need to execute these strategies.

I mentioned Kodak in this article as the best example.

Kodak made the strategic decision not to invest in the first digital camera that they themselves invented because they didn't understand that they were in the picture taking business.

That decision, to this day, still gives me pause. What were the executives of Kodak thinking...or maybe the question is...

What were these executives NOT thinking nor challenging themselves to think about?

So let me guess what you are probably thinking at this point...

Why is this lady standing up here telling us this?

My bet is that if President Lawrence were here, she'd know exactly where I am heading, so please bear with me...in the words of my daughter, “All to be revealed.”

In my thinking about “talent” in a world of disappearing traditional jobs, it caused me to ponder the meaning of a college education relative to today as opposed to when I went to school. When I went to college, like most of you, it was just an assumption. All things being equal, here's a list of schools, apply to two at the most, see where you are accepted, and make a decision.

My question in going down this school path with our daughter was certainly not my parents'. I asked myself the question, “How do I prepare our daughter to be a productive, self-reliant, and happy adult?”

Furthermore, to my comment about talent, how do you prepare someone to be “talented” when you don't know what the talent requirements will even be in the future? I then thought about all the jobs essentially lost associated with my “gone list” I just referenced...but recognizing that everything we do today, we will do in the future—albeit differently.

Every school touts they have the “best” education...we live in Princeton, and trust me, they think they are the best, but I kept coming back to what did the “best” education really mean?

Lastly, in respect to being a happy, self-reliant, and productive adult...

What I know is that people who are passionate about whatever it is in life that they pursue, tend to be the happiest and most successful adults.

Finally, there was one other thought I reflected upon, and that was from an elementary teacher who once told me, “Don't stifle the mind with the technical,” she said, “You can always teach to the technical, but the technical doesn't cultivate great minds.” This was, of course, in response to our daughter not wanting to memorize her multiplication tables or wanting to take multiple choice tests.

At the time, her comments were not the least bit comforting, but none-the-less, the words kept with me!

So, having shared all of this with you, let me bring you back to that initial Sarah Lawrence tour...

There I am listening to their approach to learning, the diversity of the curriculum, the seminar structure, class size, having a don, etc...you guessed it...it hit me! Never say never!

I went home and told my husband, “This is where Katie needs to go to school!” And yes, I know it is the most expensive college on the list, but it I believe it is going to be worth every penny. And to the contrary, I had just calculated the cost of a bad education!

In all seriousness, what struck me was the notion of training the mind for whatever the future holds. Training a mind is about diversity of thought and challenging the mind to think abstractly from numerous perspectives. Cultivating a great mind for whatever the future holds is what you get with a Sarah Lawrence education.

My daughter said she was fine with me speaking today, as long as I didn't talk about her, so I haven't until this point! But I now need to mention her to make my point.

For her, where else could she go and study economics and costume design at the same time?

That's our daughter's path. On one hand, creative and artistic—and the other—big, complex problem solver who will do a deep dive into anything she is passionate about.

To say I was a bit nervous her freshman year is fair, as I too was an economics major sans the costume design. Unlike me though, Katie's economics included not only reading both Keynes and Marx, but looking at social and political issues through both their perspectives. I shared a paper of hers with my uncle and I quote, "I don't know that I had that level of exposure and thinking until I was in graduate school."

Ah...remember my comment from that high school program I said I attended?...NOT MY DAUGHTER...she was learning in her freshman year!

This was my first realization that we made a great decision coming to Sarah Lawrence.

As an aside, my personal thank you to professor Kim Christensen. Kim's approach to teaching economics freshman year had Katie hooked, so to speak.

It ultimately led to Katie spending last year at the London School of Economics. Interestingly, three juniors out of a program limited to 100 students outside the UK come from Sarah Lawrence. Knowing what I know today, I wasn't surprised. One other LSE note...I was told that most of the students in the program need private tutors, given the intensity of the reading and academic requirements, but guess what...not the Sarah Lawrence students!

So, not to be forgotten is what I will call the "artistic" side of the Sarah Lawrence education. I will admit this "costume design" education was all a bit new to me, but my nephew, who is a lead designer for a TV series, has accompanied me to all the shows Katie has costumed.

He has explained the fabric selection relevance, the color choice, fabric movement...things I never saw that I now do. And there it hit me again...if, in my little tutorial of costume design, I was indeed seeing what I never saw before, imagine what my daughter is learning.

It is this training of the mind and diversity of thought that is the core of the Sarah Lawrence education.

Taking the Sarah Lawrence education one step further, the decision was made in 2014 to further evaluate students on six critical abilities to prepare them for life beyond graduation.

If you haven't heard of them, let me share them with you:

- Think analytically
- Accept and act on criticism
- Bring innovation to their work
- Express ideas through writing
- Work as easily independently or within a group
- Exchange ideas effectively through oral communication

I don't know how "talent" will be defined in the future, but I'm fairly certain that these six critical abilities will be key defining attributes.

By now, you must have guessed that I do not define education by the ability to get "the best job" right out of school, or how much money you make right out of school.

As I've just shared and as we all know, jobs have a way of disappearing faster than anyone would have anticipated.

I believe an education should be the training of a mind to solve problems, to have the ability to look at challenges as an opportunity, and to have the ability embrace change—not run away from it.

This is the Sarah Lawrence Education.

And this is why I feel the greatest gift that we have given to our daughter is to be at Sarah Lawrence. And I have no doubt that all of you will feel the same way after your first year.

Finally, we can't turn back the clock, but back to my comments on Kodak and not funding the first digital camera ever developed...

There is no doubt in my mind that had a Sarah Lawrence graduate been involved in that decision, Kodak's future would have been very different.

And speaking of the future...

I have no doubt that we will see Sarah Lawrence graduates rising to meet the challenges of the world in ways no one would have ever imagined.

For me, it has been a privilege to be a part of this exceptional school, and thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts with you today.

About Erin Hamrick

Erin Hamrick has twenty years of experience as an executive search consultant. Prior to founding Sterling James in 2011, Erin served as a Partner with the insurance practices of both Heidrick & Struggles and Spencer Stuart. During this time, she also took a year sabbatical to work for the U.S. Department of Defense, where she supported reconstruction efforts in Iraq.

Erin has worked extensively with board members, CEOs and other senior executives in all sectors of the insurance industry: property/casualty, reinsurance, life/annuity, brokerage and in insurance related business services. Additionally she has worked with both private equity firms and venture-backed concerns with interests in the insurance industry.

Earlier in her career, Erin served in both line and staff roles at The Hartford and at the brokerage firm Hamilton, Dorsey Alston. She is a graduate of Villanova University.

Erin is a contributing writer for Wells Media Publication's *Carrier Management* and in 2014 she was named one of the top 50 women globally in re/insurance by *Reactions Magazine*. She was named APIW's 2016 Insurance Woman of the Year and currently serves on the board of the LPGA Foundation.

Contact Information

New York Office
ehamrick@sterlingjames.com
O +1 212 203 3275
M +1 917 692 2875