What is your story?

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My story begins with a stage. About four and a half years ago, I stood before my classmates, family, friends, and teachers delivering my salutatorian speech. I dreamed of giving this speech since I was a little girl. At the end of the night, to my surprise I found myself smiling and laughing. My classmates and I were sure I was going to be the one crying the hardest. The reason I was smiling and laughing was because I felt a sense of accomplishment and excitement for what was to come.

The summer quickly passed and it was time to move to campus. I’d never been away from home and my parents for more than a week. I knew this was going to be difficult. They kept us busy the first few days we were here, but once classes started, the homesickness set in. I stopped smiling and laughing, I stopped eating, and all I wanted to do was cry. I was ready to pack my bags and head home, but someone stopped me. This someone was my Phase II mentor. To this day, I cannot recall the exact words she said to me, but I remember the feeling of relief and confidence I had after. I realized that I needed to take life one day at a time. Today I am standing in front of you because of her. Because she was so important to me and my college career at UW-Eau Claire, the past three years I have fulfilled the role as a Phase II mentor for incoming freshmen. If I have made even the slightest difference in at least one of their lives, I have done my job.

As a mentor, I strived to instill in their minds that they are now Blugolds and to take advantage of the time they are here. Now, if they were anything like me, one of the first questions they may have asked themselves is, “what is a Blugold anyway?” Is it a spirit? Perhaps a fish? Or maybe it’s that guy on campus that dresses up in the bird costume. The debate could go on for years to come, but my definition of a Blugold is an individual with pride, empowerment, courage, and integrity. For as long as I can remember, my father has told me that integrity is one of the most important qualities a person can possess. Integrity is doing the right thing even if no one is watching or will ever know about it. It is also being honest with yourself.
I was not very honest with myself after my freshmen year, as to why I tell my freshmen to take advantage of all that UW-Eau Claire has to offer before graduating. My sophomore year I decided I was going to graduate in three and a half years. This meant focusing solely on my schoolwork and having a limited social life, if any at all. I did not join any organizations or try to meet new people. I even took summer and winterim courses. Along the way, the phrase “value-added” came in to play. I thought I was smart graduating in three and a half years with a degree, but what I didn’t take in to consideration was that there was nothing setting me apart from any other average college graduates. I soon learned about certificates offered on campus and decided to diversify myself. I am proud to say that I will graduate today with a comprehensive degree, four certificates, and more hands-on leadership and internship experience than I could ever have asked for.

Throughout most of high school, we are told that college is about “finding yourself,” as if we had lost ourselves along the way. Now, I can’t say I “found” myself at college, but I think this phrase has some significance. We come to college trying to find people we have something in common with. We sift through the peer pressure, student organizations, and new experiences trying to find those people. Along the way, though we may not realize it, we are building our character, growing, and writing our story. By the time we are ready to leave the university, we are trying to find out how we are different. Though you may have the same major as the person sitting next to you or you come from similar backgrounds, you are different in more ways than you are similar.

So what is your story? Who are you? I am a daughter, a sister, a sister-in-law, a granddaughter, an aunt, a cousin, a niece, a friend, a student, a Blugold. I am a Blugold. You are a Blugold. We are Blugolds and that is something to be proud of. Everyone has his or her story. A story of triumphs, struggles, laughs, and tears. A story of failures and accomplishments. A story of friends, old and new, and family. Your story is waiting to be heard.
Today, my story ends with a stage. I stand before you a fellow graduate, a fellow Blugold. I will not leave here in tears, but with smiles and laughter. When you walk out that door today, the world is yours. May you have the pride to believe in yourself, the power to dream big, and the courage to make those dreams come true.

Congratulations Class of 2009.