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Liberal Arts at Work

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Liberal arts at work

By Maureen Pratt '02



Maureen Pratt '02

My first corporate job was with a large management consulting firm in Washington, D.C. In my first week I was asked to report to the Pentagon to support a political appointee with speechwriting and public affairs. Sheer panic. Would I get lost? (Yes) Would I say something silly? (Assuredly). What is the difference between the Marines and the Navy? (Water, and a whole lot more apparently).

I was amazed by how much I learned and grew as a communicator while working in the Pentagon. My clients were very tough – and my writing and thinking skills were called on every day.

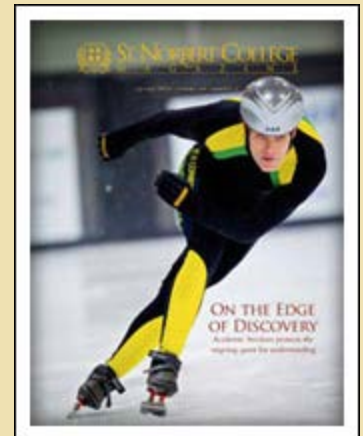
I had been fortunate to attend a Benedictine high school where I was introduced early to the liberal arts, and the teachers there promoted my natural curiosity (and spiritual growth, which led me to my choice of a Catholic college). When I learned that there were colleges that actually taught (and applauded!) such skills, I was hooked.

I chose English as a major on my first day at St. Norbert and never strayed from that path or regretted it later.

Situations like my experience at the Pentagon bring me back to my favorite William Faulkner quote: "A writer needs three things: experience, observation, and imagination, any two of which, at times any one of which, can supply the lack of the others." These words can be applied to more than just writing. In a perfect scenario, we are drawing from all three of these activities in our daily work. I have learned so much about balancing those three ideas at work, and have benefited tremendously as a result.

I am frequently called on to lend a hand in deciphering complicated, dense topics. But for me this is an exciting challenge. I'm now working in corporate communications at Bechtel, a global engineering and construction company with more than 50,000 employees around the world. With hundreds of large-scale infrastructure and construction projects around the globe and a diverse workforce, critical thinking skills are key.

Often, my speeches, papers, and reports are reviewed more than 10



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Let's eat! First course

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Patrick McCormick, of Gonzaga University, speaks to the relationship between theologians and the Church, in a lecture at St. Norbert College.



First of a kind

Shane Kohl, first to graduate with a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies, talks about the program.

times before being considered “final.” And as any writer will reluctantly admit, falling in love with your own words is common. These writing projects bring me back to the painful, yet important days of Advanced Critical Writing during my senior year at St. Norbert. I remember being incensed when Stan Matyshak (English) tore apart several papers during the first few months of the semester. His words echo in my mind: “If you aren’t deleting at least one-third of your words in a single paragraph, the paper is too wordy.” This class taught me to lessen my grip on the personal aspect of writing – to detach from the words as only mine and recognize the value of editors.

At St. Norbert we are trained to seek truth through collaboration, learning, and listening. For me, this natural curiosity is what drives my professional life, and gives me a distinct perspective that my colleagues may not share. I remember when I chose my degree while sitting in a warm and welcoming office on the third floor of Boyle. I knew that a liberal arts degree would challenge me and drive me to look at the world in new ways. Turns out those lessons never stop coming.

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Rebecca (Schmeisser) McKean '04 (Geology) talks about the moment of discovery.



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A liberal arts education enriches opportunities in the corporate world.



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