Preparing Tomorrow’s Citizen-Leaders
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By John A. Roush, Centre College President

Centre College was privileged to host New York Times columnist David Brooks in April 2011, and we anticipate having him with us again this year on October 2 as we point toward hosting the vice presidential debate on October 11, 2012. Having hosted such an event in 2000, we look forward to what we know will be a rich opportunity for our students and the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

As we await the arrival of Brooks again this fall, I am reminded of what was memorable about his previous visit.

When Mr. Brooks was with us in 2011, he delivered a remarkable address to over a 1,000 students, faculty and staff in the evening, touching largely on his then recently published book, The Social Animal. However, it was his interactions earlier in the day that may have been the signature of his time among us.

He concluded his several visits with students by meeting with the editors and writers of our student newspaper, The Cento. During this last conversation, our eager students sought his advice on a range of journalism topics, and it had to be a thrill for these budding writers to glean insights from one of our nation's most successful editorial writers. Eventually, the conversation switched to requests for more general advice, particularly what he might say to current college students.

"Study abroad," he said. "Nothing else is guaranteed to change your life."

Little did he know that he was preaching to the choir. Eighty-five percent of Centre's graduates study abroad, and nearly 30 percent of them study abroad more than once. His comments underscored and affirmed what we have long espoused about Centre College's commitment to study abroad -- a commitment that prompts both U.S. News & World Report and the Institute of International Education to recognize us as a national leader in international study, based on how well we place students in meaningful study opportunities around the globe.

In fact, what's unique about Centre College is that our programs are almost exclusively homegrown, with the majority designed and led by our faculty.

The College operates semester-long residential programs for our own students in London, England; Strasbourg, France (across the Rhine River from Germany); and in Merida, Mexico. Centre also has exchange programs with schools in Japan and Northern Ireland. Some students also study at the University of Reading (near London), at Shanghai University in China, at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, and at the University of Lleida in Spain.
One of only a handful of liberal arts colleges that has a January Term, our so-called CentreTerm features shorter-term opportunities in dozens of countries year-to-year, all of which are sponsored and directed by members of the College's faculty. Destinations range from Barbados and Borneo to Paris and Peru, and courses include the study of volcanoes in New Zealand and art and dance in Bali.

After meeting with The Cento staff, Brooks then shared dinner with members of our Board of Trustees before his evening address. There, he reiterated the importance of study abroad, but he also called off a second key life-changing aspect of America's best colleges and universities: personal interaction with teacher-scholars who are teachers first, but also mentors, guides, and counselors.

For us at Centre, this means having faculty whose focus is on having an impact in the lives of students that goes way beyond the simple, though important, transmission of information. The better devotion to students and to their intellectual development is built around relationship, not content.

I couldn't agree more with Brooks that colleges and universities that focus their academic program on undergraduate student learning are to be prized. It's what we do at Centre and what is done at other such smaller colleges and universities across America. Equally to be prized are places like Centre and other institutions across the nation that have elected to prioritize global citizenship (or the same thing by some other name).

These experiences are the foundation piece of how tomorrow's citizen-leaders should be prepared.

At a time when the American academy is under siege for a wide range of flaws, real and imagined in my opinion, Brooks has identified at least two things on which we might double-down as we seek to regain some portion of the quality that has long made our colleges and universities the envy of all nations.