When Pulitzer Prize finalist James Scott, Wofford Class of 1997, returned to Wofford as the Opening Convocation speaker in 2015, he brought with him almost two decades of experience. Immediately after graduating from Wofford, he taught English in Japan before taking a job as a newspaper reporter. As a young journalist, he followed doctors “saddled with stethoscopes and side arms, who struggled in a makeshift operating room outside Baghdad to piece together American soldiers devastated by roadside bombs.” He covered the horror in Indonesia following one of the worst tsunamis in modern history and shared the story with thousands.

Scott did not train to become a journalist at Wofford College because Wofford does not offer a journalism major, but he did learn how to think critically, ask relevant questions, discern the truth and write — important skills that apply not just to journalism but, without exception, to every vocation and every situation.

Scott then used his journalism experience as a springboard for a successful career as the author of three highly acclaimed histories. The Pulitzer Prize Committee praised the breadth of “Target Tokyo,” Scott’s most recent book, calling it “a spellbinding narrative that uses Chinese, Russian and Japanese sources to expand the story of the first American attack on Japan during World War II.” He’s currently at work on his fourth book, about the February 1945 Battle for Manila, and it all started at Wofford College.

Other Terriers who work in fields both diverse and widespread understand how Wofford College, and other colleges devoted to providing a broad-based liberal education, prepare graduates for lives filled with complications, job changes, big decisions and problem solving. The best of us do it while fostering gratitude and a desire for civic engagement, global citizenship and moral responsibility. Make no mistake about it, graduates of liberal arts colleges are making the world a better place — as ethical business...
leaders, health care professionals, teachers, coaches, judges, social workers, clergy, parents, artists, military personnel and researchers. Liberal arts graduates vote. They volunteer. They serve on juries and school boards and arts councils. They take their children to museums and athletics events. They give to their religious communities and United Ways. They keep themselves and their families healthy. They tend gardens and meet friends at coffeehouses. A liberal education, in other words, cultivates civic engagement in all its forms.

Yet, even more fundamental, this liberal education is the very reflection of our own humanity. As Richard Dawkins explains, “No other species has literature, music, art, mathematics or science. No other species makes books, or complicated machines such as cars, computers and combine harvesters. No other species devotes substantial lengths of time to pursuits that don’t contribute directly to survival or reproduction.”* It is this concept of the human endeavor that renders the purposes of a liberal education so essential to a fulfilling life and vibrant society. The breadth and focus of knowledge, but more importantly, the capacity to communicate, to create, to think and adapt, are the hallmarks of the liberally educated person. They are the hallmarks of a Wofford education past, present and future.

Unfortunately, liberal arts colleges and universities have been defending their commitment to breadth, depth and a general education curriculum since the 1960s. In 1969, the Wofford Towers alumni magazine, predecessor to our current Wofford Today, ran a special edition on the liberal arts and technology. The first article was “How will the Moon Landing Affect Liberal Education.” Wofford professor of history Dr. Joe Killian wrote: “At first glance Apollo 11 symbolizes what technical competence can do. But beyond that, it underscores a major concern common to the liberal arts; namely the quest to understand man and the universe. The liberal arts and technology both exist for the purpose of seeking truth, uninhibited and unlimited by rigid prior preconceptions.”

Although we still are too often asked to justify the value of the liberal arts, especially in a world of rising college costs and debt, I’m inclined to believe, as Dr. Killian did in 1969, that we need both the specific and the broad in education for the future of our society. “Both seek truth and a better future,” wrote Killian. “No less than technology, the liberal arts speak to the necessity and ability to do what needs to be done, intellectually and spiritually, to preserve and advance life, vitally and meaningfully, and more importantly, to understand human progress and human potential in a nuclear age.” Killian’s visionary words remain true today. According to a recent report of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, 80 percent of employers expect applicants to bring with them broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences. Although academic major matters less than critical thinking, those looking to hire undergraduates expect both field-specific knowledge and solid communications skills. More than anything else, employers want to hire people who can adapt to the demands of a changing workforce.

The type of education that Wofford offers prepares students for life — for leadership roles, for work or further study, for change, for innovation and for citizenship in an increasingly interconnected world. Wofford graduates are invaluable because they understand tradition but think beyond its confines. They pull from a variety of perspectives and make connections because they see the big picture without ignoring the details. They do this because Wofford makes education something that happens inside and outside the classroom, in Spartanburg, the nation and our world.

Every Wofford graduate must succeed in the study of cultures and peoples, English, fine arts, foreign languages, history, humanities, mathematics, natural science, philosophy, religion and wellness. English majors are not exempt from mathematics and science requirements, just as chemistry majors must spend time learning about philosophy and religion. Faculty who teach these courses challenge students. They teach, but they also mentor, advise, listen, question and expect students to stretch themselves. Wofford faculty members are just as interested in the growth and development of students as they are in keeping up with the research and trends in their respective academic disciplines. This combination is essential when preparing students for the roles they will take upon graduation and throughout their lives.

Beyond the classroom Wofford encourages every student to study abroad, intern, conduct research, practice leadership skills, engage in the community and live on campus. The college pairs these opportunities for global exposure and experiential learning with the facilities, technology and programmatic support necessary for the long-term success of our graduates and, more broadly, our world. Liberal arts graduates of any major are ideally equipped to solve society’s most pressing issues — energy, the environment, health care, poverty, crime, international trade, technological advancements and challenges still to come.

Colleges such as Wofford do this by committing to value as well as exceptional educational experiences. Recently Kiplinger’s Personal Finance ranked Wofford nationally (and first in South Carolina) as a 2017 “Best College Value.” In addition to cost, financial aid and average debt, Kiplinger’s weighs admission rate, the percentage of students who return for their sophomore year, the student-faculty ratio and the four-year graduation rate. Kiplinger’s realizes that value is not strictly a factor of cost, and Wofford strives to create an accessible, affordable and sustainable standard based on assessment, best practices...
in higher education research, and surveys of employers and graduate schools.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that more than one-third of the country’s labor force changes jobs annually. Estimates indicate that by the time today’s 22-year-old graduates reach the age of 40, they will have held 11 different jobs. Wofford prepares graduates for the 11th job as well as the first. Probably the most telling statistic is that each year more than 30 million Americans are employed in new jobs that did not exist in previous years, and the future is full of life opportunities and jobs that do not exist today. That means the purpose of higher education should be to help students develop into lifelong learners who can adapt to challenges and work with others to find solutions to problems, both small and large.

Will Prosser graduated from Wofford in 2010 with a B.A. in religion. He went on to earn a master of divinity degree from Yale University in 2013. He’s now a sales executive for UPS. According to Prosser, Wofford prepared him to ask difficult questions and adapt to unfamiliar situations. That led to success in graduate school and now in corporate America. “People ask me all the time how I use my religious education in my job, and I tell them I use it every day,” says Prosser. “Both Wofford and Yale taught me how to learn, and in this business, it’s about two questions: What can you learn, and how fast can you learn it?”

A few years ago a bipartisan Congressional committee asked the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to establish a commission to research the importance of more liberally educated students with the ability to address the country’s economic concerns. The commission’s report says, “America should foster a society that is innovative, competitive and strong. The ability to adapt and thrive in a changing world is based not only on instruction for specific jobs of today but also on the development of professional flexibility and long-term qualities of mind: inquisitiveness, perceptiveness, the ability to put a received idea to a new purpose, and the capacity to share and build ideas with others.” Further, “America should equip the nation for leadership in an interconnected world. The humanities and social sciences teach us about ourselves and others. They enable us to participate in a global economy that requires understanding of diverse cultures and sensitivity to different perspectives. And they make it possible for people around the world to work together to address issues such as environmental sustainability and global health challenges.”

Wofford’s most recent Rhodes Scholar, Rachel Woodlee, a 2013 business economics and Chinese graduate, is proof of the power of liberal education. Now a doctoral student at University of Oxford in England, Woodlee is the managing editor of Openpop.org, an award-winning collaborative blog on global population issues, an extension of her master’s research emphasis on the politics of social policymaking in China, specifically regarding birth planning. She’s a co-convener of the Rhodes China Forum, which seeks to foster understanding of China, and was named one of the “25 under 25: Rising Stars in US-China Relations” by China Hands magazine. Most recently she participated in the second Salzburg Global Forum for Young Cultural Innovators. Her talk on the importance of engaging unfamiliar cultures and challenging preconceptions as a way to learn more about ourselves and others is an enlightened and progressive engagement in our world.

We need Wofford graduates like Woodlee and so many others more than ever before. That means support of Wofford College and its mission is vital on every level — to the individual student, to the college and to our world. Nothing is more important, more inspiring and more humbling than the charge we have at Wofford College to help students build futures that include a commitment to lifelong learning and a responsibility to use their liberal arts education and innate talents to make the world a better place.

Nayef H. Samhat, the 11th president of Wofford College, is a native of Detroit, Michigan. He holds a B.A. in international affairs from George Washington University’s School of International and Public Affairs, a master’s degree in international affairs from Columbia University and a Ph.D. in political science from Northwestern University.

Samhat came to Wofford in July 2013, after having served as provost and professor of political science and international studies at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. Prior to his time at Kenyon, he was the Frank B. and Virginia B. Hower Associate Professor of Government and International Studies and an associate dean of Centre College in Danville, Kentucky.

His academic interests include international relations theory, international political economy and the politics of the Middle East, especially international relations in the Middle East. He has contributed articles, papers, reviews and essays on these and other topics to a variety of journals.

He is also a staunch advocate of the liberal arts educational experience.
Wofford’s mission is to provide superior liberal arts education that prepares its students for extraordinary and positive contributions to society. The focus of Wofford’s mission is upon fostering commitment to excellence in character, performance, leadership, service to others and lifelong learning.

Wofford College does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, creed, religion, sex, age, national origin, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation or any legally protected status.