class of 2014

ESSAYS
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In coming to Houghton College, I was prepared to learn about subjects such as English, science, 
art, religion, and intercultural studies; but what I didn’t expect, was all the non-academic lessons 
that I learned from classes, professors, faculty, and friends; lessons that will last me a lifetime. It was 
in Dr. Kiiti’s class where I learned work ethic. By that, I don’t just mean all the work I had to put into 
her challenging classes, but I learned from Dr. Kiiti’s example of what it means to work hard for the 
glory of God. Throughout my four years at Houghton, I often saw Dr. Kiiti outside of classes meeting 
with students in the coffee shop or the campus center. I saw her at every social justice event leading 
by example and enabling her students to do the same. It was at these late night events, in our 
coffeeshouse, and especially in her classroom, that I learned work ethic.

It was from KLP that I not only learned a lot about the Bible, but I also learned the importance of 
knowledge itself. Although I never had a class with her, she opened up her home to a group of women 
who wanted to learn more about scripture and femininity. We came with many questions and she 
made a list of them all, making sure to address each one as a group throughout our time together. She 
provided us with historical contextual knowledge of passages that seemed confusing and urged us to 
research, discover, and know for ourselves what we believed to be true. It was in KLP’s living room, that 
I learned the importance of knowing.

It was from Dr. Gaerte that I learned generosity. He was always generous with his time and his gifts. Dr. Gaerte, 
one of the busiest professors on campus, was always more than willing to participate and help with campus-wide 
events: serving on the Film Festival panel, making guest appearances in SPOT, and even serving eggs and french 
toast to frenzied college students at every Midnight Breakfast. It was in the mac lab, at midnight when us animation 
students thought about giving up on our projects and calling it a night that Dr. Gaerte would appear with freshly 
baked cookies, a smile on his face, and words of encouragement. It was there I learned generosity.

It was in Dr. Fisher’s Metaphysics, Mortality, and Mind class that I learned the importance of asking. I learned the 
importance of questioning beliefs that we’ve held true and furthermore finding answers to those questions that are 
hard to ask. It was in Dr. Brubaker’s Anatomy and Physiology class that I learned about bones, muscles and nerves, 
but more so, I learned what it was like to have a heart after God because of my professor’s example. It was in Dr. 
Woolsey’s Poetry class that I learned the importance and power of words. And not just in the poetry we read, but 
through Dr. Woolsey’s earnest prayers for us at the beginning of each class. It was from Dave Huth that I learned 
genuine care. Dave always asks his students how they are doing and sincerely wants to know the answer. It was in 
advising sessions with him that I got less advice about what class to pick next semester, and more advice about 
life. It was from Dr. Pearse that I learned compassion. Not because he showed any to his students, but because of 
the compassion he had for the people of the Balkans. In our travels through Croatia, Montenegro, and Bosnia, us 
students observed the heart that Dr. Pearse had for their tragic history. It was in the rubble and ruins of the Balkans, 
where I learned compassion.

It was from a chapel by Sarah Derck that I learned the difficulty of forgiveness. In this sermon that she reminded us 
that God still loved King David despite all of his wrongdoings, and that we need to keep challenging ourselves to 
forgive the King Davids in our own lives. And it was from Professor Murphy that I learned that I could find beauty 
and consolation in paintings, films, books, and even people, despite the tragic world we live in.

It was from faculty, like Greg Bish and Stephanie Wittenrich, that I learned the importance of connection. Greg and 
Steph would constantly encouraged students who worked for them to sit down and talk face to face with those 
we were attempting to connect with. They led by example and were always the people who I went to when I was 
upset and needed to talk. They took the time out of their busy schedules to stop, sit down, and simply listen. It 
was in their offices in Student Life that I learned the importance of deep and meaningful connection. It was from 
Dan Forrester, one of our chefs in the cafeteria, that I learned what it means to have a servant-like spirit. Every time 
he prepared my food, I felt served. It was the five minutes that I interacted with him over meals in the cafeteria that 
challenged me to be a better person.

It was from my peers in the Class of 2014 that I also learned many life lessons that I will keep with me forever. It was 
from Aaron Young’s faith journey that I learned the importance of openness and honesty in the Christian 
community. It was from Meghan Vanderkruk that I learned what it means to be strong. It was from the marimba 
playing of the Doxology from Simbarashe Kamuriwo that I learned how people use music to glorify God. It was
from Hannah Lily that I learned what it means to be ambitious. It was from watching players like Alyssa Figueroa and Atalie Fite on the soccer field that I learned what it means to honor God-given gifts. It was from Will Strowe that I learned the importance of finding your inner child and letting it loose from time to time. It was from Steve Mccord that I learned what it means to be dedicated. It was from Yinka Araromi that I learned what it means to be a good leader. It was from Luke Crawford, that I learned the power of a high five. And it was from a Star article written by Ben Murphy where I learned that “the opposite of faith isn’t doubt, but certainty.”

It was through my Houghton College education that I learned that every interaction we have with each other, whether it is in the classroom, in a coffee shop, or on the quad, is an opportunity to learn something. Each and every one of us has something to give as well as gain from each other. It is this type of education, one that teaches you not only academia but also important life lessons, that makes Houghton College such a special place.
“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God.”

Phillipians 1:9-11

I clearly remember arriving at Houghton College in August of 2010, an excited, youthful Missionary Kid fresh from a gap year in Chiang Mai, Thailand, eagerly anticipating the beginning of my College adventure. Over three hundred incoming freshmen arrived with me, each with unique backgrounds, individual hopes and fears; all stepping into four of the most crucial and formative years of our lives. In hindsight, I would have been even more excited if I had even the slightest idea of the many life transforming experiences I would be involved in while at Houghton. During the first weeks of studies, as my classmates and I began to delve into the college experience, Phillipians 1:9-11 was a passage that directly inspired me. It shaped my perspective in my academic, relational, athletic, and extracurricular activities as I grew to discover all the experiences—both exciting and mundane—that make up life at Houghton College.

Many exciting experiences highlight the collegiate experiences of the class of 2014. On a personal level, the opportunity to travel with fellow Houghton students to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2011, and Lima, Peru, in 2013 for soccer sports ministry trips, and the experience of performing at Carnegie Hall this spring as a part of the National Sacred Honor Choir are important events in my College journey. Apart from myself, represented in our class are students who have studied throughout the world, in locations such as New Zealand, Uganda, and Spain. Furthermore, through our studies, abroad and here at Houghton, we have enhanced our academic passions and honed our interests and abilities. And no member of this class can imagine what life would be like without the great friendships formed with fellow graduates; moreover, a healthy number of men and women on this stage are celebrating Houghton’s classic tradition of “ring by spring.” These international experiences, journeys of academic growth within the Houghton community, and life shaping relationships are prominent in our minds as we remember Houghton. However, though many of our memories encompass exciting experiences, each one was nurtured and informed through the everyday, normal and intervening moments of life at Houghton.

Many regular experiences, though unique to Houghton, define the journey of the class of 2014. Countless hours of fellowship have been enjoyed during mealtimes in the cafeteria, including breakfasts inhaled at 7:40am as we rushed to 7:45am classes. We grew through the weekly opportunity to learn and worship together in chapel and Koinonia. We rejoiced on SGA donut days and during dinners when chocolate chip cookies, hot out of the oven, were served by the dozen. Unhindered by the fact that Houghton is just west of the middle of nowhere, we created our own fun, playing nalgene gold on the quad, star gazing in the field of dreams, watching movies in the chapel, sledding down the ski hill, and having nerf wars in Chamberlain. And despite how much we joked about the “Houghton Community,” we truly have discovered what it means to cherish this place and the vast and varied contributions of the students, staff, and faculty who have invested so much into so many lives, whether in times of joy or times of pain.

As we close the rich chapter of life that is Houghton College, it is hard to realize that this adventure has come to an end. Indeed, in some ways the future holds more uncertainty than confidence, more fear than hope. Nevertheless, just as we, as incoming freshmen, had no idea what incredible adventures, learning opportunities, and relationships awaited us at Houghton College, we cannot expect to know what the journey of life will hold for us as our paths diverge. But as we leave Houghton, a place that has grown to be very special to us, and which represents so much in our lives individually and corporately, let this be our prayer for one another as we step into the next adventure of life.

“Friends, this is my prayer for you; that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God.”
Prior to coming here, I had no clue what a Houghton education was, or where it would take me in life. I’m not even sure I knew what higher education was at the time. Any illustration given to me conjured an austere climate where students were subjected to exhaustive amounts of homework and emotional trauma brought on by professors. Come to think of it, that sounds very similar to a Houghton education. Here at this college, as opposed to the expectations I had, there is an intentionality of the professors to bring out the best the students have. Now, there are many individuals who contribute to Houghton being what it is: students, faculty, and even families. For the sake of communicating what a Houghton education is, I will focus primarily on the professors. Partially because they are the distributors of academic knowledge, but also they become a great influence in students’ lives.

Had anyone asked me freshman year what the education experience at Houghton was like, I would have confidently suggested that it was about digesting extraordinary quantities of knowledge which would then be used in my profession. Yes, this is true, however several of my professors have warned me if I attempt to use their notes as scripture outside of college, that they will throttle me. This statement of theirs captures the essence of the Houghton education in a lot of ways I think. While the material we have wrestled with is important for the potential careers we are led to, much of what the professors have attempted to do is to train students to approach the world thoughtfully; to stretch ourselves in our own disciplines and take on a Christ-like perspective in the experiences we face. This has been one of the most important lessons we have learned! To the students: do not take what our professors have offered for granted, especially the more difficult lessons. Whether professors have told you that you fell short of the expectation, failed to understand the class material, or have even called you a thief of other’s time and money, they have sought to challenge us to learn with integrity. In doing so, we are more effectively able to embody the teachings of Christ through the reorientation of intellectual paradigms.

We’ve ideally been taught by the model of our professors on how to examine the world intelligently, face the conflicts of life with loving dialog, and to invest every effort in procuring the kingdom in our lives and careers. All of this happens when each student pursuing their own unique field of study does so wholeheartedly, fulfilling their vocation as an act of worship. This is the Houghton education. Let’s face it, any college can offer their students information. They can even inspire necessary characteristics in the student to help them land and keep a job. However, I do not see the Houghton education just as the intellectual content students’ master, the personal interactions that pervade the campus, or even the skills honed for careers. It is ultimately the transformation of one’s own character, through the mind, to put the body into action for the Kingdom and glory of God. Students have the opportunity to take the examples set by the professors and carry it out in the world. If this model is embraced, students will be diligent scholars, lovers of justice, and pursuers of Christ-like community wherever they go. In no way am I suggesting it is easy or glamorous. But, it is the task of those who would call themselves followers of Christ. As professors being the catalyst of our Houghton education, we would all do well to remember the lessons taught in the classroom and the life lessons taught in between. That way, when we enter our vocations, higher learning never stops. Instead, it continues to focus our day to day life that we may grow in our faith and continue our witness to the world using love and thoughtfulness in whichever occupation we are called.
I came to Houghton College expecting to be prepared for eternity. God has used Houghton to prepare me for this moment.

Life doesn’t come to us all at once. It comes in sips and gulps, not through a cosmic fire hose but through a mother’s breast and a bucket from the well. I didn’t learn it all as a baby, nor in preschool, in elementary, in middle school, high school, or college. But what I’ve found is that next moment yields to next all the way to forever.

I wanted Houghton to prepare me to go and conquer the known universe, but, can you believe it, I’m about to graduate from this little stage to another in my infinitesimal life.

I came here expecting to navigate my future and confirm my calling, and what I discovered is the optimal route through the cafeteria, which is the jock side and which is mine, and how to say hello to acquaintances along the way.

I hoped to gain self-awareness and stability of identity. I did learn how to fill out the counseling office assessment form in five minutes or less.

I arrived on campus each fall hoping to prove invincible to the long, long winter, but this year I learned the vigor of a snowy forest and the call of the chickadee in early spring.

I thought I would become a phenomenon of utmost linguistic genius, ready to translate Bibles with a snap of my fingers. I learned how to pronounce ['amma'goma'mmu'mmu], which means ‘two yellow tortillas’ in the Tlapaneco language.

I thought I would be prepared to write for the Lanthorn, or serve on committees, or speak in chapel, or participate in one of Houghton’s other illustrious traditions. Instead I joined a fledgling club called The Drawing Board and started publishing cartoons.

I thought I might land on the crest of wisdom and soar on to dazzle the world with acts of charity, but I learned to spend the night nursing an exegetical paper and still be a considerate friend the next day.

I hoped to find in my first-ever roommate an angel to draw me up to the gilded heights of relationships unknown. But I met a very human friend, and I learned love by the moment, the only way I could.

I thought I would find myself, lose myself, or at least get over myself, and somewhere along the way I learned to live with myself.

I was fairly certain I would become an adult while at Houghton, but instead I grew up a few years.

I arrived giddy and expected to come out sober, holy, and wise, and I spent four years learning to laugh and cry and wonder.

I was expecting to find out for myself what’s so special about the Scriptures, and what happened is that the God of the Bible came down as a person, and we followed.

When I came to Houghton, I was desperate to find something lasting, ubiquitous, and transcendent, and I stumbled into presence.

I expected to find The One—not a soul mate, though that wouldn’t have hurt—I mean, the Ultimate, Godself enthroned in all glory. But I found many of these little ones, and we held hands and looked up the mountain, and we trembled at the foot of the cloud.

You know, I wanted Houghton College to take me outside of itself to a bigger world, but you grabbed my sleeve and brought me in for dinner. You showed me that there is something of everywhere in the here, and something eternal in the now. And I’ve learned from your stories, your moments of grace and folly and hurt and love. And I’ve found life, here, now, with you.
We came in with all of the answers. “Well, Jesus said this so that means you’re wrong.” “President Obama’s an idiot and the U.S. should just nuke everybody.” “You gays are monsters.” There was no time for anybody to correct us, because we were right. Never mind the criticism of our peers; someday they would come around and admit that “I” was right. This was the Class of 2014 in 2010: ready to save the world, but only if the world does what I say.

Then classes began. You couldn’t close your ears to the teaching. If you did, then there goes some important point for that next exam. That arrogance that had helped us to shout down our rivals in arguments didn’t get us anywhere after a professor shot down our ideas to the point that we were left as babbling fools in front of our peers. How embarrassing. But, little did we know that this was the beginning of the planting of the leaven of wisdom. From our failures we learned, and from what we learned, we applied. And from what we applied, we flourished.

This didn’t mean there wasn’t any hard work, however. There were days when new theories were complete gibberish and it was a miracle that we even passed those quizzes and exams. Hour after hour, page after page of research all about a group of people in some part of the world nobody has ever heard of, or some organelle that stored nutrients in a cell, or some obscure business in the middle of Iowa to invest in. Plenty of times we thought, “Who cares? This isn’t worth my time.” Little did we know that these theories and ideas contributed to the big picture and little did we know that these classes were the basis for all of our other classes. And we thought we knew everything.

Then there was the day we realized that the people we didn’t agree with, and thus didn’t like, were some of the best friends we could have ever had. Not only did we bounce ideas off of each other, but soon we were eating dinners together, watching movies, taking trips to big cities to get out of the Houghton country for a while. It was these friends that would become our closest, and they that would help us get through the hardest times.

Forget failing that exam or paper, everybody does that. These friends were there when the cruel world popped the Houghton bubble. Family issues, deaths, suicides, self-harm, alcohol, drugs, and all those other things nobody likes to talk about. For too long they had been shoved under the bed since this was a “safe” environment from all of that stuff. And then they happened and who could we turn to for support? Families may be too far away and our pastors just weren’t giving us the solace we needed in our search for meaning. But we had our friends. We were all in the same boat grieving and who else could we lean upon? Enemies and friends lumped together all at once. And through it all, despite the uncertainties and disagreements, peace was made and friendships for the rest of our lives were established. Even when times are tough in the real-world, they will still be there and have our backs.

So what is the Class of 2014 today? Are we still those kids in 2010, driven by hubris with all the answers? Do we still thank God for all of the friends we have and that we aren’t like that weird guy sitting alone at lunch? Or are we now the ambassadors Paul proclaims we should be? Through all of the challenges and hardships we all have faced, I believe the Class of 2014 is certainly not like that incoming class in 2010. Instead, we are the ambassadors, seeking to establish peace as sheep in a world of wolves. We are a class who came into Houghton with all the answers and now we leave with just as many questions. But this is not a bad thing. From these questions we now have the opportunity to learn from everybody, since each perspective provides some insight on the entire kingdom. And, while there are still plenty of people we can’t stand since we first met them or after they wronged us or vice versa, we’re now humble enough to listen to them. This is the Class of 2014 today. God bless you all my fellow ambassadors.
At the start of this semester, a fellow classmate asked me to ponder everything God had done in my past semesters here at Houghton College. As a senior, I couldn’t help but laugh. Four all-too-short years and I didn’t know where to begin. I would guess, dear friends, that I am not the only one at the end of my college years who has trouble measuring the ways in which I have grown. I’m convinced, in fact, that I would barely recognize myself if I went back to the day we first met, which might be a good thing. I mean, I thought I was pretty cool at the time, but I am way cooler today. All of you seem a little cooler as well, and I think I know why.

From the unsure teenagers that we were to the comparably unsure but hopefully much more informed adults we hesitate to admit we have become, we are necessarily different than we were four years ago because our identities have become caught up in one another. I know more today about God and myself because of you. Because in you I see and understand parts of God that would be incomplete otherwise. I look at you today and am so incredibly proud to be counted among you. All these years and I find it is the goodness in you that I strive towards. Like many of you, I have sat week after week in the same chapel seats—save for a sophomore year of rebellion spent in the balcony. Some days I learned quite a lot. Other days, well, I at least got a lot of reading done. Regardless of what was said, or which songs we sang, those chapel seats were always a place for us to come together. I didn’t appreciate that at first, but looking back, I know our experience here has been shaped by the time we’ve spent sitting side by side in those old chairs. I remember waiting for all of you to come to chapel when I had class right before. When I was able to sleep in, I remember how kind you were to save my seat when I snuck in during the prelude. I remember realizing how great it was to have music major friends during the hymns.

In those chairs, we have had some great conversations, laughed at the most unfortunate moments, and shared little pieces of our lives. On good days, I got to hear some of you share the story of your life in front of the whole campus. I got to hear you sing. I got to cheer you on at your senior recital, or even in a SPOT skit. On bad days, we hurt together. Some of the most memorable and beautiful moments we’ve shared in these chairs came after we lost one of our own. After that chapel, we must have stayed behind for hours. I remember watching all of you, tending to one another’s needs even when our own needs seemed overwhelming. At the end of it all, we sang together. In that moment of darkness, this class brought a warmth and a light. In that moment, we started to learn how to heal together. We are different today, I think, because in our four years of experiences we have been made a little more whole by becoming a little more like each other. Go where we may, we will always carry a distinct similarity, and I for one count that as an incredible blessing.

When I applied four years ago, I could have never imagined everything this place would mean to me. Everything you all would mean to me. It seems to me now that God is in the very walls of this blessed place. Standing here today bearing the mark of this community, I hope all of you feel that, too. It has been a privilege to be challenged and changed by you, and I cannot thank you enough for the past four years.
When I chose Houghton, I could not have imagined all that it means to get a “Houghton education.” Per my perceived stereotypes of what receiving an education at an institute of higher learning would entail, I thought one thing: I’m going to work hard and receive a degree which would help me to get a job in whatever field I chose. Instead, during my four years at Houghton I’ve not only received an education from an institutional standpoint, but I’ve also been personally educated about the goodness and character people possess, the effect that my actions have upon our world, and how whichever career I select will not only be my job, it will also be my calling.

An education regarding the humanity and care students demonstrate, even toward a complete stranger, was given to me within the first six weeks of being here at Houghton. My father passed away freshman year, Homecoming weekend, and I was devastated. Though I was adapting well to college life, not having fully adjusted to classes and numerous people surrounding me, I felt I couldn’t share this personal detail of my life with anyone except my roommate and best friend. Sarah Thompson, a friend of my roommate who knew only that I was experiencing a difficult situation had all of the girls on her floor sign a card – they were praying for me, whatever the situation may be. I’ve kept their card here with me at college and pull it out every once in a while to be reminded of the compassionate hearts my fellow classmates possess. Throughout college, I’ve developed closer relationships with many of the girls who signed that card: Amy Coon and I became friends during our two years on CAB; I’ve come to know Chloe Naujokas as a person always willing to provide a smile or prayer to start an Intramural volleyball game; Janelle Conklin lives in my townhouse; and living right next to us Brittany Libby who works at the Campus Store with me as well. These friends and other young ladies may have no recollection of that small act that took place freshman year, but I will always remember what those girls taught me: love is demonstrated through even our slightest deeds.

Houghton has not allowed me to be lulled into a place of complacency concerning the effect that my actions, or lack thereof, will have upon our world. Global hunger and poverty, human trafficking, immigration reform, racial and social tensions are large scale issues addressed; closer to home, Houghton raises support for local families through the Turkey Drive, organizes the Soup Run that provides money for Wellspring Ministries, offers immigrant families tutoring through JET, and access to recycling containers promoting proper stewardship outside the townhouses. The key to addressing all of these issues is knowledge. Without knowing the severity of global poverty I would never have made a conscious effort to be a better steward of the resources I consumer. Awareness of Allegany County’s listing as the poorest county in New York also led me to become involved in the Turkey Drive. It was then I understood that solely because of students’ efforts and donations, over 20 families this year alone would receive a turkey on Thanksgiving. Being educated about social issues has led me to take steps to implement what I have learned, sharing that information with others around me besides.

With each class that I took, I wondered how it might relate to a possible future career. This was the education that I was paying Houghton for. I, however, had no idea as a first-year student what I wanted to do with the rest of my life so I took general courses: Biblical Literature with Schultz, Sociology with Routhe, Cultural Anthropology with Arensen, and WILA with Bowman. I developed my love of writing! My second semester I took two standout courses: Marketing Principles with Minchen and 3M with Fischer. Marketing stood-out because I discovered I was very good at it and enjoyed learning the techniques behind making a product desirable to consumers while the philosophy of 3M taught me that all people think differently...and I sure thought differently than Aristotle! I waited until sophomore year to declare my majors: Business Administration (with a concentration in Marketing) and Writing along with a minor in Communication. As a senior I began to focus my attention on finding a job in marketing, but I was finding it difficult to think of ways in which to incorporate my education and faith. Yes I could find a job, I could go to church on Sunday and find a way to demonstrate my faith to others, but I wanted something more. Then, my senior capstone business class began discussing how our vocation, or calling, is meant to be fully integrated; they should not be autonomous from one another. Likewise, Dean Jordan began a sermon series in chapel again addressing the same idea. I recognize that my Houghton education has granted me the ability to be successful in my chosen career while serving my Almighty God at the very same time.

I could never have imagined as a prospective student all that it would mean to get a “Houghton education” and that’s probably a good thing. Every day I find myself being educated further by professors, employers, and friends. I’m continually told to stretch my mind and rethink the attitude I hold toward life and the people I encounter every single day. I paid close to $34,000 for my tuition this year alone, but how would I value the education that I have received from Houghton overall? Well, summed up in one word...incalculable.
When I chose Houghton, I could not have imagined all that it means to get a “Houghton education”…

In his paper The Purpose of Education, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. writes, “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals…The complete education gives one not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate.” This quote is a powerful reminder to me that the purpose of obtaining an education is not solely for the student but for those affected by their decisions. It was in this way that my Houghton education has been an experience different from what I expected and unique from what other schools can provide.

It is not difficult to think of the ways Houghton College is different from many other schools: its geographical location, the small student-body size – contributing to a high faculty-to-student ratio, the fact that it is a Christian College; not only in identity but deep into its roots and fully present both on-campus and off, the high academic standards and the grace and openness for discussion found in the classroom as well. To me, the greatest benefit of a Houghton education is a culmination of these factors found in the people who are attracted here by them.

For being such a small school, the diversity here is incredible! There are representatives from all social classes, countless ethnicities, numerous family backgrounds, and from locations almost anywhere in the world – and each person brings their own experiences and perspectives to share. Attending such a small campus has allowed for me not only to meet people different from myself, but also of having the blessing of getting to know them deeply. Houghton College provides an atmosphere for discussion where we can challenge one another and grow alongside one another while wrestling with the difficult questions we are faced with today. This environment has forced me to be a better critical thinker, to take my beliefs out of their isolated categories to be examined, and to respect the fact that although I may have good ideas it does not mean there is a correct answer and mine has to be it. The most beneficial aspect of my Houghton education experience has been the conversations we were open and free to enjoy with one another because of the mutual respect between people from all walks of life.

In the classroom, my time at Houghton has been greatly enhanced by my professors. It is not so much that they are exceptionally good at presenting the material, but that it is done in a way that makes you want to learn; most professors’ passions for their classes are contagious. I found that our professors truly and deeply care about us as people, they invest in us, and they love us. In fact, these qualities are what allow them to assign such difficult coursework! They know us personally and they know what we are capable of so they believe in us; sometimes more than we do ourselves. Just as importantly they are there to support us through it all – in both an educational role and a personal role. I am immensely appreciative of my professors and the conversations we have had; ranging from clarification of what constitutes a postganglionic splanchnic nerve to personal matters of life at home and through bowing our heads in prayer together. The most surprising aspect of my Houghton College education were the relationships I formed in the classroom with my professors and how they spoke into my life.

A third unforeseen aspect of my Houghton College education has been my spiritual growth; more specifically the integration of my Christian faith into the very core of my being. The reach of Houghton spiritual growth extends much further than chapel and permeates every aspect of campus. From the townhouses and dorms to the classrooms to the sports teams Christ is always set as the focal point. One quick example, I have a friend on the baseball team who told me a story about the different attitudes between the previous college team he transferred from and the Houghton baseball team. At his old school, his teammates felt accomplished because they were playing “college ball.” Their goals of playing at a college institution were fulfilled and their purpose at that school was to be a baseball player and win championships. Coming to Houghton he was shocked at the differences in worldview between the two teams: his purpose at Houghton was now to be a Godly man using the athletic abilities he had been given to reflect Christ’s love. To this end he has been given a unique position and role on campus to set an example for others. The attitude of serving a God who loves and cares for us is the foundation upon which everything else we discover at Houghton is built. It is found in our institutional leaders and presented for our discovery as students, as athletes, as campus and community residents, as student-workers, and as club members. The most important aspect of a Houghton College education is that it is built on the ideas that we should use our gifts and our knowledge to love and serve others and pass on the Good News which changes and shapes our lives.
I never anticipated to have been prepared through all of these experiences to expect the unexpected, to be comfortable in uncomfortable situations, to trust in God always, to invest in those around me, and to discover Christ in every face I see. Leaving high school you expect to go to an institution that will prepare you to enter the job market to earn a living. Houghton College not only prepared me for my career aspirations but it helped shape me and change me in a multitude of ways. It is with confidence that I can say that each and every day was a day full of learning, discovering, and growth. Through the provocation and support of the people I have encountered here I have abandoned the “cookie-cutter” future I had created for myself and instead embraced the dynamic and fluid nature of life. I never imagined that a Houghton education would be more than just books, I never imagined that my learning experience would extend beyond the classroom, I never expected to leave with more questions than answers, and I never expected to have such a burning passion for serving God in everything that I do.
It is both daunting and exciting to stand before you today, as an ‘almost graduate’ of Houghton College. Tomorrow marks the end of our most recent life adventure and the beginning of a new one. Such transition comes with an incredible gamut of emotions – excitement, relief, sadness, accomplishment, stress, and confusion. And all of those emotions are acceptable – maybe even expected. These feelings may be all too familiar to some of us as they remind us of ourselves four years ago when we sat in these very seats, apprehensive and fearfully unaware of what the next four years held. But as I stand here today, once again feeling all of those emotions and feelings, another one screams louder than all the others. And if your Houghton experience has been anything like mine, you may feel the same. It is thankfulness. Thankfulness for all that these four years brought and meant to me and how they changed me. The famous philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once said, “Life is lived forwards, but understood backwards.” I have never found that to be more true than now.

Thinking back four years to August of 2010 seems hard – it feels like an eternity ago and yet just yesterday. But as I reflect on the time between senior year of high school and senior year of college in the context of my time at Houghton, the words “beautifully unexpected” seem to perfectly describe it. Many of the things that I expected to be part of my college experience were not. In fact, as a senior in high school, I thought I had college figured out: I would attend a college in a busy city where I would make some friends, learn about some stuff, listen to professors talk, and if I attended a Christian school, meet some Christians as well. How naïve I was. Not only would the humor of God’s plan place me in rural western NY with Amish neighbors, but not all of these came true. What I expected turned out to be false. And I will be forever thankful.

I remember first coming to visit Houghton. Not only was the name hard to correctly pronounce, but I was convinced we were headed the wrong way for the last hour of our trip. Coming from Rhode Island, where the entire state spans 48 miles north to south and 37 miles east to west and everything is just about a 15 minute drive from your house, western New York proved rather terrifying. Not to mention that Houghton greeted my visit with the first snowstorm of the semester, leaving my family and me walking around campus with our hands shielding our eyes from the wind-whipped snow falling an inch an hour. Who knew this would be an accurate depiction of the typical normal winter in the place I would come to call home for the next four years? My “expectation” of a thriving city metropolis was replaced by a thriving rural community, where the physical seclusion of campus - and the occasional smell of horse and cow on a windy spring afternoon - were hardly a drawback, due to the activities and people that make up our wonderfully unique community. This is the beautifully unexpected.

I expected to come to Houghton and meet some friends. I was told the four years of college would be full of memories and friendships that would be pretty great. As a freshman, I remember being worried when I attended my first class or went to eat my first cafeteria meal, thinking I would be lucky to make it through the first week without a breakdown, never mind make lasting friendships. However, I soon found that these ‘lasting friendships’ were replaced by new family members. I could spend hours up here telling you stories and memories of times spent with friends, from water-sliding and snowball fights on the quad, to late-night music jam sessions, to grocery shopping trips that turned into all-day events so we could avoid homework, to deep conversations over two-hour lunch dates, to families adopting me in and calling me one of their own. Friends who turned into family. The beautifully unexpected.

I came to Houghton expecting to learn things – I think we all did. Sit in class, write notes, take tests, and get grades. But I walk away from Houghton with way more than head knowledge. I come away with a lifestyle that causes me to ask questions, seek out answers, and never be content to accept things at face value. My educational interests have expanded and deserve to be further pursued through jobs and graduate school, much like all of you. I expected an education and came out with a new perspective. The beautifully unexpected.

Speaking of education, our professors were an integral part of our time here. Sure they taught us. But my acquired knowledge was not just through lectures and class time as I expected, but through watching how they lived out their life-calling and vocation in a way that honored God and poured into their students. Whether I had a meal with them to talk about psychology research, prayed with them in their offices, went over to their house with friends for a Christmas party, or they made sure I was “eating breakfast and calling my family”, these professors meant more to me than just a means to a diploma. They became true mentors. They are people who sincerely want to see me
and all of us succeed academically, spiritually, emotionally, and vocationally. And like all of us, having friends who attended other colleges and universities where this is not the norm reminds us that what we experienced here at Houghton is the beautifully unexpected.

Finally, I came to Houghton expecting to find ‘Christians’. You know – the typical person who goes to church and prays before meals. And I found that. But I also found more than that – I found people who are true Jesus-followers. The ones that give up their lives for what He has called them to do in service to Him. The ones that worship Him and give Him their all. By no means are any of us perfect. But we are all called to take what was invested in us here at Houghton and go into the world, offering what we were graciously given back to Him. And that will look different for each of us. I hope and pray we have the attitude of Erma Bombeck, who once said, “When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left, and could say ‘I used all that You gave me.’”

May that be what we are known for. A class of students who fully embraces life and takes what we learned at Houghton and offers it, along with our talents, back to God. And remember – sometimes our “expected” does not even begin to measure up with God's beautifully unexpected.
The Class of 2014 that leaves Houghton is not the same class that arrived in the fall of 2010.

I remember that day well. August 27, 2010. There are so many moments from that day that I can recall very quickly. I remember walking all my belongings up the three flights of stairs to the fourth floor of Rothenbuhler Hall, with the assistance of 15 people who were there to help. It only took two trips thankfully. I remember meeting my roommate for the first time, and wondering if I had somehow sinned and my punishment was having him as my roommate. But after countless arguments and disagreements over the next couple of years, I grew to love him like a brother. I remember sitting in the Chapel with tears in my eyes, knowing that I would be starting something new and exciting, but not wanting to move away from the familiar things in my life: my family, my home, my friends. I remember sitting on the hill next to Luckey while my dad explained to me that he cherished the times we had had together, but my life was now mine to live and direct as I saw fit. The tears were present here as well. I remember sitting in my dorm room while my parents walked out the door for the last time. I saw the tears on their faces, as they left their little boy to fend for himself in a foreign environment. They turned the corner out of the room and I lost it, expelling whatever tears I had remaining after crying all afternoon. I had no excitement at that moment; just sadness. I remember having my first floor meeting fifteen minutes later, knowing full well that the other men sitting in the room with me would undoubtedly become my best and closest friends. I did my best to remember their names. I remember that day well.

I am sure that all of you, my fellow seniors and soon to be alumni of Houghton College, had experiences on that day that you remember just as vividly. For me, that day was memorable; as I am sure it was for you all as well. However, that day was not formative in any way. The events of that day did not define me as a Houghton student. The tears that I shed that day did not bring me perpetual sadness at Houghton. I believe that this fact is due in part to a couple things. First, the sadness that I felt on that day and occasionally later was in part to my leaving behind everything that I knew and loved. Second, the sadness was also due to the immense challenge that faced me at Houghton. Here I was, leaving behind all that I had ever loved and facing the greatest challenge to date in my life. This is how I arrived at Houghton College: sad, scared, and vulnerable. I am sure that many of you also felt a melding of these feelings. However, like me, those feelings did not define your Houghton career.

I believe that the underlying reason why we have not been defined by our diverse pasts is actually due to the vulnerability that we felt. You see, vulnerability is an interesting paradox for a Christian. In the moment, it is the last resort; the option that we are always hesitant to choose. Being vulnerable is uncomfortable. We put ourselves—our ideas, our feelings, our personas—out for the world to see and hope that no one shuts us out because of them. We long to be accepted, so we take every effort to fit in the mold of society and act and believe in the way that we “should”, avoiding all vulnerable moments and situations. Like I said, vulnerability is uncomfortable. But vulnerability can be a good thing; I would argue a necessary thing. It is in our times of vulnerability that we have the most potential for divine change in our lives. God works through our vulnerability. It is when we come to him completely humbled that he can do the most work in our lives. All we have to do is look for him. I have found this to be the case time and time again through my time spent here at Houghton. God has worked on me through instances of death, life, tribulation, and joy. God even worked through the devastation that I felt when I received a C+ in Dr. Fisher’s 3M class freshman year.

It is no coincidence that through all of our experiences, God has changed us. Like water wears away stone at each passing, refining the once coarse rock into something to behold and cherish, we too have been changed and shaped consistently by God in a multitude of ways. I feel that I have grown in the Lord more over the past four years than at any other point in my life. I have experienced firsthand what God can do when you come to him humbled and vulnerable. For this reason, I can safely say that the Class of 2014 that is leaving Houghton is not the same class that arrived in the fall of 2010. I know how I have personally grown in the Lord and been changed by him, but what about you? How has he changed you over your time at Houghton? Only you can answer that question.
A Houghton education teaches and challenges one to think differently about the world. A Houghton experience affords the opportunity to do so. I have learned so much in my Houghton classrooms. And yet this pales in comparison to what I have learned outside of them. As I look back on four years spent in a place that has become dear to me, it is not the book learning that I will remember.

Rather, it is the conversations about God, faith, and life that reached into the wee hours of the morning. It is learning to appreciate the wonder of the sky – day or night. It is group study sessions that involved more laughter than homework. It is learning to listen for the still, small voice amid the noise. It is professors who have told me their stories and offered advice as I tried to make sense of my own. It is late night walks in the snow steeped in rich conversation or in silence. It is a trip with a new friend to a worship service in a tradition much different than my own. It is the philosophical conversations that took place surrounding or instead of writing papers. It is sitting on the floor of a dorm room or in the living room of a townhouse or on the grass outside to share testimonies and life stories. It is connecting deeply to a local church and the people there. It is holding a heartbroken friend in my arms as tears flowed freely – or letting a friend do the same for me weeks, months, or years later. It is casual dinner conversation turned theological discourse. It is spending the summer on a deserted campus, working side by side with a professor and classmate. It is the frustrating conversations in which I was forced against my will to see someone else’s point of view or the flaws in my own. It is the fellowship of many shared meals that have somehow all blended together. It is the Koinonia service that began or ended with tears. It is chapel services that challenged me to think differently about my faith, my God, or my world. It is Sunday afternoons spent walking through the woods or memorizing Scripture with a friend. It is sitting in a professor’s office, near to tears with the weight of making decisions about my future. It is learning and practicing the importance of Sabbath rest. It is the strengthening of certain friendships and the letting go of others. It is learning to appreciate solitude while also realizing what it means to live and grow as part of a community.

This is my Houghton education. Choosing a major, taking classes, writing papers, listening to lectures, suffering through exams – these are but a small part. My real Houghton education has come from the people that I have encountered here. As I prepare to leave this place, I am grateful for all that my professors have communicated to me in four years of classes. But I am abundantly more grateful for the four years of experiences that have shaped my Houghton education.
I’m one of few college students whose home is closer to campus than student housing. Let me say that again in a slightly different way: it takes longer to travel to my townhouse than it does to travel to my childhood bedroom.

As a senior at the high school just down the road, I knew more Houghton college students than most averagely social underclassman. As a senior in high school, I knew the cool college hangouts, the public and the less public-and-more-sketchy alike. I knew the inside jokes around campus, the buzz and the hot conversation topics. I had taken some classes, so I had a handle on the academics: which professors to take, which not to take; how to study in the library, how to look like you’re studying in library. I went to all the sports games, I crashed the student life events, and I sledded down the ski-hill on dining hall trays. In other words, I knew what to expect. I knew what it meant to get a Houghton education.

But of course, despite what I thought I knew about Houghton as a senior in high school, the last four years have collectively afforded me the wonderful opportunity to discover just how wrong I was.

When I reflect, I can identify three specific things that I couldn’t have possibly anticipated with respect to earning a Houghton education. The first of which is that I could never have imagined the amount of time I would spend whittling away at an enormous workload. Not in my wildest dreams—or darkest nightmares—could I have foreseen the hours huddled around coffee, computers, and books, sometimes alone, and sometimes with commiserating comrades. And it’s not only schoolwork—we all know the many other, ulterior responsibilities that college life occasions. Someday, perhaps, the value of all of this hard work will become clear.

The second thing I hadn’t seen coming about a Houghton education—and this is the one you’re all definitely expecting—is the people. This is a cliché I can’t help stepping in: the people I’ve encountered in my four years here have continually affected me in ways that I can only describe as surprising. Surprising for many reasons, I suppose, but mainly surprising because a genuine good and active will pervades this campus. I don’t mean that we’re all rosy-cheeked, do-gooding cherubs floating airborne around the quad—that, it seems, would be a special sort of hell all together. What I mean is that Houghton people have continually demonstrated to me that they are trying their best for the best. People care about improving the lives of those around them. This doesn’t always go as planned. Oftentimes we fail to communicate; sometimes we get angry. But that’s okay, I think, because we’re generally willing to forgive and rebuild.

The last thing that I couldn’t have imagined about a Houghton education is the agency. This one is sort of tricky to nail down. I think what I mean to say is that Houghton has the capacity to foster confidence-in-action. By this I mean both confidence in my actions, as well as the sense of confidence-in-motion, confidence that takes an active, shaping form in the world around me. And maybe this is the point where the two preceding points come into contact. Because of the workload (the study, care, and responsibilities demanded of me) and the people who genuinely wish to help those around them, I have been shaped into a person of an agency, a person who can identify needs, envision solutions, and enact change.

If this were a commencement speech I would finish by telling you to go forth and show the world your newly minted Houghton-granted agency. And though I can only assume that I was asked to speak here and now rather than tomorrow because of some mix-up in the president’s office, it is for the best, because the way I want to end is not so much a commission as it is a thank you. Thank you, Houghton, for proving that I didn’t know what to expect.
“Houghton College has offered us an education to grow into, rather than an education that we will outgrow.”

It feels in my life that I am on a delayed schedule, and that it just takes me longer to process and internalize things and it was the same story in college. I’m not saying that I don’t learn, or that I haven’t learned anything in college; rather I’m saying the opposite. I’ll share a little story to drive my point home if it is confusing you: Before I was dating my girlfriend, she went to a high school where my oldest brother was the math teacher there. We laugh about that fact now because the world is so small, but she did not laugh about him being her teacher then. He was tough, and it was a tough class. He kept saying the same thing over and over when students would ask questions on the tests: “I’ve given you all the tools,” he would say. I’ve given you all the tools? What does that even mean? Even as his brother I couldn’t see what he was talking about until this year. I can’t speak for his students on whether or not he was telling them the truth about giving them all the tools to do their Calculus correctly, but I know that Houghton has given me all the tools I need to be successful and never stop growing or learning.

Being here at Houghton for four years has opened my eyes to so many things. Not just how to be the hands and feet of Christ, but how to be my best self. What makes a Houghton education so great is that it taught us to think. Whether we are thinking inside the box, outside the box, whether Jesus would think inside or outside the box, debating whether the box really exists or not or just debating the measurements of the box, at least we are thinking. I’ll pull a classic music major move and I’ll make a parallel to instruments. A Houghton education is not like the sound of a piano that once it is played the sound dies away into eventually nothing. Rather it is like the sound of a cello because it can go on essentially forever. The sound can grow and shrink but as long as the bow is drawn across the strings the sound will go on. So as long as we are questioning and thinking we will never be complacent, but rather we will grow in mind and spirit. Houghton has given us a great base of knowledge off of which we can build successful careers, but Houghton also gave us the opportunity to be well rounded and receive a liberal arts education. Houghton made us think, made us ponder, and in the end it made us believe that we have been given all of the tools. Now we get to go use them. Thank you.
People say your college years are the best years of your life. I can tell you, in the moment it doesn’t always feel that way. But as you get closer to the end you begin to wonder if its true. You begin to wonder if the intense stress, the all-nighters, your mistakes and your disappointing failures are outnumbered by the grace, the precious relationships, the safety net and the unique joys that our Houghton experience has gifted us with.

When I entered Houghton as a first-year student, I imagined that by the time I graduated I would be this biblically competent, brilliant, strong, self-aware woman ready to gift myself to the world! I imagined that I’d be only a couple years away from marriage and a couple more years away from the job of my dreams. But marriage for me is not a couple years away, nor is my dream job in the near future. Nor is my dream job now what it was a few years ago.

The Class of 2014 that leaves Houghton is not the same class that arrived in the fall of 2010. Outwardly we’re more attractive, more adult-looking and more well-dressed. Inwardly we’re more knowledgeable, more experienced, and our mentalities have matured. Many of us have changed majors, have more clearly defined our passions, and we have ceased to be those young and excited, overly ambitious, free, in many ways insecure, and immature first-years that we once were. We’ve become less wild, more realistic, and hopefully not just further schooled, but more educated. We have progressed from taking so much from the college in terms of resources to giving so much back to the college in terms of service and student leadership. We walk a little taller, we speak with more conviction, and I hope we have learned just as much outside of the classroom as we have inside the classroom.

Coming to Houghton was one of the best decisions I’ve made in life so far; I know that God led me here. People say getting into Houghton is easy; its staying at Houghton that is the hard part. Just as it took prayer and faith to get here, it took prayer and faith to stay here. Perhaps for most of us our experience has consisted of a constant tension between thriving and surviving.

One of the difficulties of being a Houghton student is the deficiency of reflection time, due to busyness and/or a chaotic social life. Often in the midst of us trying to survive, we’re unable to see our own growth. We know that we are not the same, but we cannot easily pinpoint all the ways in which we’ve changed over the years. And sometimes we like to forget how we were before, preferring to believe that we’ve always been as smart and attractive as we are now. We experience change and growth at Houghton in quick and frequent, subtle yet powerful dosages; in ways that confirm that God is still in the miracle-working business.

Transitions inevitably cause us to feel mixed emotions: bittersweetness, the tension between anticipation and separation anxiety, dreams and disillusionment, etc. It can be difficult to muster up confidence at a time like this, where weariness has caused some of us to prefer to just take our diploma and skip walking across the stage. ...oh, if it weren’t for our families.

I believe as time goes by, we will appreciate Houghton more and more. Fond memories will become fonder and every now and then there will arise in us a wistful yearning for a past that we didn’t realize was as great as it was when it was our present. Just yesterday I was that first-year sophomore transfer trying to be introverted and beneath the radar. And now, I am apparently not an introvert and I am strong, I am brilliant, I am many of the things I set out to be. I am more anchored in my faith, and I am a lot more self-aware. We should commend ourselves and give thanks to God for his grace, and his faithfulness. Praise the Lord, we made it.
When I chose Houghton, I could not have imagined all that it means to get a “Houghton education.” If you had asked me what the term ‘education’ meant four years ago, I would have said something along the lines of, “gaining knowledge and learning information to prepare you for a job or other related responsibilities in adulthood.” To say this did not occur during my four years here would be a lie. But it would also be a lie to say that this is the only thing that happened.

During my four years here, I learned what it meant to get a “Houghton education.” This would mean more than simply gaining knowledge. This would come to mean growing, maturing, cultivating relationships, becoming equipped for life beyond Houghton, and most importantly learning and developing in my Christian walk. In reflecting on my education over the last four years, I have considered several individuals and groups of people that truly affected this education.

To begin with: friends. What would we do without them? Being able to live on campus and see your peers daily is part of what makes the college experience so unique! You go to class with friends, you live with friends, you eat with friends, you shop with friends; you do everything with your friends. Sometimes, we get on each other’s nerves, but in the end, friends are there to be by your side. Friends teach you what it means to love someone, how to be selfless and who you can really lean on in life.

Secondly: professors. So often, one hears about the friendly, welcoming, and active faculty here at Houghton. For example, since taking one IS course with Dr. Stephen Woolsey my Freshman year, he still remembers my name and takes the time to greet me in passing. However, the professors are more than just friendly faces. Being so in love with what you do can be reflected in your vocation. When professors are invested in individuals, work extra with struggling students, invite classes over to their houses for dinner, and genuinely love every young adult they come to know, it speaks volumes to their profession. Professors teach you how to reflect God through your life. Whether it’s those in math, science, religion, history, or foreign languages, professors can show you their love for God and how that love is reflected back in their field of study.

Thirdly: staff. Here, I think about coaches, musical educators, employers, and more, who are here to help and support the school in any way they can. I think of those who often seem to work behind the scenes, but personally invest in the lives of athletes, musicians, and student workers. The bonds I’ve seen grow between coaches and athletes, music educators and musicians, and the bonds I’ve personally developed with employers while working various jobs have been unique and impactful. The staff here that is able to work alongside students, whether on the field, in the music building, or a campus center work place, has a special opportunity to teach and disciple students in unique environments. The staff here teaches students that even those who aren’t necessarily professors can still provide us with some of the most important life lessons.

Finally: God. Without the Holy Spirit, the full Houghton education would not be possible. The way God works through people to reveal God’s self to the church is incredibly displayed on a Christ-centered campus. 1 Timothy 6:7 says, “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.” Although we learn and grow in exponential ways here at Houghton, in the end, God and God’s church alone remain. We are blessed to have a beautiful community here at Houghton; one that fosters relationships, encourages growth, and helps us to worship God in all that we do.

So what is a Houghton education? Yes, it is gaining knowledge and processing information. But it also means growing in your relationships, cultivating development on the mental, social, and spiritual levels, and understanding life lessons that one can’t teach purely in a classroom. You learn things like the outcome of procrastinating for too long on a paper or project, the difference between being involved and being way in over your head, the significance of a friendship, and the beauty of life with God and life within a community.

The Houghton education I received at this college is something that has impacted far more facets of my life than I ever anticipated. Lessons I learned and relationships I gained will stay with me for the rest of my life, be catalysts for more education in the future and eventually be lessons I can pass on to more learners in the future. I am beyond thankful for my friends, professors, staff, and God, without whom I would not have experienced my Houghton education to its fullest.
Monday nights at Houghton College are, for me, reserved for Top Gear. For those of you who do not know, Top Gear is a British television show about cars. It combines seductive expositions of the automotive industry’s latest hotrods, hatchbacks, and heinous creations, with the hysterical antics of the three hosts, “testing” cars in the most ludicrous ways possible. Now, as much as I love Top Gear, I never would have begun watching it on my own. As it is a British television show, I probably never would have found it at all. No, I was introduced to Top Gear by one of my professors and it is largely because of him that I have continued to watch it the last four years. Monday nights are Top Gear night because one of my professors has extended me the invitation to watch it with him every Monday night at his house.

Although Monday nights may be “just about Top Gear” for my professor, for me they were never “just about Top Gear.” For me, these experiences exemplify the heart of a Houghton Education. The learning, the growth, the experiences that I will remember for the rest of my life, were not limited to the classroom. Certainly the class time is important because it provides the foundation for these student-professor relationships to grow. After all, our degrees are born from labs, lectures, and liberal amounts of homework. But the classroom is more than that; professors impart their knowledge and students are given the chance to exposit what they have learned. Indeed, the classroom experience becomes dynamic, feeling more like a conversation than a lecture. Professors often take the time to connect the class material to real life. And so, the classroom stops feeling like a classroom, and begins feeling like a real relationship, the stepping-stone for deeper connections.

So many of our professors have invited us into their homes on weekends, or on extracurricular excursions throughout western New York. It is in these moments where we saw our professors as more than just professors, but as friends and mentors. I learned most about faith when, in London for a semester, doubt began to trouble me. My professor took time out of his day to stroll through the park, get coffee, and wrestle with some of those relentless questions with me. I learned most about community when, instead writing until my hand cramped, my class met during our exam period at my professors house to share common experiences that related to the course material. I learned most about learning when, in a class of two students and a professor, we met in the coffee shop for class, or grappled with the course material as we walked across the campus instead of cooped up in the classroom.

I learned about compassion in my professor’s office as a poured out my concerns about my future. I learned about relationships when my professor provided my fiancée and I with several sessions of marriage counseling. I learned about worship when my professor took me to a Buffalo Cathedral for evening prayer. I learned about creation when my professor took me fishing. Indeed, I learned most when my professors set aside books and lectures to grieve with me in times of sorrow, laugh with me in times of joy, and talk with me in times of confusion.

You see, the classroom experience is so important because it is the place where we acquire the foundation of learning. But these relationships were deepened outside the classroom. I learned most from the vulnerability of my professors. I learned most in seeing how they live their lives both in and out of the classroom. And so, I thank God for Top Gear, and the professors who are willing to share it with their students.
Houghton College has offered us an education to grow into, rather than an education that we will outgrow. In each of our first footsteps on this campus I think we all felt a little like we were walking through our own separate open doorways. Broad expanses of cultures, climates, and customs pooled and intersected into this great terminal of learning, as we all with our differently patterned pasts became suddenly a new face among many.

I myself felt deeply unprepared as a first year student, and greatly concerned with what common perceptions of college had taught me to believe were important. I thought I was headed rapidly towards a somewhat foggy concept of independence and freedom. I saw visions of my life here like clips from a movie montage about university life, compiled from photos on my older friends Facebook walls and random advices from my parents and relatives. All of us sitting here today know Houghton to be vastly different from the popularized American college experience.

But I was also met with exaggerated stereotypes upon reaching Houghton campus. We all know the old tropes concerning Shen and Roth, the jokes made at the expense of Houghton couples, the tacit understanding that comes when someone utters the word “community.” These things are harmless, and funny, and in my first months at college they were really all I knew. I allowed my experience here to be defined by the convention of what a Houghton experience ought to be.

The truth is, there is no singular Houghton experience. The doorways we passed through in our every first days here are more like hallways, leading us each down a distinct path, crossing and bumping and melding with others, but inevitably informed by our own private histories and lenses. Until we've left Houghton, crossed this stage, descended the steps, packed our things, and journeyed far, far away, we won’t be able to truly see our Houghton experience for what it was, to look back and reflect from a distance.

In my second semester I was privileged to be able to study abroad in London. It was there that I was first given a taste of what my real, personal Houghton experience was to be like. It was there that I first met some of the professors who were to impact me the most profoundly. It was there that I connected with peers who would share in my frustrations, passions, and at times, deep grief and loss. My time here at Houghton since then hasn’t been what I was initially expecting. At times it hasn’t even been what I wanted. But it has transformed me as a person most definitely for the better, and in ways that I don’t think I will be able to fully understand for many years.

Martin Luther, in his infamous Ninety-Five Theses, wrote “Death is … only a transition to life, yea, a door to life.” In a way, when we leave Houghton, we are dying to the days that we spent here. We are crossing through another doorway, one that will take us to a life where our Houghton experience will mean more than it ever meant while we were right here living it. In the big wide world around us we will understand our educations in applicable contexts, in much the same way that our entry to Houghton four long years ago changed the way we saw our high school selves. I am acutely grateful for the time I have had here, and most especially for the professors who have grown incredibly close to my heart. But I think I speak both for them and for my fellow classmates when I say that I can’t wait leave and find out what my Houghton experience was really all about.
To all my fellow students, faculty, staff and every person who has influenced me at Houghton, I want to say thank you.

When I chose to attend Houghton, I could not have imagined all that it means to get a Houghton education. At the time, I thought that Houghton looked like a nice Christian University with a strong science and equestrian program and that it would give me a good education. Not only did Houghton give me a high quality education but it continued to shape who I am, it shaped my morals, my standards, my beliefs and most importantly helped to give me a firm foundation in Christ.

Houghton has become a family, a community; a home for so many of us. It has been a place where we have been tested and tried but have learned that ultimately Christ overcomes and He is always with us through our late night homework sessions, our difficult exams, our need for Java, or the circumstances we experience here at Houghton or at home.

What is it about Houghton that makes it so special and dear to our hearts? Is it that we are more than just a number, that we have relationships with our professors who know us by name and have us over to their homes for tea, who let us walk their dogs or bring us soup when we are sick? Is it the fact that we are around other caring, kind, Christ-centered individuals? When others pass us by and ask how we are doing, it is not simply for conversation as they walk past, but they really want to know how we are doing. Maybe it is the chapels and all the incredible speakers, musicians, and artists we are exposed to who feed and nourish our souls and challenge us to be all that we can be in Christ. Whatever it is that we love about Houghton; it will stay with us for the rest of our lives and is a part of our story.

When I was in Tanzania, I realized how incredibly Blessed we all were to be there. In Tanzania, we were taught to live every day to the fullest and that the journey is the destination. Every day was a challenge for us, trying new things and reaching out of our comfort zone. It was a place of reflection, of peace, and it was so clear to see God’s light in all that we did. A Swahili proverb we learned was, ‘Elimu ni maisha sivitabu’ meaning that, ‘Knowledge is life, not books’. Houghton somehow has managed to give us both. It has given us high quality teachings with books but more importantly, it has been the professors who have put their heart and their soul into teaching us that knowledge. It is not just our academic mind that has been broadened at Houghton, it is our total mind, spirit and soul which has been richly blessed and nurtured and we will take that knowledge with us into our daily life wherever we go.

We have made friendships here that will last a lifetime. We have wonderful memories of Houghton to reflect upon for the rest of our lives. Some of us may even return to Houghton and give back the time it has given to us.

We all have different majors and minors and have been a part of different teams, activities, committees and study abroad programs but we all share in the Houghton experience. We are all part of a community we will never forget and we will always share that common bond. I wish I could have been able to get to know every single one of you individually and I wish you all much success in fulfilling your future dreams, plans and goals. As Philippians 4:13 assures us, “We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us”. Go out into the world and serve Christ, let Him guide your steps and never forget the joy, the people and the education which Houghton has given us.

Congratulations Class of 2014, we did it! ...Thank you Lord...I love you all and will miss you.