2011-2012 Honors Convocation Luncheon

On Sunday, April 22, 2012, President Randy Helm, faculty, staff, student recipients, parents and guests gathered to meet and honor donors who provide generous support for awards and prizes at Muhlenberg College. During the lunch, remarks were made by President Helm and Amanda Meier ’13. Amanda is a biology and environmental science major from New Providence, New Jersey and this year’s recipient of the Dr. James R. Vaughan ’52 Student Research Award. She is the president of EnACT, Muhlenberg’s Environmental Action Team, and a Goldwater Scholar. Amanda delivered the following speech about her experiences at Muhlenberg and her passion for learning.

As I walk along Academic Row, now that spring has arrived, I see students hastening to their morning classes, red maples swaying gracefully in the breeze, several robins aggressively snatching the ever-evasive worm and many, many squirrels scampering across the sidewalk. If you stop for a moment and look at how all of these very different organisms interact, you can begin to see how they are entirely connected. I was not able to see the interconnectedness of every person, of every being and of actually everything until becoming immersed in my academic life at Muhlenberg College.

I entered Muhlenberg as a biology and environmental science double major, intent on pursuing a Ph.D. in botany to add to our understanding of the natural environment. While my science courses provided me with an in-depth understanding of the workings of the world around me, each course outside the sciences gave me new ways to approach the world. These classes included Music Theory, Cultural Anthropology, Electronic Music and a religious studies class titled Monotheism: Creating God.

Most memorable was my first-year seminar, How to Think About Weird Things, with Dr. Ted Schick, professor of philosophy. I had to contemplate whether or not I actually existed, what reality was and even how the tiniest of particles does not seem to follow the laws of science that I was learning in my other classes. I came to the understanding, as all come to in the pursuit of knowledge, that the more I learned, the more I would realize just how little I knew.

Understanding this concept was more important than any other as I began to perform independent research in plant-insect ecology with Dr. Rich Niesenbaum, director of sustainability studies. Because of the generosity of a donor, I received a grant the summer after my freshman year to perform an independent research project – an opportunity to go through the processes that professional researchers go through daily: reviewing literature, designing experiments, carrying them out and trying to figure out what the results actually imply beyond the experiment itself. Throughout this process, my understanding of how much there is yet to discover about the Earth helped me to deal with the often frustrating variables that are present in

You can view photos and highlights from the 2011-2012 Honors convocation Luncheon by visiting www.muhlenberg.edu/main/devel/gallery.html
all ecology experiments, such as a fluctuation in temperature or wind current, as well as helped me to think creatively regarding what might actually be occurring in the systems I studied.

As I reflect upon that summer, I can see just how much that experience, along with my research the following summer with the Honors Summer Research Grant, allowed me to mature as a researcher. This is reflected in my application for the Goldwater Scholarship, a nationally competitive undergraduate scholarship for students with a dedicated commitment to a career in science or math.

In my sophomore year I was awarded Honorable Mention, and this year, after applying again, I was named a Goldwater Scholar. This summer, because of the generosity of my sponsor, the Vaughn family, I am able to continue to pursue my passion for research through my honors thesis, work that I plan to continue into graduate school. I know many other students who have also been able to perform independent research projects thanks to these very generous grants from donors. Some of these students have even altered their initial career path due to the amazing experiences that they have had.

Through being able to connect what I have learned in the breadth of classes I have taken at Muhlenberg, experiencing how natural systems work in synchrony with one another through my research and forming relationships with students and professors of varying ideologies at Muhlenberg, I can now comprehend how that squirrel that I almost tripped over several times when walking to class is really not all that distant from me. I shall bring this deeper and more holistic understanding of the world that I’ve been granted here at Muhlenberg with me in each of my journeys in the future.