

The Northern Experience

By James S. Lombard '58 BS



It has taken me some years since entering NMU in the fall of 1954, and subsequently graduating in 1958, to be able to adequately reflect upon, assess and evaluate the value and outcomes of my years at NMU. This I call the “Northern Experience.” Simple clichés would reveal an idyllic four years. The excitement of an atmosphere where learning and growing professionally comes to mind when I think back. But the real assessment and appreciation of that time came to me much later.

The most obvious values of a college education are readily apparent. The monetary value is but one outcome. Studies have consistently shown that college graduates earn substantially more during their working lifetimes.

The intrinsic value of being educated is less apparent. This is the ability to learn all kinds of things and continue lifelong learning. An educated mind has unlimited

potential. The inherent value of education begets education, a sustaining legacy for many generations.

I don't think anyone can totally evaluate the potential of their college years while they're in the process of being educated. Applying and evaluating their education comes afterward, a reflective time that causes us to ask, “Why was I so fortunate to have had this opportunity?” “What has it meant to me, and my family for generations to come?”

In the fall of 1954, a somewhat naïve youth from Hermansville, Michigan, unprepared for any kind of rigorous academic endeavor, entered Northern Michigan College, as it was known as then. Through the patience of wonderful professors, that young man—me—somehow managed to survive that first year. The small, close setting and encouragement allowed for success.

The second year was truly a blessing, for I had the good fortune of taking two classes from Dr. Luther S. West. I experienced great success through Dr. West's teaching and mentoring. This was a monumental experience in my academic career. It was the inspiration from Dr. West that gave me confidence to continue my studies. This for me was a “turning point,” or as former NMU President Judith Bailey would say, a “defining moment.” Dr. West's encouragement of me and many others reinforces the adage

that “chance favors the trained mind.”

I am pleased that NMU embraced the idea at that time that “everyone has the right to try.” This has opened academic doors for many people in terms of degrees, advanced study and professional accomplishments.

Reflecting on that turning point directly attributable to Dr. West, and all the good things that have happened as a result, spurred me to initiate the Dr. Luther S. West Biological Scholarship, which has grown with contributions and now funds scholarships for outstanding students.

If we believe that an educated society is the best investment for the future, then it would be my hope that other graduates reflect on their accomplishments and successes as a result of their “Northern Experience” and make a commitment to the future of NMU in terms of gifts for scholarships, endowments, annual giving or institutional gifts, so that others can have the opportunity to reach their potential—a legacy of undiminished and incalculable value.

In addition to earning a degree in science from NMU, James Lombard holds degrees from the University of Michigan, Eastern Michigan and a doctorate from Wayne State. He is a retired public school administrator living in Ann Arbor.

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