As the nation’s only historically African American Roman Catholic college, Xavier University remains committed to ‘the promotion of a more just and humane society.’ This small New Orleans university prepares students for their chosen careers while providing a strong foundation in the liberal arts. With its stellar reputation for graduating a wealth of scientists, Xavier has much to offer.”

Fiske Guide to Colleges 2014

As my two teenage daughters embark on their college journeys, I find myself reflecting on what a liberal arts education involves, and thinking about the education I received at Xavier more than thirty years ago. As I reflect, I am realizing that Xavier prepared me well to handle the challenges of life and career. Indeed, I can confirm from personal experience that the statements above from the 2014 Fiske Guide are true: classroom instruction was excellent; there was a strong emphasis on writing and critical thinking; and Xavier did instill in us students a spirit of caring for others.

As I describe my own experiences, I feel compelled at the outset to emphasize that others of my fellow alumni are better examples of the Xavier success story. I think in particular of Dr. Regina Benjamin, the compassionate Bayou La Batre, Alabama, physician who rose to become the
nation’s top doctor—Surgeon General of the United States—and who now serves as the Endowed Chair in Public Health at Xavier. I think, too, of Rear Admiral Stephen Rochon who, after an illustrious career in the U. S. Coast Guard, went on to become the nation’s first African American White House chief usher, serving in both the Bush and the Obama administrations. Rochon was also an advisor for the recent film “Lee Daniels’ The Butler” starring Oprah Winfrey and Forest Whitaker. Dr. Benjamin and Adm. Rochon are two of our shining examples. But I have a story to tell as well.

My story begins in the summer of 1977 when, as a pre-freshman, I entered the very first session of Xavier’s Stress on Analytical Reasoning (SOAR) program, directed by Dr. JW Carmichael, a chemistry professor and the pre-medical advisor. Drawing on the educational theory of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, Carmichael created a series of innovative laboratory exercises in which students performed experiments and drew conclusions based on the results they obtained. No extensive prior knowledge was assumed; everything was deductive; and no conclusions were allowed that were not based on the results. In the process of completing the exercises, we students learned to think like scientists—and it was also great fun! I still carry the experience with me when I think of what, in today’s parlance, “active learning” is all about. The truth is that Xavier, through SOAR and similar programs, has been engaged in promoting active learning for a long time. This is likely why the National Science Foundation
has designated Xavier as one of only a handful of Model Institutions of Excellence nationwide.

When I started at Xavier, I had not had much experience with writing. Essays and term papers were largely foreign to me. But that all changed in my freshman year, when I learned to write a tightly organized essay and a well-researched term paper in English Composition class, and I took an Honors History course under Dr. Thomas Gallagher, for whom we had to write many essays. Moreover, in Professor Thomas Bonner’s Creative Writing class, I was able to gain additional experience by writing in a variety of genres: poetry, the short story, creative nonfiction, and the technical report. Perhaps the most difficult assignment I had as a student, though, was to write a literature-based paper for Dr. Richard Burke’s Advanced Inorganic Chemistry class. I decided to focus on iron-sulfur cluster metalloproteins. Reading and struggling to comprehend all of those journal articles was tough, but in the end I learned that this was something I could actually do. The skills I learned, and the confidence I gained, came in handy later when I entered graduate school in biochemistry, and they are useful today as I write scientific or scholarly papers as part of my job as a university professor.

Another thing I learned at Xavier was what good classroom instruction looks like. As I lecture to students today, I try to emulate my Xavier professors. Foremost among these is Dr. John Sevenair (now emeritus), a
synthetic organic chemist who would walk into the classroom with only a single 3 x 5 inch index card containing notes. He would then proceed to give a flawless lecture on the fundamentals of organic chemistry, providing clear examples to illustrate major points. Typically, he would stop midway through lecture and have us take a short quiz based on a concept he had just introduced. This kept us stimulated and closely paying attention, and it was a really effective way to teach.

On the other hand, what I learned in Dr. Joseph Lefevre’s Health Ethics class was something different: I learned to think independently about social and ethical issues. He never told us what the “right” answer to an ethical problem was; rather, he encouraged us to think for ourselves. I know that this is a difficult thing for a professor to do, especially when he holds a particular view (to this day I don’t know what his views were), but it is nevertheless true that taking this approach is essential if the student is to develop as a critical thinker. Looking back, I can now say that the analytical skills I gained in Dr. Lefevre’s class have been invaluable to me. They have helped me to become a more informed and engaged citizen.

With these examples, one can see that Xavier is a liberal arts college that offers excellent instruction, teaches students how to write, and empowers them to think independently. But, you might say, a lot of liberal arts colleges do this: how is Xavier different? The answer is that Xavier is different because it is a caring and nurturing place whose goals reflect the
mission of its founder, Saint Katharine Drexel. For me, Xavier’s mission was embodied in Sr. Mary Carl Malmstrom, who passed away in 2009. Sr. Carl, who was a chemistry professor and the director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Minority Access to Research Careers (MARC) program at Xavier for a number of years, was the one who first encouraged me to consider a career in research. She kept in touch with me after graduation. Through my circuitous path to the PhD, with its twists and turns, she never lost faith in me, even though I almost lost faith in myself. Always encouraging, she even wrote a letter of recommendation for me years later, when I applied for a faculty position. I feel that she really cared about me (and many others as well); she took an interest in how I was doing. She exemplifies the caring spirit of Saint Katharine, which infuses and informs everything about my fair alma mater. This same spirit extends to, and transforms, all who enter Xavier’s gates.