

Mark Somerville

Build Week – opening remarks

As you probably know, when Olin started we had this idea of inviting students to be partners to come and build the college. There was this partner year, and they were joined by another set of students and that first class, the Class of 2006—throughout the time they were here, they were helping to invent, to test, to reinvent every aspect of Olin. Every single class those students took was the first version of that class. Which means it was a mess.

And so finally, 2006 came, and we were all very excited; we had champagne in the faculty meeting, which is, I think, the only time we've ever had champagne in a faculty meeting. There was a lot of celebration, and one of the things students did to celebrate was they made t-shirts. The front of the t-shirts read: Olin Class of 2006, worst Olin education, ever.

And, it's kind of true, because every single thing they did was a first version. Every class that they were part of they were helping to make better for the next class. It was going to be better for the next class, and having been there, nothing about it was smooth. There were lots of train wrecks along the way. But the back of the t-shirts said something different: Olin Class of 2006, best Olin education, ever.

And I've got to tell you that, actually, I think that that is closer to the truth. And the reason I think that is closer to the truth is I go out and I talk to alums, and I look at the stuff they're doing, whether it's bringing sanitation to sub-Saharan Africa, or building amazing autonomous drones; they're doing amazing stuff. And I talk to them about what their experience was at Olin and how transformative it was, and it's just clear that their time at Olin made an enormous difference in their lives and helped them become the people they are. It was an incredibly transformative experience.

I tell that story because I think it gets at what is a fundamental misconception that generally is held in society about education and that I think we question here at Olin. And the misconception has to do with how we think about what education is. The common way of thinking about education is as what you'd call a prerequisite product. It's this thing that we build for students—faculty members build for students using Lego blocks as classes, we stack them together and then we sell them to students: "here are these things, once you have all the Lego blocks then you're good, you can go out and do stuff." That's what we think about and that's the financial model we have as well.

The story of the best Olin education ever is one that says: the best education is one that's about learning as you go. It's about the idea that creating together and having that creation of value happening at the same time as the learning—having those two things be mutually reinforcing—that's the sweet spot. That's what's special about Olin.

I think that idea that at Olin students are co-creators, not just consumers, is one that we started then and that we've tried really hard to keep in place over the years.

Part of keeping it in place over the years is that a number of years ago there was the idea of creating Build Day. A set of students said, "listen, we hear these stories about the Partners. They got to build Olin. We want to help build Olin, too." And they came up with this idea of doing a day at the end of spring semester that was Build Day. All kinds of projects happened that were about making Olin a better

place. It was super cool, super fun. It was also at the end of the semester and after we'd done it twice along with doing final events, Expo, and all the other stuff that happens at the end of the semester, everyone was like, enough. And so it kind of faded away.

Where we are today with Build Week is saying, actually, the cultural part of that, the idea that students should be involved in building the college is core to Olin's DNA. It is a critical part of what makes Olin, Olin. It's why I want to be here. We need to find ways to create that environment both during our normal semester when we're running new classes with you, and you're like, "why are we doing this, this doesn't make sense!" Well, because that's part of the deal. Right? You try new things, you screw up and you learn from them, and that's what actually leads to your success as well as Olin's success. But it's also the idea that we can experiment and create new spaces in which to try experiments, so one potential space is this January space which traditionally we have not used. What does it start to look like if we ask the question, *how might we build a college?* in this space.

I think the idea of doing a Build Week makes a lot of sense. It's the right time to do it. It harkens back to our roots. It also is the right time, I think, in Olin's history, to do it. It is Olin 20/20. We've been around for 20 years. We've had one president for 20 years. We were created to address problems in engineering education that were identified 20 years ago. We are now at this inflection point as an institution where we need to decide what's next, and we need to decide who we want to be next, and what problems we want to solve next.

I propose that who we want to be should remain being a place for students as co-creators; should remain bring a place where we build this together and make this a better place.

What we want to solve is, I think, an open question, and I think that's part of what we need to do as we engage in Olin 20/20. I think Build Week is going to be a wonderful opportunity for us to address that.

Thank you all for being here. I'm super excited to be part of this. Come to my thing, it's going to be super cool.