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A View from Melrose

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Wildcat champions on and off the field

When I first announced to my family that I had been appointed president of Linfield College, my Minnesota nephew immediately exclaimed, “Hey, they’ve got a great football team!” My nephew attends St. John’s, a college that has faced Linfield on the gridiron in the past.

This year one of my Midwestern colleagues, Paul Aslanian, served as our interim CFO. Paul has taken to referring to Linfield as “the Notre Dame of NCAA Division III.” Paul is talking about more than football when he makes his quip: Notre Dame is one of America’s strongest academic institutions.

It is true: Linfield has a great tradition in football; we possess the most consecutive winning seasons in history. And this year we set a new mark at the college, when our softball players won the first national championship of any Linfield women’s team.

But like Notre Dame, we possess other great traditions as well. Not only do we excel in athletics, we excel in academics.

When Tim Benzel ’06 was a senior at Evergreen High School in Vancouver, Wash., he made two lists. The first ranked small college football programs; the second rated colleges by academic excellence. Tim found the lists intersecting at Linfield College, where he eventually became our starting quarterback and graduated last December with a 3.56 GPA, majoring in economics and finance. Tim has just become an analyst with Lehman Brothers in New York City.

Another example is tennis player Becca Johnson ’07, the first Linfield athlete to be named NCAA West Region Senior of the Year. In addition to a host of athletic honors, Becca majored in both physics and mathematics and graduated with a 3.78 GPA. After graduation she plans to attend chiropractic or medical school.

It would be easy to continue with this list. I could mention Lisa Smith ’07, a national champion softball player who majored in international business, or Linfield’s star

outfielder, Kevin Mills ’08, who is studying math and education. Both of these young people have displayed remarkable character as well as talent on the field and in the classroom.

I could even move on to other extracurricular achievements in art (Laura Hayes ’07), drama (Patricia Hews Everett ’07), and music (Chris Engbretson ’07), because our students are competing nationally in those fields as well.

But my main point is this. When a student is looking for excellence, both within and outside the classroom, Linfield is a great choice. Tim Benzel knew what he was doing when he chose Linfield. Our athletic teams get plenty of press, but in fact our academic programs are the true measure of our achievement. I contend that Benzel, Johnson, Smith and Mills and all the others are champions because they have their priorities in order – because they decided to attend an academically excellent college. Linfield has enabled them to find their calling and pursue their passions – on the playing field, in the studio, on the stage and in the classroom.

– Thomas L. Hellie



The Linfield and McMinnville communities gathered to celebrate the women’s softball team’s national title, the first women’s national championship team at Linfield. Those honored on their return are, back row, from left, Coach Jackson Vaughan, Amanda Aitleberger, Scott Carnahan, Kelly Bird; middle row, Brittany Miller, Jenny Marshall, Meredith Brunette, Jena Loop, Stephanie Rice, President Thomas Hellie, Cori Simmons, Lisa Smith, Michelle Silbernagel, Assistant Coach Lisa Allen, Assistant Coach Ben Blosser; front row, Erica Hancock, Rochelle Friend, Candice Fujino, Jenessa Peterson, Jessica Popiel, Danielle Stratton, Kendra Strahm, Rachelle Willden, Jessica Bock and Samantha Van Noy.