

## **Vollum Award Acceptance Remarks**

**Ed Lazowska**  
**August 22, 2012**

Thank you President Kroger, Professor Fix, students, parents, faculty, and trustees.

It's a tremendous honor to be with you today, to receive the Vollum Award and to say a few words at the start of Reed's one hundred and second year.

Howard Vollum's company, Tektronix, launched electronics technology in the Pacific Northwest, and the past recipients of the Vollum Award are an extraordinary group.

Reed College – I don't need to tell any of you – is one of the nation's preeminent undergraduate institutions, with an extraordinary record of students going on to become Rhodes Scholars, earn Ph.D.s, and change the world.

Today I thought I'd address the Class of 2016 with a few words about my own college career.

Just like each of you, I was a strong student in high school, and landed at a top college.

I arrived not knowing what to expect, but expecting that college would somehow be very different from high school. The uncertainty about what it would take to succeed was exciting, and a bit terrifying.

Absent any better idea, I proceeded just as I had for the previous four years. I went to class faithfully. I studied non-stop. I absorbed pre-digested knowledge like a sponge.

I got the top score on the midterm in a large freshman chemistry class – larger than any class you'll encounter at Reed. The professor fawned over me, trying to get me to become a chemistry major. Rather than energizing me, this sent me into a deep funk. Was it really the case that I was facing four more years of grinding away like in high school? It was a nightmare.

Here's what saved me. On a lark, during second semester, as I was tanking all my other courses because of my funk, I enrolled in a computer science course – back when a computer with a fraction of the power of an iPhone was the size of a building.

It was unlike anything I had ever attempted. It was creative. It was empowering. It was collaborative. It was intellectually challenging. It was mesmerizing – hours would fly by, without me noticing.

As a sophomore, I was conscribed as a teaching assistant for the course, and as a member of the research group of a phenomenal faculty member named Andy van Dam, who is still a dear friend today – a research group that, just like research groups here at Reed, consisted almost entirely of undergraduates.

Andy was the first person in my life who treated me as an intellectual adult – as a true peer. Rather than being asked to absorb pre-digested knowledge, I was being challenged to figure out how to do things that Andy didn't know how to do – things that no one had ever done before. What we did, more than 40 years ago, was to use a multi-million-dollar mainframe computer as a PC, programming a what-you-see-is-what-you-get hypertext text editor – think “Microsoft Word plus the World Wide Web.” We had ourselves a time-travel machine: we were inventing software systems that would only become practical several decades later, when the hardware caught up.

That's the sort of experience I wish for each of you, here at Reed – and you have come to the best possible place to have such an experience. Find something that's creative, empowering, collaborative, intellectually challenging, mesmerizing. Get out of the pre-digested knowledge rut. Find faculty members who have incredible expectations for what you can achieve, and make you a partner in discovery. Open up your mind to the possibilities.