

## Opening Convocation for Undergraduate Students

Address by Duke University President Nannerl O. Keohane  
August 27, 1998

I am delighted to welcome all of you to this first gathering of the Duke community for the new academic year.

It's a pleasure to greet returning students, transfer students, and those on exchange from other universities around the world, as well as parents and family members who are joining us electronically from other places on campus. But most of all, my welcome is for the members of the Class of 2002. We're really glad you are here, and I promise not to make any jokes about how this class has "taken the campus by storm." But you *are* a palindrome class, one of the rarest there is. Your banners are decorating the lampposts on campus drive for the first time in history, as you take your place in the succession of Duke students across the decades, and it's wonderful for all of us finally to see you face to face.

It was good to be on East Campus to see you with your parents and family members and eager welcoming FACs and Ras and carloads of paraphernalia of all kinds. You already have a lot to absorb, with all the new stuff and exotic experiences that are being thrown at you. I'll try to be as helpful as I can in suggesting some ideas for finding your way as a novice Dukie, sorting out your classes and your belongings and your new friends.

Why call this a "convocation"? Those of you who like to indulge in wordplay may already have thought about that. It's literally a "calling together," of you as a class: people from around the world who have made separate choices to be part of Duke and are now eager to have things get underway. So you are called together to begin a new adventure.

Some of you may have been familiar with Duke since birth; some of you got Duke t-shirts before you could walk; some of you have grown up nearby, or visited the campus often. Others may have never been to the campus before, and know of Duke only from brochures and videos or by reputation. But for every one of you, no matter what you knew about Duke before, actually being part of this university will be a new experience, and an experience that is unique to you, to each individual one of you.

What kind of community are you joining? How can you best tackle this opportunity? What should you be attentive to, seek out, notice, in the days ahead?

### ***1. A balanced institution for an adventurous education***

Duke prides itself on being a well-rounded institution, with a good balance between strong academics and a great social life; between big-time athletics and one of the best research libraries in the country; with a climate that is usually quite moderate -- although in this La Niña year, you may have more chances to find out what a big hurricane is like! But there's just enough winter to make you appreciate the spring, and just enough of the Piedmont summer to make you long for fall; an institution that is regarded by Northerners as Southern and by people in the South as an alien import from New Jersey.

These qualities of balance, of being the best of both worlds, are indeed a great asset for Duke. They no doubt weighed heavily in the decisions most of you made to choose Duke; they surely did in mine. And we were not mistaken: in many ways, Duke does exemplify this special kind of balance.

However, the fact that Duke has this image, and that there is substance behind the reputation, does not guarantee that it will work that way for you. A university education does not come off an assembly line, all wrapped up and crisply packaged, with a lifetime warranty against disappointment.

In fact, the whole notion of "getting" an education is misleading. An education is not something that is handed to you, not something that happens while you just sit back and let it wash over you. Learning is an active verb; so, for that matter, is partying -- and cheering, discussing, working, talking, seeing.

You've worked hard in the past few years to get into college. You've thought a lot about it, directed your courses and extracurricular activities towards that end. Now you are here. You are beginning a new life. Get into it. Savor it. Don't move too quickly past it to think about how this is going to help you get somewhere else. It's terrible to live your whole life always seeing your present activities as instrumental to what happens next, never enjoying what you are actually doing until you're old and tired and it's too late.

So, choose your courses wisely, but choose them with a spirit of adventure, playfully as well as carefully, not seeing them just as a route to med school or law school or grad school or business school, but as a set of intellectual voyages of discovery that will shape in profound ways the kind of person you are and how you will live your life.

In coming to a research university rather than a smaller college, you have chosen breadth and diversity rather than immediate intimacy and focus. You will have available to you over the next few years a splendid, indeed bewildering array of courses and seminars in every subject you can think of, and quite a few that are now unknown to you. You should take advantage of your faculty advisors and others who are here to help you chart your course through that array, so that you build a program that will deepen and broaden your understanding, hone and enrich your mind, as well as prepare you for the next steps in your life.

You surely can create your own intimacy and focus, even on a great university campus. There are many faculty members at Duke who are eager to know you well and work with you closely. But reaching out to them will take some initiative on your part. Faculty in a university are busy people; teaching undergraduates is one of their main responsibilities, but they also do lots of other things. Since it's a big place, you cannot take for granted that they will be responsive to your own intellectual needs and yearnings unless you are mentally fully engaged in the work, and willing to reach out to them to ask questions, to challenge them, even, to express your ideas.

Fortunately, most Duke faculty members -- including many in the Medical School and other parts of Duke, not just the undergraduate colleges -- find that teaching bright, articulate young people is one of the most rewarding things they do. You will quickly learn that they pay careful attention to their teaching, and to their students.

One of the most beloved of those teachers is Prof. Bonk, in the Chemistry Department. His introductory chemistry course is known as "bonkistry," an experience shared by many students across the years. The story is told -- you may already have heard it -- of the time when four guys decided to head up to Charlottesville to party before the chemistry final, and had such a good time that they rolled back into Durham only a few hours before the final was to be given -- without having studied at all. Panicked, they went to Prof. Bonk and asked if they could take the exam later.

Prof. Bonk, they said, we went to UVA over the weekend, and on the way home we had a flat tire on a back country road, and by the time we got it fixed and got back to Durham, it was too late to study for the test. Prof. Bonk looked them over, thought for a moment, and then agreed that they could take it the next day. So they all hit the books bigtime and arrived the next morning ready to ace the test. They were each given blue books and sent into separate exam rooms.

The first question was straightforward about some chemical element, for 10 points. The next one, for 90 points, was this: "Which tire?"

Three morals to this tale: always tell the truth to your professors, study well in advance of the final, and do your partying closer to home.

## ***2. A high-spirited place, with multiple sources of excitement***

One of the very best things about Duke is that people really get into being excited about lots of things, most famously basketball, as you well know. Probably everyone you know, when they heard you'd chosen Duke, asked if you're a fanatic enough basketball fan to flourish around here.

There's a joke going around these days about Dean Smith, the legendary former coach of our fierce rivals twelve miles to the southwest, dying and going to heaven and being met by God himself, because he was such a distinguished member of his profession. God shows Dean Smith to his new heavenly home; it's a modest one-family home, with some faded light-blue Tarheel banners hanging out in front. God says that since so many people are qualifying for heaven these days, it's gotten crowded, and most folks who make it here live in apartments or condos, but because Deano was so good at what he did, he gets a house for himself.

Dean Smith appropriately thanks the Lord, but then says, "Sir, I can't help asking, I see over your shoulder a huge mansion on the hill, with columns and landscaped gardens and snapping bright Blue Devil banners hanging out front. How come I get this house, and Mike K. gets that house?"

God looks at him and smiles, "That's MY house."

In a recent survey, Duke students were ranked number one in the country in terms of supporting their athletic teams; number two was UNC. That support goes for all our teams, including women's basketball, tennis, soccer, lacrosse, golf, crew and yes, football too. By coming out to cheer on the Blue Devils this fall you can help inaugurate a new era of good times for Duke football.

The very fact that our mascot is the Blue Devil says something positive about Duke. The Blue Devils were a French mountaineering team in the first world war, noted for their courage and audacity and their blue capes and berets. When Duke students were given a chance to choose a mascot in the early 1920s, this was their overwhelming choice. And so Duke's symbol is not some animal like a ram or tiger, not a color like crimson or cardinal, but a real live set of heroes, human beings with a lot of intelligence and spunk and panache. That's appropriate for the way this place is.

And the spirit spills over in many other ways. It's not just sports, but high spirits about music, and social life, about theatre of many kinds, about fraternity and sorority life, about art, with student curated shows at the university museum, about community service, religious life, and political activities as well. Those of you who went on Project WILD and Project BUILD are already aware of this.

Just this week Duke was ranked the top school in the nation for social activism by *Mother Jones* magazine, primarily for the pioneering work of some of our students on the issue of sweatshop labor for things that bear the Blue Devil logo. That's a good example of how the Duke spirit shows itself in everything we do.

Work hard/play hard is a well-known mantra at Duke: each of you will interpret it for yourself. But one thing it surely means is that Duke students bring high energy, high spirits, and a sense of dedication to everything they do, whether it counts as work or play.

I mentioned social life, and I want to pause on that. Each of you will have your own ideas about how to make your social life as enjoyable as possible, and I urge you to take some initiatives to create the kind of place you want to party. Reach out, be creative, and let us in the administration know when you find that there are obstacles to doing so, in available space or cost or paperwork hassles.

Part of the social life on any college campus is alcohol, and during orientation you will be given some important information about North Carolina laws and campus regulations. This past summer, my husband and I spent a week in China, and took a cable car to get to the top of the Great Wall. We were amused by the extensive list of regulations for the cable car, all the things you couldn't take on it or do on it, like carrying animals or firecrackers. Our favorite was the prohibition against drinking alcohol on the cable car, "the senses being indistinct." Not a good state of affairs for driving a car, engaging in romance, or studying for a test.

Please recognize -- and help your friends recognize -- that alcohol, especially excessive amounts of it, can be very dangerous to your health. Learning how to use alcohol in moderation is part of becoming a healthy and responsible adult.

### ***3. A beautiful place, in an interesting region***

What else can I tell you about this university, which is now your university?

As you've surely discovered, Duke is a beautiful place physically. The campus includes the tall trees on East, the lovely Sarah P. Duke Gardens on west, the whole range of Duke Forest, and the splendid architecture on both campuses, which was designed by Julian Abele, a very talented African-American architect from Philadelphia, almost 75 years ago. This is a truly lovely place to live and work.

We're in an interesting region of the country, also. The city of Durham has many things that are worth exploring, including the Durham Bulls, the Carolina Theatre, and your very own college drag, Ninth Street. The larger Research Triangle offers you a great many opportunities to explore in cities of different character, and the Atlantic Ocean is only just over two hours away. Myrtle Beach, and all the beaches north of it along the Carolina coast, are worth a visit even during those weeks when most of Duke isn't officially in residence there.

Take advantage of courses and cultural opportunities and potential friendships and alliances on other campuses nearby: at North Carolina Central University here in Durham, North Carolina State in Raleigh, and yes, UNC Chapel Hill. We have within a very short radius several of the finest universities in the world, and in addition to cheering with appropriate ferocity against their sports teams, you can also add to the depth of your own education by exploring some of the intellectual and cultural breadth they offer.

### ***4. The uses of diversity***

In addition to being a beautiful place in a very interesting region of the country, Duke is also, by design, a very diverse community. The faculty, the staff, the student body, are all made up of people from many different kinds of backgrounds -- economic, religious, racial, geographic, cultural. We believe, on very good evidence, that a diverse community provides much better opportunities for education than one that is homogeneous.

But again, you can't just expect diversity to happen to you as you sit by passively -- you need to reach out, take some risks, take advantage of the fact that the people around here, as well as the curriculum, offer you lots of opportunities to learn about the world from very different perspectives than you may have experienced.

One of the most important places where this advice will be useful to you, and where it is probably most needed, is in your friendships. The temptation to spend all your time with people who think, act, dress and talk very

much like yourself comes easily to most of us, especially in new situations. Novelty is scary; you don't know exactly what is expected of you, and you'll need the comfort of people you know and trust to discuss what is happening. This is perfectly understandable, and of course some of your friends will be (and should be) people with whom you immediately feel at home.

But if you succumb to the temptation to spend all your time at Duke with people a lot like yourself, you will be cheating yourself of one of the most significant parts of a good education. You won't learn very much about the world from people who see it pretty much as you do. They will reinforce your notion that the world really is just exactly the way you think it is; but that's a dangerous belief. One of the splendid advantages of a university like Duke as a place to be educated is that there are many different kinds of people here, with many different ways of looking at the world. You should take advantage of that to find out what the world looks like to them, in order to broaden and refine your own knowledge and understanding of the world.

From the beginning of recorded human discourse, people have lamented that they can only experience the world from one set of senses, one life course; for people who are curious, it has always seemed a tragedy that you can never know what the world looks like to someone other than yourself. But you can come close, by getting to know people who come from a different country, speak a different language at home, have skin of another color, worship God in a different way. People who have a lot more money than you do or a lot less, whose views on political and moral issues are much more conservative than yours, or much more liberal.

To get to know such people, you'll have to take some initiatives, and risk getting rebuffed or blown off, but I can assure you that the rewards are tremendous in terms of your understanding of the world. You will have the most precious advantage of any education: you will have some outside ways of testing what you've always taken for granted in your beliefs about the world -- morally, religiously, politically. Some of those beliefs will stand the test of comparison and emerge as true convictions, convictions that define your character and provide a sturdy compass for you for your whole life. Other beliefs will be modified and changed, and some will even be discarded, so that over time at Duke your views and beliefs become more nearly your own, rather than just the views and beliefs of your parents or your high school friends.

We talk a lot at Duke about diversity. It's easy to assume that having different kinds of folks around is a feature of the place that you are expected to tolerate, carefully avoiding being mean or prejudiced. But diversity on a university campus involves much more than that. It is one of the essential sources of your education, part of the way you grow intellectually and as a person.

It's also a good idea to get involved in doing something for someone beyond yourself. More than three-quarters of Duke students do significant community service. They have discovered something you will soon learn as well, if you do not already know it from your own experience. It makes your own life better to help someone else who needs your energy, your optimism, your good ideas. You are pulled out of your own narrow concerns and fretful worries when you try to help someone who is homeless or ill or lonely or in prison or worrying about how they are going to feed their kids. It puts everything else into perspective, and it allows you to strengthen yourself by giving of yourself.

I urge you to get in touch with the Community Service Center on campus to learn more about the many opportunities for service, especially through Duke's neighborhood initiatives for those neighborhoods and schools that are closest to our campus.

It is no accident that every major world religion enjoins us to feel some degree of responsibility for other members of the human family. This is a core definition of what it means to be civilized, for only thus can civil society survive. Unexpected personal rewards also come to those who heed such mandates; you will become a deeper, stronger, more interesting person if you think at least sometimes first of others rather than yourself. A

Duke education should build character, as well as intellect. Character depends on subsuming narrow selfishness in a more enlightened, generous, inclusive vision of the world.

## **5. Conclusion**

Those are weighty pieces of advice: to plan your education in a bold spirit of adventure, to choose your courses and your friends and your extracurricular activities with the deliberate purpose of broadening and deepening your perspective on the world. But the most important thing to remember is that all this great adventure is made up of many particular days, and that you can take it each day at a time. Each day will give you a new chance and bring new possibilities.

One of the books you may have already enjoyed, and if you haven't, should read while you are at Duke, is Voltaire's *Candide*, published in 1759. It's a fierce and funny dissection of several different ways of looking at the world, and it concentrates most of its force on attacking the extreme kind of optimism that believes that everything is for the best in this world, even cruelty, torture and war.

At the end of the book, after an incredible series of adventures, most of them dangerous and painful, the major characters come together for a quiet and useful life on Candide's farm. Pangloss, the incurable and fatuous optimist, says:

"All events are linked together in the best of possible worlds; for, after all, if you had not been driven from a fine castle by being kicked in the backside for love of Miss Cunegonde, if you hadn't been sent before the Inquisition, if you hadn't traveled across America by foot, if you hadn't given a good sword thrust to the baron, if you hadn't lost all your sheep from the good land of Eldorado, you wouldn't be sitting here eating candied citron and pistachios."

Candide responds: "That is very well put, but we must cultivate our garden."

I look forward greatly to sharing this Duke adventure with you, one day at a time. There will be hard times, but there will also be many joyous times. I hope that these years will be full and fruitful for you. The heartiest of welcomes, and good luck to each and all.

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