

Opening Convocation for Graduate and Professional School Students

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It is a pleasure to greet all of you who are beginning advanced training in every field. The first year undergraduates get most of the media ink for their move-in, but your coming is just as significant for Duke, and we are delighted to welcome you.

By your presence here today you demonstrate that you consider yourself a part of the university, of Duke as a whole, as well as the specific school that you have joined. I want to speak with you for a few minutes about what that means, about what kind of community you are joining. And then I'll have some remarks that are more focused on the particular kinds of odysseys you have before you.

1. A real, rather than a virtual, experience

Last May, at Commencement, I conferred dozens of different kinds of degrees on graduate and professional students. Their families and friends and faculty colleagues watched with pride as each marched into the stadium dressed in the academic robes appropriate to his or her profession -- the green of medicine, the orange of engineering, the purple of law and dark blue of philosophy.

These vivid marks of accomplishment are also marks of belonging to an ancient company of scholars. The colorful gowns and hoods are more reminiscent of an ancient guild of craftsmen than of the very modern and worldly professions that you are now preparing yourselves to join. It's unlikely that as an MBA you'll wear your brown-lined hood around the office very much, and it's hard to believe that it would impress your potential clients or employers at McKinsey or Goldman Sachs as much as a tastefully chosen power suit. It's true that other professions, such as medicine and divinity, have their own distinctive costumes that are sometimes worn at work; but academic regalia transcends all particular professions, bringing us together by demonstrating the varied accomplishments within the academy.

Thus, the first thing I would like you to note is the distinctive and colorful *reality* of all of this, walking into a traditional Gothic chapel on a hot August day to be saluted by your new faculty members in full academic regalia. This symbolizes, among many other things, that you have chosen to take your professional education full-strength, in person, in a real rather than a virtual community. There is nothing virtual about ceremonies like this, or about the daily living and working together that you have now embarked upon. You are joining a community, or a large and diverse set of people in a complex and sometimes bewildering place that likes to call itself a community, and even aspires to be worthy of the name.

In doing this, presenting yourself in person and dedicating several years of your life to being in residence for this endeavor, you have made a choice that could not even have been a matter of choice for the generations of professional colleagues who preceded you. If you wanted to be a doctor or lawyer or professor, you spent the required number of years at a university for your training and apprenticeship. However, in some of your fields of specialization, advanced training is now available -- or soon will become available -- on line. Increasingly, you could remain in your jobs and your familiar homes, click on a mouse and undertake the course of study that would lead to the degree you seek. But if you had made that other choice, you would have missed a great deal that will constitute your education.

Duke is committed to developing some of the most sophisticated informational technology anywhere, to help

expand and deepen your training here. We hope, in fact, that while you are here you will challenge us to develop even more effective techniques, to prepare you for the powerful technologies each of you will need in your profession. But we are also committed to the proposition that there are fundamental advantages in doing this core professional training face to face, with colleagues and companions.

One of our flagship programs, the Global Executive MBA, relies heavily on technology to provide most of the course of study to students around the world. But it is crucial even to this program that students spend significant amounts of "face time" in the same physical places with their classmates and professors, to get to know each other and share experiences in a way the Internet never can. For Duke, virtual learning is part of an array of techniques, increasingly fascinating and powerful. But virtual reality is not a substitute for being together, learning together, making your lives together as developing professionals.

2. So what kind of place is Duke?

First off, the Duke campus is exceptionally beautiful, in its architecture and its landscaping. If you have not yet discovered Duke Gardens or Duke Forest, I urge you to do so as soon as you can. The city of Durham also has much to offer, with great restaurants, a vibrant and diverse community culturally, and the Durham Bulls. There are at this point no fewer than three Irish pubs in the area around our East Campus, I'm told. Which prompts me to tell you a joke I heard this summer, about a guy who walks into a bar and orders three beers, sets them up side by side, and takes a sip of each.

The bartender is puzzled, and tells the guy that he'd be glad to bring him a cold refill whenever he asks, but the customer said that he was from Ireland, and had left two brothers in the old country, and that when he drank his three beers he felt close to his brothers far away across the sea.

Well, the guy became a familiar and beloved figure in the bar, coming in every Friday night and ordering his three beers.

One day, he ordered only two beers, and consternation spread throughout the bar. The bartender asked solicitously if one of his brothers had died, and the guy said, "Oh no, but I've decided to give up drinking."

In addition to all of Durham's treasures, we're in an exciting region of the country, the burgeoning Southeastern region, the Research Triangle Park. Some of the finest universities in the country are within just a few miles of us, and I urge you to take full advantage of the special opportunities offered at Chapel Hill, State, and Central, in your fields of interest both professionally and avocationally.

Duke is also a high-spirited place, as you are no doubt aware from the dedicated ferocity with which Duke folks support our sports teams, including most famously, basketball. You'll hear about the fall campout for tickets for Cameron Stadium, and the graduate cheering section is one of the most colorful, the loudest, and most inventive parts of Cameron. Caring about sports brings Duke people together in a marvelous catharsis, or apotheosis, whatever you want to call it, but mainly it's just plain fun.

There's another joke, one I told the freshmen yesterday, that I thought you would enjoy as well; it's 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 Tar Heel 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."

3. What can you expect your lives to be like?

Most of you are probably curious about what graduate school life is going to be like, and how it will be different from what goes before and after. Your experiences in universities and colleges so far have mostly been limited to learning first hand the joys and sorrows of undergraduate life, and observing from a closer or greater distance the preoccupations and practicalities of faculty life.

And now you are about to discover the paradox of tough challenges and deep rewards, loneliness and close comradeship, intellectual exhilaration and irritating dry spells, which is what graduate and professional student life is all about.

Most of you will learn something about being poor, but you will also, if you are fortunate, form friendships and intellectual ties that will enrich you for your entire life. There is not a lot of money in being a graduate student: but, the experience of many decades tells us, there will somehow prove to be enough. And the conversations you have over pizza or tuna casserole and a latte or cheap wine, conversations ranging over every conceivable topic, are likely to be among the very best conversations you will have in your entire life.

The activity you will engage in over the next few years is truly at the heart of the university. Your life, as a committed scholar given a few precious years to develop your craft and find your muse, or a budding professional given a few precious years to clarify your vocation and take your place among the leaders of your field, is, in a very real sense, central to what a university is all about.

Last year I served on a committee of the Association of American Universities charged with reviewing graduate education in the research universities. Our Duke report to that committee stressed the pivotal role of graduate education in the life of the university.

We argued that graduate students are crucial in shaping the larger intellectual conversations that make universities such exciting places, at least potentially. We noted that many of the most exciting breakthroughs in many fields come from the cutting edge work of bright and innovative graduate students. That many of the most fertile social/cultural debates about race, gender, individual and national identity formations, are extensions of discussions and conferences sponsored by graduate and professional students. We argued that the whole intellectual climate of our research universities depends fundamentally on the fact that we have so many bright young researchers and developing new professionals among us. As the report put it,

"Graduate students provide many of our faculty with their only true colleagues in specialized subfields. Furthermore, as graduate students migrate across departmental lines and through laboratory rotations, they pollinate the intellectual climate of discrete departments and cross-disciplinary programs."

I bet you never thought of yourselves as providing pollination, which may not be the best metaphor we could have chosen, but you get the point: your own restless intellectual adventures and search for the best possible training lead you to ignore disciplinary barriers and bureaucratic silos in order to put together the best possible contexts in which to explore the things that matter to you; and that's how the most exciting interdisciplinary work gets done.

The report describes graduate students as "the central nodes or gateways of the modern research university." You will be both teachers and learners, placed squarely amidst the continuum of intellectual development on campus from the rawest first year undergraduate to the most senior emeritus professor. You can, if you care enough, be the best and truest link across the other parts of this continuum, interpreting faculty insights to bewildered undergraduates in language they can understand, and presenting jaded faculty members with the incredible jolt of deep fascination with the field, and insights nobody ever had before.

4. Developing a sense of passion and perspective

The fields that you are entering will change over the coming years with bewildering rapidity, and you could not, even if you wished, master in the next few years the details you will need to carry you through your career. This is truer today than it has ever been in the past, and it will surely be even truer in the future.

So it is especially important, when you survey the enormous masses of material and ideas that will be placed in front of you or thrown at you over the next few years, to develop some principles for getting beyond the details, focusing on what is really important for you to know, and preparing yourself psychologically for the challenges that lie ahead.

As one guide in this process of determining what is truly important, I commend to you an especially thought-provoking set of essays by the great German social theorist, Max Weber. I drew upon his work when I addressed the entering class of graduate and professional students here five years ago, and several of those students have since mentioned to me that they found those ideas useful, so I wanted to share them with you today as well.

In 1918, at the University of Munich, Weber gave two lectures that are available in English translations of his collected works, under the titles "Politics as a Vocation," and "Science as a Vocation."

In the essay on "Politics," Weber follows another great social theorist, Niccolo Machiavelli, in emphasizing that successful leadership requires the willingness to be comfortable with exercising power over others, to think nimbly and strategically about the interests of other people and what they are likely to do as they pursue those interests. Weber deplores the fact that politics too often degenerates from the high pinnacles of bold charismatic leadership to the petty cliquishness of party hacks who are looking out only for their own personal gain.

In the second essay, on "Science as a Vocation," Weber analyzes what it means to be a scientist, in the broad sense of a scholar who uses rigorous and careful methods to discover truth in any field. In one brilliant passage he captures beautifully the exhilarating concentration of effort that marks the life of the scholar/scientist at its best:

A really definitive and good accomplishment is today always a specialized accomplishment. And whoever lacks the capacity to put on blinders, so to speak, and to come up to the idea that the fate of his soul depends upon whether or not he makes the correct conjecture at this passage of this manuscript may as well stay away from science. He will never have what one may call "the personal experience" of science. Without this strange intoxication, ridiculed by every outsider; without this passion ... you have no calling for science and you should do something else. For nothing is worthy of man as man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion.

Weber's challenge is daunting, indeed. But I am sure many of you can resonate to it: the sense of passionate involvement, of absolute absorption in this lab experiment or construing this bit of ancient poetry. This getting it right, and dedicating your whole mind and spirit intensely to doing so.

From what I have said so far, it might seem that Weber follows the traditional duality of action vs. contemplation. In fact, however, the beauty of Weber's message is that these two types of lives are not wholly different after all. Where they converge is in that final sentence of the quote I just read you: "For nothing is worthy of man as man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion." Despite his language, which in this translation sounds sexist to our contemporary ears, his message is surely worth pondering.

In the essay on "Politics," Weber asserts that three qualities are of pre-eminent importance for an effective leader: passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion. The sense of proportion sounds pretty different from the extremist absorption of the scientist; but the passion part is provocatively the same. And later in the same essay, Weber waxes eloquent about this.

The final result of political action often, no, even regularly, stands in completely inadequate and often even paradoxical relation to its original meaning. ... But because of this fact, the serving of a cause must not be absent if action is to have inner strength. Exactly what the cause ... looks like is a matter of faith. ... However, some kind of faith must always exist.

This common thread of passionate faith in a cause, of passionate devotion to the work that lies before you, is essential to the success and meaningfulness of the lives of both the leader and the scholar, as far as Weber is concerned.

It might seem, to a casual observer, as though our convocation this afternoon includes representatives of both of Weber's ideal types, and that you are quite different in your purposes and approach. Those of you who are entering Fuqua business school or the law school would be our best examples of the leader-type, the activist type, the people who are preparing to use power wisely. At the other extreme would be the purest scholar in one of the most austere sciences, an ancient historian or a cell biologist, intent on carrying forward a highly focused understanding of the world.

But even as I begin to divide you into these types, we will all realize that they are too simplistic. Some of you at Fuqua or the Law School will become intrigued by management as an analytical problem or by the science of law, and get your doctorates and teach. One of you pure scientists may someday run the National Science Foundation and need all the political skills that you can muster. And some of the ancient historians among you might actually wind up as deans or provosts or presidents someday.

Those of you who have chosen innately activist professions like business or law will have to work harder at finding time for study and reflection after you leave Duke, so that your job performance can be informed and refreshed by thinking about larger issues than the immediate challenges you will face. I hope that your time at Duke will help prepare you to do this. And on the other hand, those of you who have chosen more contemplative professions should make sure that you do not neglect your responsibilities in the governance of your profession or your community, leaving all that sort of stuff to someone else. I hope that your time at Duke will help prepare you to do this, as well.

Basically, I am asserting the importance of a human life that has balance and variety, and of exploring different aspects of yourself across your lifespan; and I am urging you to use your time at Duke to prepare yourself for that kind of understanding of your own vocation.

Beyond that, I would urge upon you the wisdom of Weber's own core insight: the crucial importance of having principles, of serving a cause beyond yourself, of passionate devotion to and faith in what you are doing. Such passionate devotion will pull you through hard times and give rich meaning to all you undertake. Without it, everything you do will ultimately feel hollow, desultory. As Weber puts it in concluding a passage I have already quoted to you from the "Politics" essay:

Some kind of faith must always exist. Otherwise, it is absolutely true that the curse of the creature's worthlessness overshadows even the externally strongest ... successes.

A modern version of this advice to those of you in the various professions is that you should not see your work only as an opportunity for personal gain or professional advancement. You should use your knowledge and your skills for human betterment, for serving causes that you personally have chosen, to have an impact on society, in addition to earning a good salary and living the kind of life style to which you will aspire. If you do not work from passionate devotion to something larger than yourself, Weber warns us, all the pleasures of your life can turn to ashes in your mouth, because there is no ultimate meaning or value to justify your work beyond the immediate personal selfish gain.

Ethics and character in public life are on the national front burner these days, and we've all seen plenty of instances in modern culture of these temptations and perversions in every profession, in business as well as politics. You believe of course that you would never engage in unethical behavior on such a grandiose scale as that. But you must be prepared for more subtle temptations in every field.

5. Conclusion

Some of my advice has made the world that you are entering sound formidably serious and daunting. It is important to remember that it is also deeply rewarding. You should approach your new vocation with a spirit of adventure and creativity, even of playfulness, in order to live it to the fullest. And you should nourish your sense of humor and your sense of judgment, in order to keep your own bearings in this brave new world.

We look forward greatly to sharing this adventure with you. There will be hard times, but there will also be many joyous times. I hope that these years at Duke will be full and fruitful for you, as you prepare to join -- and eventually to lead, as wisely as you can -- the procession of educated men and women. The heartiest of welcomes, and good luck to each and all.

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