UNDERGRADUATE CONVOCATION ADDRESS
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Duke University
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First, a most hearty welcome to all of you as we begin this new school year. A warm welcome to the parents and families who have accompanied our new students, and who are just on the verge of entrusting you to us and letting go. And of course a very special welcome to the members of the Class of 1998. You have been beginning school years now for longer than you can remember. This one should be different from those that have gone before, and from any that come after.

All of you, we hope, have high expectations for university life; perhaps you also have a pretty clear sense of how it's going to be different from high school. Some of the differences have already occurred to you. I'm sure: living away from home (which, as you discovered last night, involves, at least at Duke, a serious land-rush for space in order to establish your new nest), having a roommate, a more open social life with all the opportunities, and all the potential downsides, that implies -- big time sports (everybody you know must have asked you, when they discovered you were going to be at Duke, whether you like basketball well enough to flourish here).

In the course of the next few days and weeks, your FACS and your RAs and your faculty advisors and the people in student services and the CHRONICLE and lots of other people will be giving you a great deal of advice. For some of you, who are transfers to Duke, you already have some relevant experience which now needs to be translated to a new campus and a new life.

This morning, I want to use my first encounter with all of you to give my own version of how your university experience ought to be different from what you've known in the past, and invite your participation in making it the most positive possible difference you can imagine.

To make this point as usefully as I can, I want to talk specifically about what it means to be at Duke, rather than just generally at a university. Having spent the past year, which was my first year in this job, learning about what is distinctive to Duke, and how it differs from some other institutions I'm familiar with -- institutions that many of you considered coming to and decided against to come to Duke -- I have a few pieces of advice about how to make the most of your Duke 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 neither too hot nor too cold, 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; I confess they did in mine. And we were not mistaken: in many ways, Duke does exemplify this kind of balance.

However, an education is not like a brand name television set or automobile: 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 (even if you take what people say about all those great Duke parties too literally and come to class all the time with your brain only partly in gear). Learning is an active verb; so, for that matter, is partying — and cheering, discussing, working, talking, seeing.

You cannot just assume that Duke's fabled balanced education will be provided for you in the next four years. A Duke education requires your active involvement in all its parts — in the classroom, but also in your extracurricular activities: in your clubs, fraternities, sororities, student government, in your volunteer service and your residential life, in the stands at Wallace Wade Stadium and in Cameron.

It seems unlikely that any of you are planning to just sit back and let the next four years happen to you. But you may not have thought enough about how you are going to ensure that they are as full and meaningful as possible.

Some of you have come to Duke with particular passions; and if this is true of you, you don't have to be told how to get the most out of that part of Duke life. If you came to play the flute or soccer; if you came because Duke is one of the best places in the world to study public policy or environmental science or English literature or history; if you came because you are a math whiz and you know that Duke is the place to be as a mathematician, nobody has to tell you to be sure to spend plenty of time practicing your flute or soccer skills, or to enjoy the new Terry Sanford Public Policy building or the new School of the Environment, or to seek out the companionship of your colleagues in the math department.

For those of you who came to Duke with a particular passion, the potential downside is that you will be so absorbed in pursuing that passion that you will neglect other parts of Duke. You will need to remind yourself occasionally that there are many other aspects of Duke that you should get to know. But you are fortunate to have a passionate interest in something that will provide your key to Duke, your kinetic protection against just meandering through four of the most important years of your life.

For those of you who came because of this fabled balance, without any particular passion but with high hopes of getting the most out of a fine institution and having a great time doing so, you will have to pay more deliberate attention in order to fulfill your hopes. If you fail to pay that kind of attention, you will have missed an extraordinary opportunity, an opportunity that will never be offered you again.

Let's start with residential life, the place where you will spend much of your time for the next few years — some of it (less than your parents could expect or hope) in sleeping, but also in studying, making friendships, pizza parties, long bull sessions late into the night, watching TV together, just hanging out.

We publicize Duke as a residential university, and we make a great deal of the fact that we guarantee you four years housing if you want it. For some Duke students, especially those in what we call "selective housing," residential life is one of the most rewarding and happiest parts of their education. For too many, however, it turns out to be disappointing.

For too many students at Duke, the fond image of bull sessions and pizza parties with good friends along your corridor becomes a prolonged version of last night's land rush, a perpetual struggle to secure space in prime West Campus housing, which means that you move to a new place every year and never develop any sense of belonging or community in your residential experience. The doors along the corridors of too many Duke dorms are almost always locked, not just for security, but in isolation, and some people don't even know who
their near neighbors are. We'd like to fix that, and as you will discover if you have not already, this fall is a crucial time for doing so.

Your Duke class of 1998 has a really strong vested interest in our getting the answers right, since you will be the first class to live for three years under whatever new system we create. I'm not going to take your time this morning to talk about the various possibilities for change -- you have enough to learn about Duke as it now is without being required immediately to think about five or six alternative ways for Duke to be. But you will soon be given a chance (through articles in the CHRONICLE and discussions in your dormitories) to hear about some possible alternative visions for Duke residential life.

And this is the first place where you need to get involved, in order to make your Duke education work. You need to weigh in with your ideas and your opinions, take an active role in envisioning and imagining the kind of residential life you want to live. We want to hear your views -- and there is a very unusual opportunity for those views to count, to have a real influence on what is decided -- and thus to make your Duke education, and that of the students who follow you, the best that it possibly can be.

I also want to reassure you, however, that the kinds of changes we are talking about are designed to build on what is already strong about Duke, things that led you to choose to become part of Duke. We are not trying to turn Duke into someplace else. It may be that some people around here suffer from what is called "Ivy Envy," but not a lot of us. Most of us came here because we like the special aura of Duke, and we feel that for some of those other institutions, a bit of "Kudzu envy" is in order. (For those of you who are really new to the south, Kudzu is the omnivorous vine that crawls over everything along the road sides -- it looks sort of like ivy, but it is much more aggressive, restless, exploratory -- and it grows a foot a day to cover anything in its path; some interesting similarities there with Duke, given all the new buildings we are opening this fall).

In addition to thinking carefully together about what kind of residential life we should create at Duke, we'll also be continuing a long-standing trend of thinking about other aspects of undergraduate life. We're engaged in a rather intense discussion about alcohol policy, as you will soon discover; and in addition to the great parties that fraternities, sororities, theme houses and various Duke groups are famous for giving, some of your fellow students will be opening a new dance club in the Bryan Center; there's a new place called "Down Under" on East Campus, and a new coffee house in the main Perkins library, called "The Perk."

Be sure to explore these and many other places, both on campus and nearby on Ninth St. and in Brightleaf Square, where social life is flourishing. Don't believe it if someone tells you the only game in town is kegs, or that you have to go to Franklin St. in (perish the thought) Chapel Hill to have a good time; use your imagination and energy to discover --and add to -- the social life at Duke.

One of the most important components of both social and residential life is friendship. And to take full advantage of your Duke education, you should resist the temptation to spend all your time at Duke with people who dress and think and talk just like you do. One of the splendid advantages of a great university 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 of the world.

We talk at lot at Duke about diversity. It's easy to assume that having different kinds of folks around is just 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; you should value diversity and learn
from it.

You should also make sure that you 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.

In the midst of all of these exciting opportunities, the core and center
of your life at Duke over the next four years should be your intellectual
experience. This might seem so obvious that it's not necessary to say it.
But you cannot take for granted that the academic part of the balanced life at
Duke will automatically be handed to you, any more than other parts of this
education. You will need to be imaginative and energetic here as well, in
order to make the most of this central aspect of your lives.

In coming to a 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.

Even if you choose your courses as wisely and carefully as possible,
with a good balance of challenging and familiar work, you will still not take
full advantage of a Duke education unless you enter actively into partnership
with your faculty members. Faculty in a university are busy people, with lots
of demands on their time. One of their main jobs is to teach you, and
teaching bright, articulate undergraduates is one of the most rewarding things
they do. Since it's a big place, however, 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, express your ideas.

I hope that you will not load up your schedule entirely with large
classes, where the chances for active partnerships with faculty are by
definition less. Some large classes are unavoidable and some, with a great
teacher at the lectern, can be among your most stimulating experiences. Be
sure, however, to take some smaller classes in your first two years here, so
that you can actually get to know some of the faculty in disciplines that are
especially fascinating to you. Ask a faculty member to lunch in the Oak Room,
along with some friends who will be interested in what he or she has to say;
you may be pleasantly surprised by how many Duke faculty will welcome that
opportunity, and how much difference it can make to your perception of what
faculty are like.

If you are to take fullest advantage of this education, you need to
develop your capacity to think for yourself, to examine propositions
critically and carefully, as well as empathetically, in order to become a
truly educated person. Don't just think of Duke as a cafeteria or a
storehouse where you pick up a certain amount of material and then go to the
checkout line and walk out with a diploma. Think of it more as a journey, an adventure, an odyssey, with bizarre and fascinating and unpredictable turnings in the road ahead.

One of the books I read through this summer was called The Quark and the Jaguar, by Murray Gell-Mann. It's an absorbing and occasionally quirky meditation on journeys with lots of those turnings. One of my favorite parts was about a physics class where the professor asked the following question on an exam: "Show how it is possible to determine the height of a tall building with the aid of a barometer." One student said: "Take the barometer to the top of the building, attach a long rope to it, lower the barometer to the street, and then bring it up, measuring the length of the rope, which is the height of the building."

The professor, no doubt expecting something conventional about air pressure at different altitudes, gave the student a zero; the student protested that he deserved full credit; another professor was called in to arbitrate. The other professor thought that in fact the answer was technically correct, but that it didn't show much knowledge of physics, so they agreed that the student could try again.

The student was given six minutes to answer the question; at the end of five, he hadn't written anything; but when he was asked if he was stymied, he said no, the problem was that he had so many answers he couldn't choose -- and then he scribbled one in the final minute, which was: "Take the barometer to the top of the building, and lean over the edge of the roof. Drop the barometer, timing its fall with a stopwatch. Then, using the formula S=1/2at^2 calculate the height of the building."

The two professors agreed that the student should get credit for this answer, which did show some knowledge of physics, however unorthodox. Then the visitor expressed his curiosity about what the other answers were. The student offered three or four, all equally ingenious, involving taking the barometer out into the sun and measuring the height of the barometer and the length of its shadow, or tying it to the end of a string and swinging it as a pendulum, or -- what he called a "very direct method" -- taking the barometer and walking up the stairs of the tall building, marking off the length to give you the height in barometer units.

And then he concluded: "If you don't limit me to physics solutions, there are lots of answers. For instance, you can take the barometer to the basement and knock on the superintendent's door. When the superintendent answers, you speak to him as follows: "Dear Mr. Superintendent, here I have a very fine barometer. If you will tell me the height of this building, I will give you this barometer."

I do not suggest that you model yourself explicitly on this young man, since his professor no doubt thought he was a royal pain -- but the creativity and ingenuity, looking at familiar things in novel ways, is a precious and fundamental intellectual asset in getting an education. And even if he was a pain, this student provides a better model than the ones in a story that is told about a Duke class -- a story which, I gather, is only partly apocryphal.

One of Duke's legendary classes is introductory chemistry taught by Professor Bonk, called "Bonkistry." A few years ago, four students in the class were doing pretty well going into the final, and decided to go up to UVa to party over the weekend before the test. They partied more than was good for them, got drunk and fell asleep, waking up only just in time to dash back to Duke for the exam, not having studied at all.

They went in to see Professor Bonk and said: "Dr. Bonk, we went to Charlottesville over the weekend, and on the way back we got a flat tire on a
lonely road, and by the time we got it fixed and got back, we didn't have any
time to study. Can we have an extension?"

Dr. Bonk thought for a few minutes and then agreed that they could take
the exam the next day. So they went home and studied furiously and came in to
take the exam. They were put in separate rooms and opened their blue books to
discover a really easy question for the first five points. Then they turned
the page to question two, for 95 points, which read: "Which tire?"

There are multiple morals to this one: that it is always better to tell
the truth; that it is hard to fool a Duke faculty member; and that just as I
told you, it is better to get your social life closer to home.

In closing, let me remind you that before you even arrived at Duke, John
Tolstma, as president of Student Government, sent you a letter and a brochure
in which he described some of the most significant historical features of
Duke, some of the distinctive characteristics that define this particular
university.

Some of these characteristics are embodied in buildings or spaces on
campus. The most obvious example is this great soaring Chapel, rising like a
cathedral out of the surrounding woodlands. The Chapel was deliberately
intended by our founders to exemplify one of the characteristic things about
Duke: a ready recognition of the importance of spiritual life, whether as a
quest or a settled commitment, to a well-rounded human being and a balanced
education.

East Campus, now given over to a variety of uses, was for many years the
home of the woman's college -- so it symbolizes another fundamental Duke
commitment: to co-education, and the development of the talents and
abilities of women as well as men. The idea of co-education was a bold and
eccentric commitment in the late nineteenth century, and the fact that Duke
took its place alongside only a handful of other great institutions that had
taken this particular adventurous step sets us apart from many other
universities which admitted women only belatedly, only a few decades ago.

Other Duke characteristics are not embodied in spaces, but in notable
events: the Bassett affair in 1903, which committed Duke firmly and durably
to the fundamental principles of academic freedom; the decision in 1961 to
admit African-American students to what had been an all-white Southern
undergraduate institution; the back-to-back National championships of the
men's basketball team in 1991-2, bringing world-wide recognition to the strong
athletic component in this balanced university.

I encourage you to learn more about places and events such as these,
landmarks along the way to where we are now and where we are going in the
future, so that you will gain the fullest possible understanding of this new
institution of which you are now a part.

I am sure that over the years to come, you will find rich rewards in
belonging to this fascinating, distinctive place called Duke University. By
joining this university you bring to it enrichments of your own -- gifts of
curiosity, imagination, energy, devotion. Together, you as individuals, you as
a class, and Duke University can go far. I look forward to sharing that
journey with you.