CONVOCATION 1995

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It is my privilege to preside over this historic gathering of our university community at the opening of a new academic year. I am glad to greet returning students, transfer students, and those who are here on exchange from other universities across the world. And a hearty welcome to the parents and family members who are joining us electronically from Page Auditorium and Reynolds Theatre.

This morning our particular focus is on the Class of 1999 in Trinity College and the School of Engineering, and these welcoming remarks are therefore especially directed to members of your Class.

At this point, the notion of a "class" is mostly honorific; you are very much a loosely joined group of individuals. You have come from many different cities, towns, states, and countries. You have said goodbye to friends and families, prepared yourself quite consciously to embark upon a new stage in your life; and you have done so with a strong sense of isolation, of novelty, of doing this as a single person striking out for unknown territory. You have just met a few of your companions on this journey, but at this point, you hardly think of yourselves as members of a class.

To most of you the class that still sounds right is the one you graduated with from high school: you are in your own minds part of the class of 1995. This is now a rapidly receding set of memories rather than a present bond. And yet you are not at this point the Class of 1999.

This label, the Class of '99, is on your materials, the signs, the forms, the t-shirts; it will forever follow your name after an apostrophe anytime anyone at Duke refers to you in print, T99 or E99. But it is not only a convenient way of categorizing you for conveying information -- a class, in a university, develops a brand of unity, through shared experience, that for many of you will become one of life's most significant bonds and boundaries.

Your Class, the Class of 1999, has a number of distinctive features that may help in this bonding. You are the last class of the present century, indeed the last class of the millennium. Fortunately, no one expects you to carry the weight of the whole century on your shoulders, and we shall try to avoid such apocalyptic references, since your status at the end of the millennium is largely an accident of your parents' timing.

East Campus as your home

A more relevant distinctive feature, and one that will have an enormous influence on your lives here, both as a class and for each of you as individuals, is that you are inaugurating East Campus as a home for the first year class. More than half of Duke first-year students have lived on East Campus for many years -- but you are the first class in Duke history to be entirely housed on one campus, where facilities and opportunities will now be focused on your needs in ways that we hope will greatly enrich your Duke experience.
Our University Archivist, William King, has shared with me a few facts about your new home. East Campus was the original campus in Durham for Trinity College, the historic core of Duke University, when the College moved here from Randolph County in 1892. (Note for those of you who live in Randolph -- your residence hall has that name because the college that became Duke University was founded there).

The new campus was built on the site of the Durham County Fairground, which was called Blackwell Park -- this should ring a bell for those of you who live in Blackwell. One of the most salient features of the fairground was a racetrack, which may explain why Duke students have always known how to set a fast pace.

In 1924, Trinity College became Duke University, because of the great generosity of the Duke family; when West Campus was built six years later, East Campus became the home of Duke's women students. Classes have always been available on both campuses -- which is why Duke schedules 20 minutes between classes, and we have one of the largest bus systems in the country. Since 1972, when the university became fully coeducational, students have lived on both campuses.

When you drive into your Campus from Durham, you are welcomed by Washington Duke, the patriarch of the Duke family, sitting in his armchair. Booker T. Washington gave a major speech there in 1896, his first in the South on a non-African American campus; he speaks of this in his biography, Up from Slavery. Theodore Roosevelt, the first US president to visit Duke, came to East campus in 1904. Phi Beta Kappa at Duke was founded there, and the Blue Devil became our mascot.

In case you've always wondered why Duke has such a distinctive mascot, instead of one of the more familiar lions or tigers or bears, you'll be pleased to know that Duke students made the choice; the inventive imagination Duke students are famous for in Cameron Indoor Stadium has a long history. At first the team was called the Blue and White, or the Methodists, to distinguish them from the Baptists of Wake Forest. But when NC State became the Wolf Pack around 1920, the student newspaper -- the CHRONICLE -- launched a campaign for a catchier name, and suggested that the name be something blue, to go with our colors. Now there are not a lot of blue items that work well for sports teams (think about that one sometime), and no suggestion won a majority; but the name that had the most support from the students was the Blue Devils.

Who were the Blue Devils? They were a group of French soldiers in the first world war, who fought in the Alps and were uniquely trained to be effective in the mountains. They won international fame for their courage and their distinctive blue uniforms which featured a flowing cape and a beret; some of them toured the US to raise money for the war, and they were even mentioned in a popular song. Thus, many of the students had heard of them, and liked the idea more than the Polar Bears, or the Blue Eagles, or the Royal Blazes.

However, there was some feeling that this name, with its devilish connotations, might cause some problems for a Methodist school, so there was no
official selection. Undaunted, the student leaders decided that the team needed a name, and they thought the Blue Devils was the right one, so the CHRONICLE in 1922-23 just started calling the athletic teams the Blue Devils. And before long, through repetition, the Blue Devils we became.

And this all happened before West Campus was anything more than a gleam in our founders' eye. So East Campus has a feisty and creative history, and this is where the Blue Devil was born.

Last December another historic step was taken for East Campus. The Trustees approved a plan to house first-year students on East Campus; and in the months since then, a great many students, faculty and administrators have worked very hard to prepare this campus to welcome you properly. There have been extensive renovations in East Campus Union -- renovations which are, as you know, not quite finished yet -- but this historic building was redesigned specifically with you in mind. The East Campus sports fields have been improved and expanded, and we are beginning to build a new recreational center as well. Other new initiatives are underway, including a Faculty Associates Program and an "adopt-a-quad" program so that you will get to know upperclass students as well.

However, we have deliberately left many things unplanned. You -- the Class of 1999 -- will have a large part in creating this new East Campus, in determining how it will work for you and for generations of students who will follow you. Like actors inaugurating an exciting new role in a play, you will place your mark on Duke in an indelible fashion, as together you explore and define what East Campus means as the home of the entering class.

What kind of Duke will we create together?

What kind of Duke will you make your own, what version of Duke will we create together over the next year, and indeed over the next four years of your lives and the life of the university?

Let's start with the things that were in your mind when you decided to come here. You already have some conception of what you want your university experience to be like. Often students find that their expectations are only partially fulfilled (or even rudely shattered) when they actually get to college. Sometimes this turns out to be a good thing, since some of your expectations may have been based in naive assumptions that you'll be just as glad to leave behind. But other expectations are rightfully important to you, and should be nurtured rather than shattered by what you discover here. As the Class of 1999 at Duke, you have a better chance than most students ever do to make your experience conform to your most optimistic expectations.

As soon as we begin to talk this way, we stumble up again on the fact that you are not a monolithic class, united in your views, but a collection of interesting individuals; each of you has your own personal set of hopes and expectations. Yet it should be possible to start with some basic things on which we can all agree.

You came to obtain a baccalaureate degree, with the understanding that this will prepare you in some as yet undefined way for the next stages in your life;
and you assume that along the way to the BA or the BS, you will also become in some equally vague sense "an educated person." This could be done at almost any college or university, although it couldn’t be done many places as well as it can at Duke.

For some of you our competition was the Ivy League, for others the excellent state universities or liberal arts colleges. And for some of you, from the beginning, nothing but Duke would do. But each of you, in the end, chose Duke.

Some of you chose Duke because of the things it has in common with other excellent, demanding research universities, and you expect Duke to differ from them only in that the climate is a lot more pleasant (except in the summer months), and the athletic teams are a great deal better (except for ice hockey and other esoterica). Others chose Duke more or less explicitly because of the ways it is different from some other universities, and you are quite clear that you are at Duke precisely because it is not Harvard or Yale or Princeton. This distinction may not sound too crucial, but in practice, it has gotten in the way of mutual understanding and shared educational experiences among Duke students.

The singular advantage of a fine university is that it brings a large number of bright students and faculty together and creates the potential for intellectual ferment. To make the ferment happen, however, you have to be willing to get excited about ideas, to talk about what you are doing on your honors paper or in the research lab, along with all the other things undergraduates love to talk about, which I surely don’t have to outline for you here.

There are many people at Duke who feel that way, but it will be your responsibility to put some effort into building a community of friends here who are comfortable in talking about ideas, who get turned on by the pleasures of intellectual exploration.

For some Duke undergraduates, the prevailing wind blows in a slightly different direction. You will hear the phrase "at Duke, we work hard and we play hard," as a way of describing the distinctive Duke approach to university life. What that boils down to is a commitment to academic experience, and a parallel commitment to having a great time, with the understanding that both take energy and dedication, but that they are quite separate -- as though a university education were a 9 to 5 job where you work conscientiously during the day and come home at night ready for some heavy partying, intending to forget all about what happened in the office.

The "work hard/play hard" motif in this context describes an attitude -- and I use the word advisedly, in the sense of a person-with-an-attitude, a bit of a chip on the shoulder mentality -- that can be quite defensive. It goes something like this: we’re all smart people here at Duke, and we’re here to get a BA that will command respect in the world outside; it’s important to get good grades, but we’re not grinds or nerds, and we want to keep academics in its place. The place for academics is the classroom and the library; the rest of the
campus is for other things that are more fun, the kinds of things that really
make Duke Duke. Which means that Duke is a good school, but not too
intellectual; if I'd wanted that, I'd have gone to an Ivy. So don't mess with
Duke, don't try to make it something other than it is.

When I hear this mentality expressed, I always want to ask what this
person-with-an-attitude is really worried about. What is he (or she) afraid will
happen? That if you break down the barriers between the classroom and the
library, on the one hand, and the Bryan Center, Cameron and Wallace Wade, and the
frat house on the other, Duke parties will suddenly become dull and boring? the
Blue Devils will be frozen in place and unable to function? nobody will have any
fun at all? To quote Sir Toby Belch in Twelfth Night, "Do you think, because you
are virtuous, there will be no more cakes and ale?" Do you think, if you
occasionally talk about some idea that you find exciting outside the library, the
whole of Duke will collapse like a house of cards?

This seems mighty implausible to me, knowing at least something about how
much Duke students like having a good time, and how strong our impulses are
towards athletic accomplishment. Nobody wants to change that; most of us on the
faculty and administration also chose Duke because of its distinctive
combinations of intellectual accomplishment and accomplishment in other parts of
life, including, most emphatically, excellent athletics -- the faculty Cameron
Crazies and Wade Wackos are just as rabid as the students. You don't have to
worry that the faculty and administration don't understand what makes Duke
special.

However, the faculty debate ideas as passionately as they cheer on the
team, and they do so wherever interesting conversations can be found. This gives
them the best of both worlds; they get the intellectual excitement and the
climate and the Blue Devils as well. Many faculty members are eager to include
undergraduates in those passionate debates, and disappointed when a student says
-- literally or metaphorically -- just the facts, please; just tell me what I
need to do to get a grade that will get me into law school, and don't bother me
from those big ideas.

All of you, the members of the Class of '99, are smart, or you wouldn't be
sitting in this Chapel today; you have succeeded in the things at which you've
tried your hands before, including academic accomplishment. If you take the
"work hard/play hard," 9-5 route to a university education too literally, you
will cheat yourself of an absolutely unique opportunity, something that you can
never in your life experience again. And you'll cheat your classmates, who have
as much to learn from you as you do from them. To disengage your mind just when
you've joined a great university, to slip your brain out of gear every time you
walk out of Lilly Library would be ironic, even tragic -- to use more
straightforward jargon, like, you'd be clueless.

If Duke were intended to be a 9-5 experience, we wouldn't have built all
those residence halls and dining rooms and bookstores and film theaters and
concert halls; we wouldn't have a community service center or playing fields or
coffee houses; we wouldn't have even our great soaring chapel -- James B. Duke
could have saved a lot of money by building only classrooms and libraries and letting you get the rest of your education wherever you could find it.

The Duke experience ought to be comprehensive, omnivorous, all absorbing, in a way that your life has never been before and will never be again. That's what it means to be on a campus, rather than an urban commuter school, or a virtual university where everything happens on-line and you never really see another person.

A central part of what we call education at a fine residential university is to let your mind and body work together, to develop your senses and your spirit as well as exercise and stretch your brain. The point of all these wonderful places, facilities, organizations, opportunities, and people is that you can weave together a life with friends, classmates, and yes, faculty and staff members that will educate you profoundly, that will wrench you out of your complacency and naiveté.

That extraordinary magic we call an education happens when you put it all together, so that the classroom and the athletic fields, the Library and the East Campus Union, become places where you can be playful with ideas and get serious about having fun. If you deny yourself this opportunity to experience the whole of Duke, all of Duke working together, you and your parents are not getting what you are paying for; and we are well aware, as you are, that that's a handsome sum.

How can you make this happen?

I have some suggestions, as university presidents always do, about how you might make good on your Duke experience, how you might pull together a magnificent holistic four years that will prepare you well for the rest of your life -- and also be, in themselves, among the most rewarding years you'll ever know.

1. My first piece of advice has already been offered to you, but I want to make it more explicit: think of your classmates and other Duke students as people you can learn from; don't assume that only the faculty have something to teach you.

Duke has brought together about 1650 of you in the Class of 1999, and about 6000 undergraduate students in all, and more than 11,000 if you count graduate and professional students as well. All of you are curious about the world and have something to share with each other.

So look to each other, not only to the faculty, for stimulating discussions of things you've always wondered about, to sort out ethical dilemmas, to mull over an elegant truth in physics, to say what you really should have said when the discussion got very heated in public policy and you were on the verge of something truly brilliant but the class ended before you could get it out.

Look to each other to start a new club, or write and perform a play, or plan a trip to someplace you've always wanted to go. Look to each other for
learning in the largest sense: for learning about life, for sharing your emotional ups and downs, and for sharing your dreams and your ideas.

2. My second piece of advice is this: just as you think of your fellow students as an amazing resource from which you can learn much, think of the faculty as more than distant authority figures, as people from whom you can learn in many ways.

This year you have a special opportunity in this regard, because of this new and exciting program being launched across the university called the Faculty Associates. These people join other faculty -- including your pre-major advisors and the Faculty in Residence -- in taking a special interest in helping you find your way around this multi-faceted and complex place. They want to make sure you learn now, not at the end of your senior year, about the Primate Center and the Duke Gardens and Broadway at Duke and Jazz on the East Campus lawn, as well the best sports stores and places to get a bagel or a cafe latte.

They want to talk with you about sports and films and popular music and world events. For a long time, students and faculty members at Duke have been asking for better ways of getting to know each other naturally outside the classroom; now you have a unique opportunity to make this happen.

3. My third piece of advice may surprise you. After I've spent all this time telling you to develop your mind and body and spirit to take full advantage of this expensive education, I'm now going to tell you not to spend too much time thinking about yourself.

You will be subject to homesickness, anxiety, loss of self-confidence; virtually every college student throughout history has been. When this happens, your inclination may be to brood, to hunker down and inward, even to drink yourself into oblivion. These are not good remedies; the time-tested remedy for those ailments is not to dwell on yourself but to get outside of yourself. There is a strong strand in the Protestant Christianity professed by those who founded this place, a theme echoed as well in other world religions, that if you want to save your soul, to find yourself, the best way to do this is to lose yourself, to give yourself to others.

What this means is first noticing that lots of other people have troubles at least as great as yours, and then realizing that you might be able to do something about it. The troubles may be those of your roommate or best friend, but they may also be troubles of someone who is not now known to you, someone who lives not far from you in the city of Durham who also has some things to worry about -- about living in a rented house that is falling down and the landlord refuses to do anything about it, or about children who are at school with children dealing drugs, or about not having a job and not knowing where the next grocery money is going to come from -- these are troubles that will put your own into an appropriate perspective, and more important, they are troubles that you might help relieve, by getting into one of the many fine programs for community service sponsored right here at Duke.
This could mean joining the folks at Habitat for Humanity in building a new house for the person with the rental house that lets the rain and the roaches in, or spending time in a big brother/big sister relationship with a kid who is struggling to find the reasons to stand up to drugs, or preparing a meal at a soup kitchen that will relieve the anxiety about where the next meal is coming from, or visiting an old and lonely person for whom your visit will be the most important thing that happens in her life.

You will not only forget your own troubles, but also get a better education, if you spend some significant portion of your time thinking about somebody else who may need your help. You will learn from these experiences, and if you are wise, you will think about how they fit in with what you are learning in the classroom. You will enrich what you learn in books and in discussions by what you learn in the community. Again, it is the principle of holistic learning: you'll learn more, use it better, and remember it longer, if all parts of you are engaged in the learning. There are courses at Duke that work specifically, along with internships or field projects, to link what you are learning to the world outside our lovely campus.

4. My fourth piece of advice is to take some personal risks in broadening your horizons, deliberately stretching your mind into some new dimensions, rather than staying on territory that seems familiar and therefore safe.

What do I mean by that? Well, for example, you might take a class in something that you have never studied before, something that will be quite different from what you have already excelled in -- and do it soon enough in your university career that it could help shape your education. Many people who are intellectually adventurous find that they wind up majoring in something they have never even heard of when they come to Duke. We ask you to put down your prospective major on several of our forms, but we also counsel you to keep a very open mind.

Broadening your horizons also means getting to know about people and places you've only heard about before. It means making friends with classmates from all backgrounds, not just reaching out to those who seem most like yourself, and therefore good prospects for comfortable and supportive relationships. You'll need those comfortable relationships as well, of course, as you chart your course through these unfamiliar waters we call Duke -- relationships with people whose race or religion or region of the country or economic class are closest to your own. These people will undoubtedly become some of your closest friends throughout your Duke career; but if you stop there, you'll miss one of the greatest benefits of a university education.

We talk a lot at Duke about diversity, and we do so for good reasons. We are convinced, on the basis of lots of evidence, that diverse experiences are one of the cornerstones of a university education. This means seeing things from new perspectives, not just staying in the same old groove; getting to know people who see the world differently from yourself -- which includes both studying diverse people through history or anthropology or literature, and literally getting to know some real world people who are your classmates and other members of the Duke and Durham communities.
If you do this, you have a priceless opportunity to see the world through someone else's lenses, to walk in someone else's moccasins for awhile, as the Native American saying goes -- and the result, I guarantee you, will be to multiply your own understanding of the world in many ways. It will also help you in one of the other great purposes of a Duke education, which is to sift and refine and confirm your own personality, your own values, your own commitments in the world. By looking at those commitments, those beliefs, those values, through someone else's eyes, you can make a personal decision about what matters to you, what you want to make your own as you become an adult human being, conserving those things about your past and your heritage that are most important to you, and blending them with other things that you have learned and made your own.

One particularly important form of diversity in your education will be getting to know different parts of the world, through people and experiences from around the globe. You may want to think from the beginning about how you will fit into your Duke years a period of study, travel or work abroad; and in the meantime, take advantage of the people from across the world who are here around you everyday -- international students, faculty members, people who have spent lots of time abroad. Go to the special festivals sponsored by different groups -- Diwali and Kwanza and the first night of Passover and the Chinese New Year, and many more.

5. The reference to groups brings me to my final piece of advice, at least for now!

Duke, like most universities, has lots of groups that you will be invited to join, groups with all kinds of purposes, religious and intellectual and athletic, greeks and non-greeks, service and political, dramatic and musical and journalistic, purposes of all kinds and flavors, or even no purpose at all except the perfectly reasonable goal of just hanging out together and having fun. These groups can enrich your experience in many ways, and I encourage you to explore the options soon.

However, I also urge you to be careful about how you make your commitments, and how fully you immerse yourself into any single group. You will impoverish yourself if you allow yourself to be wholly absorbed by, identified with, any group, no matter how meritorious. Your personality should be defined and shaped at Duke as a unique collection of overlapping commitments, curiosities and ideals. Nobody, not even your closest friend or brother or sister, will have exactly that same set of overlapping sources of identity.

And thus, although you will want to multiply your experience by joining groups and using them to make a much greater difference than you could ever make on your own, you should beware of the powerful pressure to conform, to blend in fully with the group. At some time you may disagree with the group, you may be troubled by a stance the group is taking, and you should always retain enough of your own unique identity to take a separate stand if you believe that's right. That won't be easy, but it can in itself be a deeply educational experience, and it will prepare you well for similar pressures and opportunities throughout your life.
That brings me back in closing roughly to where I began: you are at this time a very loosely united set of individuals, in the first crucial stages of becoming a new group, the Class of 1999 at Duke University. This is an historic group for each of you as individuals, most assuredly, but also for this University of which you are now a part. This is your Class, your university; make it your own, shape it, let it shape you in turn. But always remember that in the end, it is your education, your own experience, and that it is you as individuals who richly constitute the whole.

A most cordial welcome, and our best wishes for the adventure that lies ahead.