

Convocation Address

Duke University

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It is wonderful now to welcome all of you to Duke. Like you, I have only recently arrived, and I've been learning my way around. It's easy to find the Chapel, but not much else; the roads seem to have been laid out specifically to divert you from the shortest way to your destination. But as I'm sure you have already discovered, you and I have come to live in a very beautiful place.

As you begin to find your way around as a novice Dukie, as you sort out your belongings and your classes and your new friends, I encourage you to take time to make this wonderful campus your own. Let us agree to enjoy it together, to explore its treasures and make it our home.

On West Campus, where we are now sitting, everything is splendidly, unrelentingly Gothic, each quadrangle meticulously laid out. At first you may think they all look alike; but look again -- there are small delicious nuances of difference from one quad to another. When you need to catch your breath from the frenetic pace of orientation week, take time to look more closely at those stone decorations. Each one of them was lovingly carved to represent familiar and strange beasts, local flowers and trees, the symbols of the various disciplines, and in a most generous gesture, the seals of several dozen other universities. All of these are close around you -- begin to discover your own favorites.

West Campus looks just like Hollywood's idea of a college campus, and indeed you'll find that occasionally your scholarly peregrinations will be interrupted by film crews and bright lights, when yet another film company is immortalizing your alma mater for yet another movie.

Then there is East Campus, the original site of the early core of Duke University, Trinity College, then later for many decades the home of the Woman's College. You will discover soon, I hope, that East Campus has its own character and charm, which some observers have called "Georgian repose," as distinct from West's "Gothic restlessness." But East is also our urban campus, close to the city of Durham, including the trendy shops of Ninth Street and Brightleaf Mall, as well as many of the people who work at Duke and live in the city as our neighbors.

And then there is everywhere else -- North Campus, Central Campus, the utilitarian red brick science and engineering buildings punctuated by high-tech additions in bold new architectural styles. Don't overlook the Sarah P. Duke gardens, an amazingly large and beautiful garden with many different kinds of areas -- the rose garden, the wildflowers, the new Asian garden -- people come from far away to see these gardens which are in your own back yard.

Of course you will soon discover the hustle and bustle of the Bryan Center, the playing fields, the sacred precincts of Cameron Indoor Stadium where you will soon develop into certified Cameron crazies. Then there are the professional schools, Law and Business, and the enormous Duke University Medical Center, which houses some of the world's most advanced research on diseases like cancer and Alzheimers and AIDS, and one of the best hospital complexes anywhere.

While you are at Duke, you will have many claims on your time and your attention. That is part of the point of choosing a University setting for your education. You will also find out that a great many things are going on at Duke that are only tangentially related to undergraduate education. That is also part of the point of choosing a University.

In choosing Duke, you have come to a place that offers a splendid array of undergraduate courses in every discipline you have ever heard of, and many that will be entirely new to you. You have also come to a place where undergraduate teaching is only one of the responsibilities of the faculty members who will teach you.

Your education will be enhanced in ways you cannot even predict that the faculty here are seriously committed to undergraduate teaching (which is not true of the faculties of every university) and yet are also engaged in world-class research in their fields. It means that they may have less time than you would like to answer every one of your questions; it also means that you can look forward to learning about things that are at the very forefront of whatever field you study, from someone who is highly respected by other professionals who really know the business.

The fact that so many other things are going on at Duke besides your education might seem, from your perspective, a clear disadvantage. You, or your parents, are paying a great deal of money to have you come to Duke; even (or perhaps, especially) if you are on financial aid, you and your parents are working hard to provide your own contribution to Duke's costs. It's easy, therefore, to see Duke as a consumption good, like coming to a hotel and expecting everyone who works here to be dedicated solely to providing you with prompt and courteous service, fluffy towels, a heated pool and sauna, and good food in the restaurant.

As you've discovered if you have already been to your dormitory room, nobody is going to mistake Duke for a luxury hotel; and you'll have to make up your own mind about the food. But it's important to realize that what you undertake in coming to Duke is different from anything else you've ever done. It's not just a consumption good; it's a life-transforming experience, a partnership in which you should take a lead role. For you to get the most out

of this experience, to make it most deeply rewarding for you for the rest of your life, it is important to think now -- and then again occasionally across the years -- about what Duke can most advantageously do for you and to you.

First and foremost, remember that you have come here to get an education. That sounds obvious, but it is not so simple as you might think. Some sort of education will happen to you at Duke, whether you want it to or not. Your stay in this powerful environment at a crucial time in your life will inevitably shape you in many different ways. Even as soon as the time you first go home for fall break or Thanksgiving, you will be, in some ways a different person.

But you don't want to be different just in some random or casual way. It should be your responsibility, and your privilege, to be as conscious as you can of how you are being educated, and how much you are taking advantage of this experience for good.

By saying that you have come here to get an education, I do not mean that you have come to Duke just to take classes and exams. However, it is important to remember that the core of your educational experience should happen in the classroom. Many other things will contribute to your education -- I'll speculate in a moment about what some of those will be. But many of those things could happen almost as well if you were somewhere else. The unique aspect of your education that can only happen in a great university, the essence of your experience, ought to be the courses that you choose, the books you read, the laboratory experiments you run, the seminar discussions in which you take part, the great lectures you will hear.

Take advantage of the people you are ready to advise you in making your first choices about courses, and be intellectually bold and adventurous. If you stick entirely to subjects you already know something about and feel like

you will do well in, you'll miss the opportunity to discover whole new ways of looking at the world. You will be like an explorer who chickens out just before the big voyage and decides, instead of travelling up the Amazon or trying to get to Mars, to play it safe and visit the town next door instead. If you don't play it too cautiously, you will be richly rewarded with discoveries you cannot now envision. You may find your major subject, indeed your whole life's vocation, in a subject that you can't even pronounce at this point. And don't spend too much time worrying about whether you are going to get into graduate school.

If I can borrow some terminology from our distinguished Medical Center I would say that the biggest cancer on an undergraduate education is worrying too early and too much about what you are going to do afterwards. That kind of worry consumes your time and energies, redirects your vital juices in perverse directions, and slowly drives out more healthy intellectual impulses.

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 at Duke. You are beginning a new life. 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 that way, always seeing your present activities as instrumental to what happens next, never paying singleminded attention to 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 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.

Over the decades of your life you will spend a lot of time with many different people -- family, friends, colleagues -- but the person you will spend most time with is yourself. One of your major purposes at Duke should be preparing yourself to be an interesting person to spend time with. This has a double advantage: first, that you will enjoy your own company in solitude, when you either choose to be alone or find yourself in circumstances where you are alone. And secondly, that you will be a more interesting person for other people to spend time with, so that friends will seek you out for your wit and conversation, not avoid you as an airhead or a pompous bore.

To make you a more interesting person to spend time with, both for yourself and others, ought to be one of the primary purposes of your education -- which reinforces the wisdom of being intellectually adventurous in framing your education rather than too cautious or sterile. One of my favorite authors, one whom I hope many of you will discover for yourself, is Michel de Montaigne, a sixteenth-century Frenchman who wrote a book for which he coined a new title that has become a common noun: Essais. The French root of this word means to try, to experiment, to give things a chance and see what happens. And this is what he did in his book, providing accounts of his explorations of the world, both the world outside (he was an inveterate traveller) and the world within himself.

Montaigne's favorite place to write was the tower library on his estate, to which he climbed by a series of narrow stairs reaching the very top of his domain, with a view of the vineyards and grainfields, a ceiling carved with some of his favorite quotations, and lines of books around the shelves. When you go to France you can still see that library and understand vividly what his life was like more than four hundred years ago. Here Montaigne would retreat each day he was at home to think and write his essays.

Montaigne hit upon a lovely image that I commend to you: the image of

the "backroom of the mind." He thought of his own mind as a kind of tower library to which he could retreat even when he was far away from home, filled with quotations from wise people and experimental thoughts and jokes and anecdotes, where he could keep company with himself. He suggested that we all have such backrooms in our minds, and that the most valuable and attractive people we know tend to be people who have rich and fascinating intellectual furniture in those spaces rather than a void between their ears.

You might think of your education first of all as a way of furnishing that back room of your mind. Fortunately, you don't have to complete the job by the time you get your baccalaureate degree. In fact, the most wonderful thing about a worthwhile education is that, unlike most consumer goods, it tends to get better the more you use it. It improves rather than depreciates with age. If you use your time here wisely, you will not just complete the required number of courses, but you will prepare yourself to embark on a lifelong odyssey in which you will keep learning, keep experimenting, remain mentally adventurous and continually update and redecorate the backroom of your mind.

I promised you that I would mention a few other factors that will contribute to your education, in addition to your specifically intellectual pursuits.

Next in importance will be the people you meet, the friends you make. And here I have an equally strong-minded piece of advice to give you. Don't make friends only among people who look and act just like yourself. That's a very easy temptation. You are new to this place, and 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 who dress and think and talk just like you do, 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 conceit. 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.

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 radical.

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. Others 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 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.

In addition to learning from your classes and from your friends and your acquaintances, you will also learn from the various extracurricular activities in which you will engage. This means, of course, the great parties and basketball games for which Duke is justly famous, but it should mean other things as well. You will be barraged with opportunities to join this club or that intramural sport, to try out for a singing group or drama troupe, and you should indeed get engaged in such things to broaden your experiences.

But in addition to this, 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.

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. And it also brings unexpected personal rewards 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.

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 I offer this advice with confidence, based as it is on the wisdom and experience of many who have preceded you at Duke.

I 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 the company of educated men and women. The heartiest of welcomes, and good luck to each and all.