

AUGUST 2018 CONVOCATION

On behalf of the faculty, your fellow students, college staff and alumni—all of us—welcome to St. John's.

You have joined a community of learners who wrestle with bold and radical ideas in ways that are increasingly unusual in American life. You will do your work with a searching temperament and with honesty tempered by civility. These values—honesty, a commitment to rigorous searching, civility, respect for and openness to the ideas of others—are largely lost both in American life and in American higher education. But they still have a home here at St. John's.

And now, you have a home here with us as well.

Looking at all of you this morning, and having shaken your hands, I know that you have chosen to make your home in a very unusual community. But I am not sure you know *how truly unusual* it is.

Different is who we really are. We are dramatically distinctive, even stubbornly contrarian.

I am convinced that is why you chose to join us. To those here who know me even a little, they can tell you I do not flatter. But I have to tell you that I am impressed by you. I'm impressed by your courage. I'm impressed by your willingness to take a more challenging path. I believe that your presence here is an indication of how you are going to make your life choices.

In my brief talk this morning I will focus on what we do here at St. John's—on how distinctive it is—and therefore what will be expected of you. And offer just a little advice on how to take best advantage of this opportunity.

So—how different is St. John's? Let me put it this way. St. John's is as different from other schools that describe themselves as small liberal arts

colleges—schools such as Middlebury, Pomona, or Oberlin—as those schools are from the University of Texas or Ohio State.

There are many substantial reasons that this is so. For example, after you chose this college, pretty much from here on out you *do not get much further choice* in what you will study. Nor do your classmates. You are studying what other people—after diligent thought and in many cases a lifetime’s exploration—have determined will offer you the best platform on which to build your life. Not just your academic or intellectual life, your whole life. To show you how seriously tutors and others take this curriculum, how deeply they consider what is best to study to be a liberally educated person, I wish you could all listen in on a faculty meeting when they discuss possible changes in the readings. It is a pretty incredible experience—and also quite beautiful—how seriously they take their work.

To say that this runs against trends in American higher education today is to engage in massive understatement. Most schools—even other small liberal arts colleges—allow, no, even encourage, students to *design* their own curriculum. And I suppose for some students—no, why not say it truthfully—for a vast majority of students, it is what they would prefer. Students in these schools do not need to study outside of their comfort zone. They are not asked to go places they do not want to go or have not already been.

So let me make this abundantly clear: St John’s will not allow you to stay in your comfort zone. You will confront ideas and ways of looking at the world that are markedly different from your own. You will be uncomfortable, not just on occasion, but often.

Ours is a challenging program that asks you to overcome your fear of being unable to do higher-order thinking in mathematics, science, philosophy, and literature. By learning you can do what you feared you could not do, you will become not just a stronger student, but also a stronger person.

I mainly speak of what happens in the classroom, but I also should speak more broadly about how much we value an open campus climate. Two years ago we welcomed Justice Sonia Sotomayor, perhaps the most liberal

member of the Supreme Court, to campus. She dined with students, met with faculty and staff, and had an open forum for the St. John's community and the public. A year later we welcomed to campus for a Friday night Dean's Lecture former George W. Bush Attorney General Mike Mukasey, who is politically very conservative—even provocatively so. They are both from the Bronx and both respect what we do here, but that is where the similarities end—except for the fact that they were both welcomed to be heard here at St. John's College.

Compare this to the new college tradition of students protesting the very presence of speakers on campus whose views happen to conflict with their own.

Let's talk about other differences. We call our faculty tutors and not professors. This is not just a semantic oddity. It represents something truly important. It is that the faculty at St. John's will not "profess" the "truth" to you. Tutors are always open to the possibility that they might, alongside you, learn something new about the Pythagorean Theorem in Freshman Math or in the Graduate Institute mathematics tutorial, or while reading *Genji* in the Eastern Classics program. You, the less experienced colleagues of your tutors, and the equal partners of your classmates, will develop new insights together, and all will benefit greatly from those insights. Work hard. Be present. Share your mind. Give and get the utmost.

A question is even different here. At most colleges a professor will ask you a question to see if you know something already fixed in his or her mind. Here at St. John's tutors ask questions to invite you on a shared exploration, not because they know the answer and are seeking to find out if you do as well.

Think about that. That is a profound difference in how to deliver an education.

Another major difference, and one that at times will not gain 100 percent enthusiasm from all of you, is that you will work very hard here. How different is this from many other schools? Just check out the recent book

Academically Adrift, which examines how little work many college students actually do and how little they learn. One conclusion: about a third of the 2,300 college incoming freshmen tested on measures such as critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and other higher level skills had made no gains in those areas when tested again as outgoing seniors. Parents here: how would you feel about helping to pay for four years of that?

You are about to be immersed in an intellectually driven climate the like of which you may never again experience in your life. Take advantage of it. Dive deep. That's how discoveries—intellectual, personal, and otherwise—are made. That's how worthwhile lives are built.

You have shown enormous humility and courage in choosing St. John's. Now you must show perseverance. Commit to seeing through the struggles that are up ahead. You will gain greatly when you do.

We are a distinctive school but the research on what makes for a successful college experience is still useful. The most essential positives? Connect. Engage. Commit. Learn how to fail and how to recover. Learn what is truly important to you...what lights your emotional and intellectual fires. And seek help if you are in trouble. We—all of us—faculty and staff are here to support you. Seek us out. We are working hard to make sure you have all the support services, academically and personally, that you might require. But it is essential for you to have the courage to ask for help when you need it.

And now, begin with confidence. You chose St. John's for a reason. You will add great value to this college, and you will receive immeasurable gifts in return.

One last thing. Things get a bit heavy here. That is understandable, life gets a bit heavy. It is preferable to get as much balance as you can. Have some fun. Play with ideas. Tell terrible jokes. Hike. Participate in our outdoor and intramural programs. Kick a soccer ball. Help a little kid learn to read. Enjoy the incredible beauty of this wondrous environment in which you are going to school. Take care of yourself. Sit in the plaza downtown and think about the history under your feet and

all around you. Whatever your time here means to you, make the most of these four years—or your graduate experience. Become you.

Thank you for listening. And welcome to your new home at St. John's.

I declare the College in session. *Convocatum est.*