



Opening Convocation

Welcome from the President

Memorial Chapel

Wednesday, August 30, 2017

Good evening. I'm Ralph Kuncl, and I have the privilege and honor of serving you – you – as the 11th president of this great University and to welcome you today for the start of our 109th academic year. We hope this tradition of convocation solemnly conveys that the next few years of your life will be incredibly enriching . . . if you embrace what the people of this institution have to offer. However, you cannot truly excel if you don't first expect it of yourself. That is our goal—to raise your expectations and ensure you meet them!

Before I get to my message for you, I want to acknowledge a couple of people in the crowd today. First, Trustee Ron Troupe representing our Board, and his wife Sheila. Second, I am going to embarrass a young man who is a new friend of mine, sitting near the front. He is a seventeen year-old student named Girish Senthil who is in the same predicament you were in a year ago when you were deciding what college would be the very best match for you. So I invited him here today to see and feel what it is like on opening day at a college and to sense your enthusiasm, because for all of you, you have found the perfect fit here where you have now become Bulldogs for life! Third, what about this weather? You may not know, but as the President, I have responsibility for the weather, and so you can blame the 109-degree day on me. But I hope you see we tried our best to get extra ice and water, air conditioners, fans, and misters. To get serious for a moment, these are mere inconveniences relative to the catastrophic losses suffered by our brothers and sisters in Texas from hurricane Harvey. The flooding and property damage are happening now, but many people have lost their lives and many tens of thousands of people will have their lives changed forever because they either lost loved ones or lost their entire life's possessions. In these kinds of situations we are often at a loss to know what to do or know how to feel. What I hope none of us do is ignore it or forget about it because it doesn't involve us. You should know that some dozens of our students come from Texas—five new students from the affected areas are in the audience right now—and we have checked on all students to know that they are safe and secure, although some have had disruptions in their travel or study abroad. You should know that we have made special academic accommodations for students who may not be able to arrive for the first day of classes. Now I ask for your support. Our Office of Community Service Learning, which you will come to know well during your time here, is sponsoring relief trips to Texas, for what we call Spring Break Plunge, for students who wish to help in the recovery effort. If you

wish to donate to help support our students, please consider making a cash or check donation made out to the University of Redlands as you exit the Chapel or one of the live streaming locations. Staff members will direct you. And here's a promise I will make, as I put my money where my mouth is. I will match any of your donations up to \$1,000 this evening.

For most of you, this is the first day of arriving here at Redlands. For many of you, this might be your first time at any college; for many parents, it may be the first time "letting go," or the first time with an empty house back home. For almost all of you, it is move-in day.

To our new students, just by choosing Redlands, you have already demonstrated your desire to be part of a community that is committed to the life of the mind as well as to the enrichment of your spirits, emotions, and social and physical well-being. You have chosen a student-centered, caring place known for its welcoming nature—one that celebrates personal and intellectual diversity . . . a place where you can discover your best self . . . a place that values a personalized experience built on relationships both inside and outside of the classroom . . . a place that challenges you to try new things and supports you along the journey . . . a place that fosters exploration through not only coursework, but student government, study abroad, community service, athletics, clubs, fraternities and sororities, outdoor programs, and much more.

So, look around you and take it all in. At this very moment, you could be sitting next to someone with whom you will become life-long friends. You are already a member of this community . . . a community of Bulldogs for Life!

Not only are you now Bulldogs, but you are also the oldest members of Generation Z. You are the first of your generation to enter college. Some commentators have even called you the i-Generation, because you've always had smart phones and social media. Now, while I don't like to oversimplify an entire generation, I am heartened by the generalities used to describe yours. According to a recent survey of Gen Z-ers conducted by the College Division of Barnes and Noble, you are simultaneously an independent and a social bunch. You are practical pragmatists who sometimes are financially driven. You learn best by doing, for example, through the sharing and exchanging of ideas. So . . . why am I up here lecturing you when we could be doing something together!? I'll give a hundred dollars—no, a cheap t-shirt—to the first two people in the audience to interact right now, one who asks me a question and one who shares a new idea.

The survey says you're also conscientious, hardworking—and although somewhat anxious—you are mindful of the future and career-focused. You are adept at filtering information quickly and thus you appreciate on-demand services available 24-7. Oh my, I see some changes coming, Dean Eddleman!

The Gen Z-ers in the survey cited their top three reasons for choosing a school: they were – 1) career preparation, 2) interesting coursework, and

3) engaging professors who take a personal interest in their success. How do those national reasons for college selection stack up to our Redlands students? Well, last year's incoming freshman reported their top three reasons for choosing Redlands this way, and it was pretty close: 1) learning more about things that interest, 2) ability to get a better job, and 3) gaining a broad education and appreciation of ideas. Interestingly, men weighed getting a better job 13 percentage points higher than women did, whereas women rated expanding their interests as a top priority.

Our first-year students, in response to a national freshman survey, also cited helping others who are in difficulty, and improving their understanding of other countries and cultures as things that are important to them. And, yes, they did want to be more comfortable financially than did the previous generation of Millennials. This sounds like Gen-Z to me. Pragmatic, caring, and in search of new knowledge.

These are qualities that will serve you well as you shape your own college experience and lay the foundation for your—and your generation's—future. By the way, you first-year students will get the chance to take the same national survey this Sunday.

Right now I want you to consider our own university community in Jeffersonian terms. Our mission is broader than classroom teaching or granting degrees. Our purpose is to educate globally-responsible citizens, whose thinking is liberated. That's what the liberal arts means, by the way, and has nothing to do with the political spectrum. And we are party to a social contract with the nation to provide educated citizens for the public good. I assure you, along the way, you'll make a living and achieve that financial stability you desire. But first you must make a life.

Orientation week is a time for you to navigate your new surroundings and get your bearings. I know you are beginning this journey in the wake of profoundly disturbing national events centered on and around a fellow campus community in Charlottesville, Virginia. There is no doubt about it . . . these are scary times . . . much different from when I dropped my own son off to college in the contrasting-quiet of 1998. But what are we going to do about making sense out of our current era here on this campus? It seems to me that extremism and the divisions that separate us are not going away quickly. There was never a moment of greater calling for you than now! How do we find moderation again? Following the 2016 election, Provost Kathy Ogren launched a discussion series called "Beyond the Great Divide," and that enabled faculty and students from across the campus to integrate and focus their research and creative work on public forums and events responsive to the newly forming government in Washington D.C. Providing a forum for civil engagement and leadership at the University is one of our most worthwhile endeavors—one that reaffirms our commitment to values we hold sacrosanct. What are those? I espouse four today:

- First . . . we will treat all persons among us equally and with humanity, empathy, compassion, and respect;

- Second . . . we denounce bigotry, racism, extremist ideology, hate, and intolerance in any form – while acknowledging the right to individual freedom of thought and expression on which our democracy is founded;
- Third . . . we reject violence as a means to communicate any legitimate message or to effect any legitimate change in society; and
- Fourth . . . we will embrace inquiry, open-mindedness, active listening, careful reflection, and reasoned discourse as our chief weapons in combatting the attack on those very same ideals that we are now witnessing.

What else will we do about it? This fall, Provost Kathy Ogren, a great leader here, is organizing a second series focused on national debates concerning campuses and free speech. Now more than ever, it is incumbent on me, and all on this stage, and the professors who will be your mentors, to help you develop as members of a community, as engaged citizens of the entire globe, and eventually as the leaders of principle we so need. Redlands is committed to rise to this challenge and determined to achieve this goal, as it has for more than a century.

To the Class of 2021, I say to you this is YOUR Redlands. Just like it is MY Redlands, just like it is the Redlands that belongs to all those students who have come before you. Make of it what you will. Explore new things. And challenge that overly-comfortable comfort zone. Get involved in something sooner, rather than later. Study hard, yes, but build relationships with your faculty. They want that. And, recognize that independence is harder than it looks. Yet . . . don't worry . . . you now have a whole community of Bulldogs to lean on. You will quickly realize that Redlands is a place “where everyone knows your name” . . . a phrase popularized by our Redlands alumni Glen and Les Charles through the theme song of their hit TV show Cheers—which I just now realize is a reference you won't even get, because that show was on television from 1982 to 93—remember TV?—that was before TiVo and Roku, before Netflix and Hulu, and before the Internet, for Pete's sake. But that's OK; your older and wiser parents will get the reference and explain it to you!

Welcome to the University of Redlands. To paraphrase the American philosopher Cornel West: You are stepping out today . . . not on nothing . . . but on faith . . . hoping to land on something. I assure you, you will.