

**Getting the Most Out of College:  
How The Broader Purposes of Higher Education Connect to Your Own Goals  
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Academic Convocation for New Students  
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Thank you President Abare and Dean Woolfolk for inviting me to speak, and for your generous words of introduction.

I want to wish a warm welcome to all of the new students here as you begin your studies at this absolutely gorgeous college in such a truly historic city.

To the faculty, welcome back for another year. I must say, dressed as I am, I do love your outfits.

I have a tremendous amount of envy for beginning college students. I have four daughters – one who just finished college, two who are in college, and our wonderful little surprise, who's now beginning fourth grade.

As I dropped each of the older girls on campus freshman year, I told them: you are about to embark on what may well be the highlight of your lives. The college years provide that unmistakable sweet spot of blossoming freedom prior to the onset of full adult responsibility.

On the one hand, you will enjoy a newfound liberty. No one will tell you what to drink, what to eat, when to go to sleep, when to get up – or even whether to. On the other hand, you will not yet have the crushing responsibilities that will inevitably come later in life. As my brother in law, a University of Florida grad, has warned my daughters: life does truly go downhill after college. So enjoy it while it lasts; and make the very most of it.

As you embark on what we *hope* will be a four year journey, I would ask you students to think hard about what you want to get out of college, what you'd like to accomplish.

And among the faculty here, I'd encourage you to think once more about the larger purposes of higher education; to consider what an institution like Flagler does well, and what it might improve upon in order to better serve those larger goals.

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So what are the purposes of education? When the city of St. Augustine was founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, there was little inkling that the United States of America would become the greatest free-market democracy in the world. Much of the success of this country has to do with a dogged pursuit of the twin goals of education in a democratic and capitalist society.

On the one hand, education, including higher education, is aimed at producing and training students to become productive and contributing employees in the workforce. We want our education system, as politicians remind us, to produce adults who can compete in a global economy. When I was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, we worried about the Japanese and the Germans beating us. Now it's the Brazilians, Indians, and the Chinese.

On the other hand education has also been seen as essential to producing thoughtful citizens in a democracy. Unlike many nations around the world, we put the fate of the country in the hands of ordinary voters. We want citizens who have critical thinking skills so important in a system of self-governance. We want voters who can discern whether the Tea Party, for example, is a group of patriots or blowhards or maybe a little of both.

Now it may be that as a personal matter, you are all more concerned about goal #1 (getting a job) rather than goal #2 (being a great citizen). But it's for both reasons that the taxpaying public invests in your education.

And make no mistake; taxpayers don't only support public institutions like the University of Florida or Florida State. There are many ways in which the public also supports private institutions like Flagler. Nonprofit colleges and universities are not required to pay taxes the way for-profit colleges and other corporations are, an exemption that costs the federal government \$18 billion annually. Moreover, the donations made to nonprofit educational institutions are tax deductible. If someone gives money to Flagler to build a new swimming pool, a third of the funding effectively comes from the government in lost revenue, which totaled \$6 billion nationally in 2007. Financial aid programs and tax credits for college tuition also support students at both public and private institutions.

We all support your education because we want you to graduate and become productive employees and good citizens. But related to those broader goals, I'd like this morning to sketch five related aims of higher education. (Studies suggest speeches should only include three points because people can't remember more than that. But this is a bright audience, so I'm going to give you five.) I want to ask you, the students here today, to think about how you can advance these goals while you're here; and to ask you, the faculty and administrators here today, to think about how Flagler can help students reach these goals.

**1. One primary goal of higher education is to ensure that everyone, no matter the wealth of their parents, has a chance to enjoy the American Dream. The U.S. is supposed**

**to be different than the Old World of Europe in promoting greater social mobility and equal educational opportunity.**

It used to be that there were two major paths to economic security in the United States: go to college or join a unionized occupation. But unions have significantly declined in the US. Today less than 7% of private sector workers are unionized, compared with 35% in the 1950s. So today, the most reliable path to economic security involves getting a four-year degree.

To begin with, the unemployment rate for college grads is one-third that of high school dropouts, and one half that of high school grads who don't go on to college. In 2010, the unemployment rate was 4.7% for college graduates, compared with 10.3% for high school graduates and 14.9% for high school dropouts.

Likewise, earnings are far greater for college graduates. According to the U.S. Department of Education:

“In 2009, the median of the earnings for young adults [25-34 year-olds working full time] with a bachelor's degree was \$45,000, while the median was \$21,000 for those *without* a high school diploma or its equivalent, \$30,000 for those with a high school diploma or its equivalent, and \$36,000 for those with an associate's degree. In other words, young adults with a bachelor's degree earned more than twice as much as those *without* a high school diploma or its equivalent in 2009 (i.e., 114 percent more), 50 percent more than young adult high school completers, and 25 percent more than young adults with an associate's degree.”

Overall, however, American higher education is not doing a very good job of promoting social mobility. Education is supposed to be the “great equalizer” in the words of Horace Mann, but today those with wealthier parents disproportionately earn bachelor's degrees and enjoy the accompanying economic benefits. Indeed, 82% of those from higher-income families get a

bachelor's degree by age 24, compared with just 8% from low-income families. That is, children from wealthy families are about 10 times as likely to get college degrees by age 24.

And students from low-income families are especially scarce at selective institutions. According to a 2004 Century Foundation study, you're 25 times as likely to run into a rich kid as a poor kid on the campuses of the 146 most selective colleges and universities. I've written a book called *The Remedy*, which argues that while colleges have generally done a good job of promoting racial diversity, they should give a leg up in admissions to low-income students of all backgrounds.

We are wasting an enormous amount of talent in our society. According to a book The Century Foundation published last year, entitled *Rewarding Strivers*, only 44% of low-income students who score in the top quarter of the population go to a four year college; and 31% of these low-income high scorers don't attend any college at all.

Flagler, to its credit, is doing a better job at promoting social mobility than many other colleges. I'm told 30% of students are eligible for Pell Grants, the primary federal aid program for students from low and moderate income families – generally those making less than \$40,000 a year. That's a much higher rate than at many private colleges and universities. For example, about 15% of students are eligible for Pell Grants at the nation's 50 best-endowed colleges.

The relatively modest tuition and fees charged at Flagler may help explain the greater representation of students from moderate income families. Flagler charged just under \$14,000 in tuition and fees in 2010-11, roughly half the amount charged by private nonprofit four-year colleges nationally (\$27,293). At some colleges, tuition, fees, and room and board are about \$50,000 a year, which Andrew Hacker notes is “almost two-thirds of the after-tax income of the typical household with college-age offspring.”

But in order to promote social mobility, institutions need to do more than enroll low income and working-class students but also to graduate them. That will take more support from colleges like Flagler – where today about half of students graduate in four years. And it will take a strong commitment from students.

I hope that you all graduate, but I especially hope that the 30% of you who are Pell recipients graduate. You represent the country's promise of social mobility. There are extra burdens on Pell students – many of you will be working long hours in jobs to make ends meet. But, what President Obama has said about high school also applies to college: Dropping out is “not just quitting on yourself – it's quitting on your country. And this country needs and values the talents of every American.”

**2. A second key goal of higher education is to educate leaders in our democracy.**

If you graduate, you will become part of the top third in educational attainment in the nation, and have opportunities, including leadership opportunities, that most Americans don't enjoy having. If less than one-third of Americans have four-year college degrees, three-quarters of state legislators do.

Thomas Jefferson famously wanted the United States to be led by a “natural aristocracy” of “virtue and talent” rather than an “artificial aristocracy” based on wealth and birth. And a system of free public education, coupled with accessible higher education, was critical, in his view, to producing America’s leaders.

Yet, once again, in practice, many institutions of higher education fail to live up to this ideal today by admitting some students through so-called “legacy preferences” – a system which provides special consideration for the children of alumni. Last the Century Foundation published a book that I edited on this topic, called *Affirmative Action for the Rich*.

One of the chapter authors, Michael Lind, noted that the practice of giving a preference in admissions based on who your daddy is flatly contradicts the ideals of a democratic republic. Lind wrote, “By reserving places on campus for members of the pseudo-aristocracy of wealth and birth, legacy preferences introduce an aristocratic snake into the democratic republican Garden of Eden.”

Legacy preferences are justified on the theory that they increase donations from alumni, but the research in our book – comparing 75 universities with legacy preferences and 25 without – found that the existence of a legacy preference *per se* did not increase donations. Moreover, universities that dropped legacy preferences in admissions, such as Texas A&M, did not see a decline in donations.

This issue will be debated in coming months and years – and we may very well see a legal challenge against the use of legacy preferences. But whatever the problems with the larger system, the message I want to leave with you is that if you graduate from college, you have a strong shot at joining the leadership class in this country. That is an

opportunity and a responsibility which you should take very seriously. I would encourage you to develop your leadership skills while at Flagler, particularly in extracurricular activities. Our democracy is constantly looking for new leadership and improved leadership – as the recent debt ceiling shenanigans illustrated. And as college graduates, you will be disproportionately likely to fill those leadership roles.

**3. A third purpose of college is to advance knowledge. This is accomplished when faculty produce research; and when students broaden their minds and increase their knowledge of the world, even if that knowledge does not seem immediately relevant to their careers.**

Some dismiss learning that is not directly related to career goals as impractical or even frivolous. The humanities, some suggest, is a “cocktail conversation” major, something that helps you make interesting points at a party but doesn’t otherwise advance one’s employment goals.

However, as Louis Menand has written in *The New Yorker* magazine, college is a time for you to learn “things about the world and yourself that, if you do not learn them in college, you are unlikely to learn anywhere else.” Later in life, you will be caught up in family and career, and at least some portion of your time in college should be spent becoming “a reflective and culturally literate human being.”

Ann Mullen of the University of Toronto has suggested that choosing a major can be about more than picking an “occupational field,” and also be considered a way to understand important “bodies of knowledge.” Knowing history and literature and science

can help you make wise well-considered decisions in a broad variety of personal and professional situations and should not be denigrated.

Particularly here at Flagler, you should take time to explore the history in this area. Harvard, where I went to school, brags about being oldest university, but you're in the oldest city in America. The Census Bureau says there are about 20,000 incorporated cities and towns in the U.S. Not a single one of them is older than this one. Explore that history and take advantage of it while you are here.

There is disturbing evidence from a recent report, entitled *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, which found that an astounding 45 percent of students learn little in the first two years of college, as measured by progress on a standardized test, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). I hope you'll rise above that national average, by taking classes that will challenge you and require substantial reading and writing and analytical thinking. This will make you not only a better employee and citizen but also a wiser, more fully-developed person.

**4. A fourth purpose of higher education is to teach you to interact with people different than your selves.**

I've written and edited books on our K-12 system, and the evidence is unmistakable that our elementary and secondary schools are becoming increasingly segregated by race and class. In fact, our public schools are more segregated today than at any time in the last three decades. Even as our society is becoming more diverse, our student populations are being pulled apart into separate camps, divided by race and class.

American colleges, because they draw upon students from a variety of neighborhoods and states, and even countries, from rural and urban areas, provide a unique environment in which students of different backgrounds can learn from one another.

Many colleges have done a fairly good job of promoting racial diversity through affirmative action programs, but as I mentioned earlier most do a poor job of bringing students from different economic backgrounds together. As Walter Benn Michaels has noted, many colleges now have “rich kids of all colors.”

From the data I’ve seen, Flagler is an exception to this rule. On the one hand, you have a fair degree of economic diversity represented on campus here. And there are students here from 47 states and from 20 other countries. On the other hand, more could be done to increase racial diversity.

For those of you who are students, I’d urge you to move beyond your comfort zone and affirmatively seek out people who have different backgrounds than you. There is new evidence just reported last week that confirms that interaction in the dining hall matters even more in changing student attitudes than in the classroom, because conversation are more frank in a relaxed setting. So go sit at lunch with someone from a different part of the country or a different economic group or racial or ethnic backgrounds and learn his or her story.

##### **5. Finally college is a time to find a passion – and even a purpose in life.**

When I was a senior in college, I wrote my thesis about Robert Kennedy’s 1968 campaign for president, in which he built a powerful coalition of working-class white

voters and black and Hispanic voters – who were, at the time, at war with one another – by making appeals to common economic interests. Kennedy thought that the economic divide in this country was even greater than the racial and ethnic divides, and that hypothesis – bolstered by lots of evidence – is something I’ve pursued in almost all my research and writing since college.

My passion on this issue helped me, particularly when I went to law school, to better know my values and to know what would be the right career path for me. As I explain in my book, *Broken Contract: A Memoir of Harvard Law School*, I was very tempted to go to a big law firm and make a large pile of money. During the summer after my second year of law school, I worked at a well-known corporate law firm in Boston. Much of the law firm work seemed to be aimed at protecting the interests of wealthy corporations and families, which of course was the opposite of what Robert Kennedy had tried to do.

At the same time, the law firm life was highly seductive. I attended lavish lunches at fancy restaurants, and I can still remember going to a Boston Red Sox game with the other summer lawyers, and sitting near a firm partner with a large stack of \$20 bills. Whenever you got hungry for a hot dog or wanted to buy a souvenir, he’d hand you a \$20 and you didn’t have to justify it, or bring a receipt or even give back the change. As the innings wore on, you could go back to him as many times as you wanted.

The firm was sending a very clear message about the financial rewards of working there. But for me, the actual day to day work had nothing to do with the passion I’d developed in college. And so, instead, after law school I turned down law firm offers and went to work on Capitol Hill for a U.S. Senator. Today, I write about equity issues

and policies to try to make life more fair for those kids, who, through no fault of their own, lack opportunity in our society.

So I wish you a passion. Use these next few years to find out what you're really good at, what you're really interested in, and also think about what the critical problems are facing the country. What is the civil rights issue of your generation?

As you embark on your education here, I hope you'll keep the five goals of higher education that I outlined in mind – promoting social mobility; educating leaders; broadening the minds of students; learning from diversity; and finding a passion.

And, if you're really lucky, as I was, you might also find the perfect spouse in college – and then have children, whom you can tell, when they go to college: “Cherish these years, for they may be among the very best in your entire life.”

Thank you.