

President Gee—Remarks
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These subjects are dear to my heart. I have been a university president for nearly 38 years, yet I still remain a law professor. In every aspect of my work, my law degree remains the most important arrow in my quiver. It also gives me back-up career option, if this presidential gig does not work out.

Over the past several years, anyone scanning news headlines could be forgiven for doubting academia's future.

As the economy faltered, government funding for higher education plummeted, college costs soared, and student debt reached crisis levels.

Modes of learning are evolving. Technology is revolutionizing our lives and integrating the global landscape. Meanwhile, the job market is changing, and the body politic is losing faith in the value of higher education.

In a Pew Research Center survey, only 40 percent of respondents said the value for the money spent on higher education is good or excellent. This is an existential threat to those of us in this room.

An anti-academia feeling is surging on the conservative side of the opinion spectrum, with 58 percent of Republicans saying colleges and universities are having a negative effect on our country. Just two years ago, only 37 percent of Republicans held this view.

Protests about free speech and its limits have erupted on campuses nationwide. Controversy surrounds the best approaches for preventing and responding to sexual harassment and assault.

A growing number of young people are experiencing anxiety and depression.

Immigration policies and rhetoric have helped to spur a 7 percent drop in international students enrolling in the United States. And the number of high school graduates here at home will be dropping significantly by 2026.

So, have you lost your appetite yet?

If so, I cannot blame you. These are tenuous times for universities and colleges—

small and large, public and private. The obstacles are daunting. The urgency grows each day.

But, so does our opportunity to reinvent ourselves and reinterpret our founding principles for new generations. As a philosopher, Kierkegaard is known as the father of “angst” and “existential despair.” So somehow this seems like a fitting time and place to quote him. Kierkegaard declared that man’s greatest fear is learning what he is truly capable of doing and becoming.

As educators, we can succumb to complacency, hide our heads in the sand, and ignore the luminous possibilities of the future, or we can take this occasion to reconfigure, recalibrate, rethink and redefine what higher education will look like in years to come.

In this atmosphere of havoc, we can either be architects of the future or victims of destiny. If we choose the challenge of building, let us remember the words of Frank Lloyd Wright: “Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union.”

Wright’s best expression of that principle is about an hour’s drive from the West Virginia University campus. Designing Fallingwater, which has been called “the best all-time work of American architecture,” Wright drew upon the building’s setting for both materials and inspiration.

We can build a future for higher education that is just as strong, enduring and beautiful if our materials and inspiration express the needs of those we serve.

Instead of the locally-quarried stone used at Fallingwater, I will recommend seven less tangible building blocks for a havoc-resistant future. And “havoc” makes a handy acronym to help you remember these building blocks: Humanity, accountability, vision, obligation and communication.

Humanity

Let us begin by talking about something that is lacking in our public discourse today—a recognition of our shared humanity.

The 21st century demands leaders who, despite glaring differences of opinion, have respect for the views of their peers. People who can think, reason, and debate are the ultimate antidote to incivility and intolerance.

One of our primary purposes as an academic institution is to nurture our students' questioning spirits — to help them understand that they have not only the freedom to speak, but also the responsibility to listen and understand.

As scholars, we must be willing not only to hear others' opinions about things that matter deeply; we must also be bold enough to engage with them in frank, civil dialogue.

Unfortunately, if you walk through a typical student union at lunch time, you are apt to see students segregating themselves into social groups along racial or ethnic lines.

We must start asking why this happens and what we can do to change it. Unfortunately, in many ways, universities reflect the splintered state of America today. But we should be helping to lead our students out of that splintered state and into one of inclusion and enlightenment.

Our country's founders understood that free and open discussion is the cornerstone of democracy, and they enshrined our right to free speech in the U.S. Constitution.

On America's campuses, people come together to argue and rebut, to debate and debunk. That is how we learn. That is how we challenge our own ideas and open our minds.

Unfortunately, these days, we see minds closing and civil discourse withering all around us. We see it across the Internet, which has become a platform for rude and sometimes vicious commentary.

And we see it on our nation's campuses, where some students demand "safe spaces" and "trigger warnings" to protect them from opposing viewpoints.

However, I believe in today's students. I have great faith in this generation. What is more, I have faith in the university experience. A university's role is not to make people comfortable; it is to make them think. Our responsibility is not to shield students from the harsh winds outside. It is to teach them how to weather strong disagreements.

Any attempt to deny free speech protections to others is a threat to our own freedom. It is a threat to education. And it is a threat to democracy itself.

President Lincoln, who led at a time of greater division and despair than we can even imagine, said: "Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit which prizes liberty as a heritage of all men, in all lands, everywhere. Destroy that spirit and you have planted the seeds of despotism around your own doors."

Varying opinions cannot rend a community if our shared values outweigh our differences. At West Virginia University, we undertook a collaborative process to identify our values and we determined by this process that we are curious, service-oriented, accountable, respectful and appreciative — always mindful of our true sense of self.

It is our charge to teach students how to debate civilly, protest peacefully and learn from people whose opinions and choices differ from their own. And just as it is our responsibility to teach our students, it is also our responsibility to learn from them.

Three years ago, we began a journey to change the culture at West Virginia University — and we started with our students. During the fall of 2014, we experienced several incidents involving student behavior and substance abuse, including the heart-breaking death of a freshman fraternity pledge from alcohol poisoning. We met the issues head-on by having direct and candid conversations with our student leaders. We worked in partnership with students to begin creating the culture we wanted at West Virginia University — not one defined by the actions of a few.

Our campuses, and our whole society, are also reckoning with the issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment. The search for fair and effective guidelines to handle accusations will continue.

In the meantime, I believe that the most effective sexual assault prevention involves treating students as adults and engaging them to find solutions for recognizing assault, intervening in situations of assault and creating an environment in which assault is wholly unacceptable. Campus leaders must be transparent about the issue of sexual violence and encouraged students to have the difficult, often awkward, discussions needed on these issues. Transparency in all we do is an important element of our second solid building-block for progress: Accountability.

Accountability

Being accountable means working smarter. It means hiring the very best people in the country and rewarding them for what they do best. We need to value each faculty and staff member as an individual, with individual strengths. Treat people like McDonald's hamburgers and they become one.

A one-size-fits-all approach has no place at any university. Our reward structures must promote innovation, instead of propagating mediocrity. It is time to move away from structures that worked well 50 years ago. Reward and recognition should be crafted to fit today's higher education landscape.

Accountability also means that colleges and universities must take the lead in reducing college costs by lancing bloated bureaucracies.

We must make real, strategic decisions about academic direction, about programs for investment and disinvestment, and about how we meet today's enormous challenges. We must finally learn to say the word "no," a word rarely used in higher education. Today, in our country, rules have replaced leadership. Regulations and outdated laws have us handcuffed.

No one ever asks, "What is the right thing to do here?" Instead they wonder, "What does the rule book say?"

The architectural rulebook would have pointed Frank Lloyd Wright away from locating a house over a waterfall. I say it is time to throw away the damn rule book and let innovation outweigh mere compliance.

Cantilevers and reinforced concrete supported Wright's innovation. To support ours, we need our third building block: Vision.

Vision

Colleges and universities have always been places where the mind and the imagination flourish. We are repositories of human achievement, sanctuaries for the human spirit, and incubators of human aspiration.

More than ever, in these challenging times, we must go beyond the answers we have always given and the boundaries we have always maintained. We must liberate energies imprisoned by long-held habits, and habits of mind.

"We have always done things this way!" is not an acceptable rationale for anything in higher education today. Ladies and gentlemen, sacred cows make the best hamburgers. I strongly believe that freedom begets human creativity and goodwill. Making our own choices empowers us to take risks, to innovate, to fail — and to get up and try again.

So, we must move boldly forward, holding fast to the enduring principles of the past, the art of the possible and the shining promise of the future. We must challenge traditional assumptions, drive creativity, foster innovation and renew our personal commitments to our institution's unique and sacred responsibility.

That brings us to our fourth building-block: Our obligation to society.

Obligation

American higher education has long benefited from a diversified education system that includes large and small, public and private, religious and secular, comprehensive and specialized institutions. This diversity has made our system the best in the world.

Each of our country's 4,500 colleges and universities has its own niche. At West Virginia University, a public land-grant institution, our goal is not to be elitist or even elite — it is to serve West Virginians and apply knowledge to solving the state's many problems, including the opioid crisis, economic stagnation and health disparities.

Other types of institutions have other roles to play. Community colleges, for example, are the front door to the American dream. Amid the quest for prestigious rankings, too many in higher education have ignored the importance of technical education.

Not everyone needs a four-year college degree, but everyone needs some post-secondary training to succeed in today's economy. In West Virginia, which has the

nation's lowest workforce participation rate, employers have 20,000 jobs that they cannot fill because citizens lack sufficient training. By focusing on their fundamental obligation, colleges and universities can pivot to meet the unique needs of those they serve.

For example, we recognized that in Appalachia, parents dislike sending their children far from home to attend college. That is why we moved our WVU Institute of Technology to a new location in Beckley, West Virginia, expanding opportunities for people in our state's southern coalfields to reinvent themselves by retraining and re-establish themselves with the skills they need to be competitive.

If each college and university works toward its own purpose, we can build a culture of collaboration—rather than competition—among institutions. For far too long, we have acted in isolation from one another, hoarding our marbles and imagining the broad framework of education as a zero-sum game.

Colleges and universities cannot solve our nation's problems alone, and neither can primary and secondary schools. A new sustainable system of education – pre-K through life – requires our unrelenting pursuit of deeper partnerships – with one another, with business and industry, with government, and with our communities. If we welcome all good ideas and develop new partnerships, if we cast our gaze around the world

and expand our imaginations, then there is no question that we will succeed. And then, our voices can rise in chorus –rather than clashing in cacophony – and defend the value of higher education itself.

Communication

Our last building block, communication, means our stories. We need to describe in concrete terms how education changes lives, improves communities, feeds the world, sustains art and culture, and cures diseases.

Now is the time to stand up against those who discredit higher education. Because in truth, it is more important than ever to possess the knowledge and skills acquired on a college campus.

In 2015, college graduates earned, on average, 56% more than high school graduates—the largest gap the Economic Policy Institute has ever found in almost half a century of polling. Since 2008, there have been 14 million new jobs, of which only 800,000 required a high school education or less. This trend will only escalate in coming years, as our nation continues to shift from a manufacturing-based economy to a knowledge-based one.

The economic benefits of college attainment go beyond individual advancement, however. College graduates contribute more in tax revenues, while being much less likely to require public assistance than those with a high school education or less.

People who have a post-secondary education are also more likely have retirement and health insurance benefits.

But as important as economic benefits are, they are far from the only way that high college attainment rates strengthen our society. Research shows that college graduates are more likely to vote, to volunteer in their communities, to make charitable contributions and to engage in healthy practices such as exercising and getting regular medical care. College-educated people even have a longer life expectancy than those who never attended college — 81 years compared to 74, as reported in a recent study.

We live in an era when ideas are the catalysts of virtually all progress. And that means that education has never been more vital. So, this is a pivotal time in our history where our voices must be heard.

Because, amid today's seeming havoc, our nation still looks to higher education for solutions. They look to us because of the uniquely powerful role that education fills in America – to fulfill our country's founding ideal of a meritocracy based on ability and action, to sustain our democracy through an informed citizenry, and to right the wrongs of bigotry and oppression.

Today, our terrain looks rugged and forbidding. But with the proper materials and a blueprint that serves people's real needs, we can shape our colleges and universities into something more vital than ivy-covered historic landmarks.

We can build homes that nurture people from around the world and across the ideological spectrum. We can build factories for ingenuity and economic growth. We can build laboratories for creativity and artistic expression. We can build monuments to the life-changing, world-changing power of discovery. And together, we can build a future that soars beyond any skyscraper — and beyond all imagination.