

ROBYN HANNIGAN INAUGURATION REMARKS

Wednesday, October 12, 2022

“Good morning, fellow Bears!

It is an honor to be standing here, among so many great friends and colleagues, as your 19th president.

This afternoon, I would like to extend an enthusiastic welcome to my family, my colleagues and supporters, friends new and old, all who came to Collegeville to be part of today’s celebration. Alan, Cami, and I are truly humbled by your warm welcome ... and for your willingness to adopt a 150-pound Great Dane into your family. Grizzlies beware—Astro thinks this is his home turf. And I suggest you let him think that for a while longer!

To Chair Joe DeSimone, Presidential Search Committee Chair Peg Williams, their colleagues on the board of trustees, and the alumni, faculty, staff, and students of Ursinus: you all have a bond that can never be broken. Ursinus is a special place, steeped in history with an eye on the future, and I am honored to be a steward of that tradition.

I am deeply blessed to have some family and friends here today. Among them are some of my former students. All of them, especially Tom and Bryanna, learned some stuff working with me, not the least of which is that pickled octopus pairs beautifully with just about everything, and argon doesn't grow on trees. My mentors, particularly Tony Collins, showed me what it means to lead, and what a special obligation I now have to stand firm in keeping the promise of higher education alive.

My mother-in-law Pat Christian is here too—I am looking forward to getting back to our annual trips to Puerto Rico! Thank you for wrapping your arms around me and showing me the power and intimacy of family. To my childhood friends who may wonder how I ended up here—I told you I was wicked smaht! And I'm especially grateful to our elected representatives and community neighbors who are with us today for showcasing the incredible spirit and camaraderie of this region. To all of these guests—welcome to Ursinus!

This has been a campus of discovery and of invention, where scholars and artists and athletes share a common DNA. I, like my predecessors, will carry into the future a living vision of the liberal arts that will forever remain grounded in the common good and in service to one another. Because that is what this world needs more than anything.

And it's what we do exceptionally well.

But we can't have an honest dialogue about the common good without acknowledging the sacrifice and generational harm done to those whose land we now inhabit and on which Ursinus now rests. Dating back centuries before William Penn, this region was the spiritual and ancestral home to the Delaware Tribe of Indians—the Lenape. In their Algonquian language, “Lenape” roughly translates to “the People,” and for generations, these peacemakers presided over disputes and conflicts of neighboring tribes. They were a “Grandfather Tribe”—caretakers of this land AND of one another. I am humbled to continue their legacy of community as your 19th President.

Their environmental stewardship and love for one another is an example for us all. I stand in solidarity with the Delaware Tribe of Indians and, under my presidency, Ursinus will demonstrably embrace the “Welcome Home” project, and work with you on a path of healing and reconciliation. It is an honor to share today with members of the tribe.

With open hearts and minds, Ursinus commits to listening, to learning, and to acting in accordance with our commitment to stewardship of your ancestral home and our shared future.

I don't take the opportunity to transform the lives of our students, their families, and communities lightly. It is, in fact, the highest privilege! And so, in the spirit of the Lenape peoples, I am dedicating my tenure as president to a simple, but powerful, idea of ONE URSINUS. As a college that changes lives, we need to manifest a vision that positions us as a college that changes higher education. And we must do it together.

I firmly believe there is nothing more important we can do to change higher education than to create a campus environment that nourishes the well-being of every student, faculty, and staff member. Anxiety, stress, and uncertainty about the future were heightened by the pandemic. Nearly 75 percent of American college students report feeling more anxious and suffering emotional and mental distress. That's as untenable as it is heartbreaking, and there's no simple fix. Change is now routine and building resilience is central to long-term survival, let alone success. Here at Ursinus we realized that addressing these issues required us to think outside of the box; to reimagine the role of health and wellbeing in the success of students, faculty, and staff. Last year, founding the new division of health and wellness, Ursinus became one of the first colleges in the country to position health and well-being within the core of the academic and residential enterprise.

Yet we can do so much more as ONE URSINUS, where the responsibility to support every student is accepted by every one of us. That's why I am so, so proud to announce that, right now, Ursinus College is becoming the very first liberal arts college in the nation to officially sign the international Okanagan Charter—a campus-wide commitment that re-envision student wellbeing, embedding health into all aspects of campus culture, across the entire student experience.

In a few minutes, with the stroke of a pen, we immediately change the way colleges across the nation—in fact, across the world—approach the health and wellbeing of their campus community. And by being the first liberal arts signatory, Ursinus is taking an explicit stance in favor of health, equity, social justice, and sustainability in recognition of the fact that the wellbeing of people, places and the planet are interdependent. I can think of no better way to celebrate an inauguration than to fully commit ourselves, as ONE URSINUS, to this incredible endeavor and to lead by example!

As I hope today's celebration illustrates, I believe that a liberal education is a vehicle for positive action and transformational change. The liberal arts and sciences give us a lens through which we can view the world and take necessary risks to manifest needed change – and that we're not afraid to ask tough questions of ourselves or of one another.

Ursinus is a college that is, and should be, proud of its mission. Embracing a diversity of lived experiences and empowering the thinkers and doers of tomorrow to lead meaningful and positive change in service to planet and people -- This is what we do.

And we've been doing it since the start. When Ursinus was chartered back in 1869, the United States had just begun to piece together a tattered fabric, torn by disunity and bigotry. The first transcontinental railroad was about to be completed and women were soon granted the right to vote for the first time, in the Wyoming Territory. And, in a peculiar twist of irony that we can only fully appreciate today, Thomas Edison earned his first patent for the electronic vote recorder, designed to make Congressional voting on Capitol Hill more efficient and time-saving. Congress, of course, had reservations and it was never used.

Then, as now, our (very) imperfect union was at an inflection point. I share this for two reasons: First, this college was borne during a time of not only turmoil and tension, but uncertainty and division. And second, that the idea of progress and resiliency, however incremental, would come to serve as the prologue to the Ursinus story—much as it does today. We are preparing to write a new chapter for Ursinus when, across this country, prospective families question the value and purpose and mission of college

and universities—and a time when so many students face obstacles that, too often, sound quiet alarms too easily dismissed.

We know, for instance, that college-bound students of all economic and racial backgrounds are choosing to explore options other than college at unprecedented rates, especially students of color. And yet too many colleges and universities still take pride in high selectivity rates. That is exclusionary, and we should call that out. Prestige should never, ever equate to a college's ability to decline admission to thousands of students. Why shouldn't we instead provide greater access and opportunity to those students who don't think a college education is within reach?

That, after all, is the mission of higher education. We once thought of our work as a great equalizer. But how can our work be an equalizer when those who can benefit the most choose different paths—not as a last resort, but because they believe opportunity lies elsewhere?

Let me share a story that, I hope, brings this to life. As you know, Ursinus College is, first and foremost, about students and their ability to lean into their potential. Ultimately, my career successes are attributable to the extraordinary students I've been honored to mentor—especially those who've traveled rather untraditional journeys and who had to overcome

adversity.

In my first year as a newly minted assistant professor, I had a cadre of students working with me. Maybe 10 or so undergraduates, a handful of Ph.D. students – a BIG project funded by NSF.

I noticed that one of the students—we all had nicknames for each other, and his was Squishy, a non-traditional student who had re-started undergraduate studies again in his late 20s – he was always in the lab working when I arrived in the morning around 7:30 a.m. I thought, “What a go getter.” I applauded his work ethic and shamed other students, especially the graduate students, for not being like him. After a couple of months, one evening, quite late, I remembered I’d left an instrument running so I went back to campus at maybe 11:30 p.m.

And there the student was, but not working.

He was sleeping, in a sleeping bag on the floor. I woke him and asked if he was staying over because he had lab work. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and said yes. Well, that week I asked a couple of graduate students about this undergraduate. Low and behold, the student was homeless. I asked how the student was eating and showering and they said that they were feeding him and that he used the athletics facilities to bathe. They

didn't know much more than that.

I asked the Dean of Students, the department chair, and my other my colleagues if they knew anything about the student and they said no—he's quiet, stays to himself. They were surprised he was working in my lab as he usually came to campus only for classes and then left. I finally got the courage to ask him what was going on and how I could help as this was no way to live and certainly wasn't conducive to completing his degree.

Turns out that he had been in jail, arrested while in college the first time as a 21-year-old for drugs, and had gotten released the summer before joining my lab and returning to college. He had no job, so he knew he needed on-campus employment and saw my ad for undergraduate assistants. The pay was good, and the hours were flexible. He couldn't live at home with his folks and go to school as the commute was too long, so he had lived in his car until he realized he could sleep in the lab, and no one would know.

The only reason the other students were feeding him was because they had figured out he was eating their leftovers at night. After quickly running through this story, he started to cry and slowly began picking up his books and papers and packing up. I asked him what he was doing, and he said he understood that his dishonesty would mean losing his position.

I said he was nuts. I'd never had anyone in my lab work so hard or someone who, as an undergraduate, was so great with lab techniques. And I told him I'd heard he was a star in his classes so there was no way I was letting him go. Rather, I said, let's take a walk over to residence life and to financial aid and see if we can't get you a place to live, a meal plan, and make sure you're financially able to stay in college not only now but until you graduate.

With the help of colleagues and an institution committed to the success of non-traditional students like him, we discovered he was eligible for several scholarships and grants, we leveraged donor support to get him a meal plan and a dorm room.

After 3 years, he not only published his research in peer-reviewed journals and finished his BS in chemistry with a minor in biology but was accepted to medical school. He is now a practicing physician with a spouse and a couple of kids. But he hasn't forgotten the journey he took. He established a scholarship for formerly incarcerated men to pursue chemistry at the university and volunteers as a math and reading tutor at the prison where he is on staff on the weekends. While he knows he is giving back to pay it forward, I hope he also knows how much he gave to me early in my career. His example showed me the profound importance of well-being and health

in student success, a legacy he should be very proud of.

In some ways, I share common bonds with that student in that my unconventional journey was fraught with challenges, too. My high school grades were not stellar. I'm fortunate to have had a brother who sacrificed so much so that I may attend college in his place. My family had limited means and limited knowledge of how to navigate a college search. I am of mixed-heritage, equally celebrating my roots as both a descendant of the Narragansett Indian Tribe and my Irish lineage.

It wasn't until college that I learned how to turn a learning disability—my dyslexia—into a “superpower,” one that allowed me to solve problems in unique ways.

In short, I was anything but an average student, and I'm well aware that I was granted an opportunity when so many of my peers, in similar circumstances, were not.

So please understand this comes from the heart, as much as the mind: We need to change higher education so that we may change lives.

And I want us to accept that challenge.

As I got to know so many of you over the past few months, many of you shared ideas on how this next chapter might read. In my final few minutes, I'd like to briefly share a few of those suggestions, and how they fit into a vision for ONE URSINUS.

First, we need to diversify our revenue, which means being more adaptive and responsive to market demands while recommitting to our values and our "true north." How can we build capacity so that our students can enjoy greater opportunities, programs, and experiences that prepare them to make contributions in their careers and communities?

Second, we want to raise our visibility so that we can forge new partnerships with organizations that are driving real change. Earlier this month, I had the good fortune to present, along with our director of sustainability, at a hearing of elected officials from across the Commonwealth, the different policies, and technologies that municipalities across the nation have put to use to counter climate change and severe weather events like flooding. We have a rich history of research and innovation, and I'm fully invested in raising our profile so that Ursinus is a partner in developing informed policies that benefit society. We should embrace this calling.

Third, many of you spoke eloquently about scholarships and other financial supports for our students. If we are to create greater access to opportunity and knowledge, then we need to think differently about how we create that access. In what ways can we enhance the students experience and, in so doing, assure their personal as well as financial health and well-being?

Fourth, how can we better meet students where they are, geographically, economically, and academically so that they can effectively navigate a too complicated and messy educational landscape? Can we empower the campus community in new ways to creatively promote Ursinus and the real, tangible benefits of an Ursinus education? This moment in time, with all of its disruption, is tailor-made for Ursinus, and we need to be bold about just how transformative that can be.

And last, we need to continue making the right kind of investments in our infrastructure. In the past five years, the IDC and the Schellhase Commons have enhanced both the academic and social neighborhoods of campus. How can we look at our current physical assets, our geographic and carbon footprint, and enable decisions that will benefit students, faculty, staff, and the community as a whole in new, perhaps not yet considered ways?

These are the five opportunities you shared with me, and each is critical to Every Students' Success, the college's next strategic plan. I am grateful for the community's honesty and candor in these discussions. To paraphrase Mae Jemison, astronaut, and first black woman to travel into space, Bears never limit themselves because of others' limited imagination and they never limit the imagination of others. We're about to do great—and some would say brave—things here and your sincerity and commitment are a foundation upon which to build. As your president, I will work alongside you to harness all that is possible and together we will move forward with a renewed purpose and unified vision for Ursinus.

So, let there be absolutely no doubt that Ursinus remains unwavering in its core mission. You might recall my remarks during Convocation, when I implored our first-year students to – quote – Pave the way for your own “a-ha!” moments and lean into them. Learn from them.

Read Darwin and Descartes and Plato and Coates and Bechdel and have a conversation with them. Be an active participant in what you are reading by questioning and coming to your own conclusions.”

I suggest each of us in this room today do the same! Let's embrace who we are and be bold and proud and loud in telling that story—a story that includes our commitment to people, places, and the planet, as noted in the Okanagan Charter, which I'm signing now. Thank you, Ursinus, and Go, Bears!