

**Inaugural Address**  
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Washington and Lee University  
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Introduction

Thank you: Rector [Donald] Childress and the Board of Trustees, for your confidence in me. Professor [Shane] Lynch and the University Singers, for such a beautiful piece of music. Professor [Ted] Delaney and Professor [Joan] Shaughnessy, and all of my faculty colleagues, for welcoming me to your ranks and allowing me to join you in what I regard as the best job in the world, sharing our intellectual passions with curious young people. Mary Woodson and our entire staff, for making this university shine in every way. Mason Grist and the student body, for being the purpose of our work and making our work so much fun. Mike McGarry and 27,000 Generals, for your undying support of Washington and Lee. Vice-Mayor [Marylin] Alexander and the town of Lexington, for making me feel so quickly at home. Greg Avis, for somehow seeing a college president in me, long before I did, and mentoring me along the way. Stevie P [Steven K. Poskanzer] – which is what they call him at Carleton, confirming he is more hip than I will ever be – for showing me what a great college president looks like and being such a generous colleague. My predecessors: Larry Boetsch, Tom Burish, Harlan Beckley, Ken Ruscio, for your deft and devoted stewardship of the university. My friends and family, for traveling from far and wide. My daughter, Ella, for missing an important high school soccer game to listen to her Dad give another speech.

My deepest thanks go to my parents, Earl and Louise Dudley, who are with us today. I inherited my life-long appreciation of the liberal arts tradition from them. My father is a 12<sup>th</sup> generation Virginian but a first-generation college student. Not knowing any better, he attended Amherst, which was possible only because of generous financial aid. The experience enriched his life and enabled his legal career. Most importantly, he met my mother and married up. My mother was the third generation in a line of women who went to Smith. My great-grandmother graduated in 1897 and then taught biology at Pomona. She was a pioneer among female science faculty, which was made possible by an education that not only imparted skills and knowledge but also transformed her self-conception. My mother became a brilliant editor — I learned in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade never to show her a sloppy first draft and made certain she did not receive an advance copy of this address. My family history makes me acutely aware of the power of the liberal arts to help young people discover and achieve their aspirations, and of the importance of making that opportunity available to talented students from all backgrounds and financial circumstances.

Liberal Arts Education

A presidential inauguration is like an institutional wedding, which I suppose makes me the bride. But even if I am the focal point, in my lovely gown of blue, we are here to celebrate Washington and Lee University. What, exactly, do we celebrate? Who are we? And why did the Trustees give the microphone to a philosopher?

Washington and Lee is one of the oldest and most distinguished liberal arts institutions in the country. Perhaps there was a time when that sufficed as a self-evident demonstration of our value. But not recently. Indeed, as far back as 1960, when Fred Cole delivered his inaugural remarks at W&L, he lamented “there continues to be great reluctance to accept the achievement of a liberal education as an end, or even as a means ... ‘What good will it do me?’ is a persistent question of students and parents regarding the liberal arts.” We remain on the receiving end of such skepticism today: “Are the liberal arts still relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?” “What is the return on investment?” Often the doubts take declarative form, such as when Senator Rubio famously announced to the entire nation, during a presidential debate: “we need more welders and less philosophers!” For the record, I have taken an arc welding lesson and thought it was a blast.

In the midst of this public hand-wringing about the relevance of what we do, we should channel our inner Socrates, who would counsel us to remain calm and pose a more fundamental question. We should insist that our critics join us in considering: “What are the liberal arts?” We can clarify their meaning by analogy.

Consider the martial arts. The “martial arts,” literally, are the disciplines that prepare you for war. Although they are ancient, they have never been more popular. Our own Provost, Marc Conner, mild-mannered scholar of Irish literature by day, is a longtime student and teacher of the martial arts. They also offer a pretty good return on investment: last month Conor McGregor, mixed martial arts lightweight champion, earned \$1 million dollars per minute for losing a fight.

If the martial arts are the disciplines that prepare you for war, the liberal arts are the disciplines that set you free. The main impediments to freedom are ignorance and alienation. Freedom means not being governed by things we don’t understand, by societies in which we are not recognized, by political institutions that do not represent us. Liberal arts education increases our knowledge of ourselves, of the natural world, and of the legal, economic, moral, political, historical, and cultural dimensions of human life. The “arts” in “liberal arts” does not mean “arts.” Or “humanities.” It means “disciplines,” which include the arts and humanities, but also (since ancient times) math and science, and by extension any discipline that puts us in a position to be more fully self-determining, by giving us tools to understand the world in which we live and to work more effectively to build communities in which every person has the same rights, responsibilities, and respect.

Are the liberal arts relevant? Some teachers say there are no stupid questions. I am not one of those teachers. Are the liberal arts relevant? That is an embarrassingly stupid question. So long as there is a need for freedom, there will be a need for liberal arts education.

Freedom is a noble ideal, but liberal arts education is expensive. So how could it be a good value? The answer lies in the fact that although liberal arts education is the antithesis of job training, it also happens to be the best form of professional preparation. It expands our horizons, develops our capacities, and increases our flexibility. Nothing could be more valuable than that in the 21st century. The liberal arts are not soft and weak but, like the martial arts, devastatingly powerful. The members of yesterday’s panel on “The Liberal Arts and the Professions” — I like to think of them as 10<sup>th</sup> degree black belts of freedom — are living proof that the pursuit of one’s intellectual interests for their own sake is an exceptional foundation for accomplishment in any arena, including those with no direct connection to a particular field of study, and for making valuable contributions to society.

The problem we face is not that liberal arts education is insufficiently valuable. The problem is that the highest quality liberal arts education is so valuable there’s a moral, social, and political imperative to make it more widely available and affordable. This is a challenge of scale that no single institution can solve, but to which Washington and Lee does and must contribute.

### Incubator

How, exactly, do we go about providing an outstanding liberal arts education? I like to think of the university as an incubator. We are not raising chickens. But we are helping young people raise themselves. We are helping them cultivate their potential.

Each year we welcome 470 18-year-olds and 120 first-year law students to our community. We place them in an environment carefully constructed to be conducive to their flourishing. It is small, rural, residential, and resource intensive. It is populated by capable and dedicated peers, professors, coaches, and staff. It is busy. The variety and intensity of curricular and extra-curricular activity is astonishing. The incubator never sleeps.

At the end of the year, we celebrate commencement by ejecting 500 newly minted graduates from the nest. How are they different, we must always ask ourselves, as a result of the years they have spent in our

incubator? We know they are older. Our success rate is 100% on that score. But are they wiser — do they have a clearer understanding of the goals it is important to pursue? Are they well-prepared — do they have the knowledge and the skills they will need to achieve their important goals? Are they better people — do they have the character and habits to persevere and succeed when doing the right thing is hard? Are they happier — do they feel confident about the future and satisfied with the paths they are on?

No standardized test can answer these questions. The proof lies in the lives led by our alumni. The Five Star Generals, who return to Washington and Lee each fall, more than 50 years after their graduation, embody the lifelong impact of our educational incubator. The extraordinary support we receive from alumni of all ages is testament to the fact that our graduates are profoundly grateful for the cultivation they received at W&L and committed to ensuring it remains available for the rising generation. And young people of this generation are aware that we are doing something right. We receive five applications for every available spot in our incubator. Students are banging on the door.

### Distinctiveness of Washington and Lee

Why? What is distinctive about Washington and Lee?

For one thing, we have a lot of lawyers. We lead the nation in lawyers per capita. We are distinguished from small liberal arts colleges in virtue of having a law school. And the fact that the law school is our only graduate school distinguishes us from large universities. Our structure is unique, but intellectually coherent. Legal education is a natural extension of the liberal arts, in virtue of the modes of thinking inherent to the discipline — lawyers are basically better paid philosophers — and the fact that the law is the basis of freedom. Washington and Lee is not just a college that happens to have a law school, but rather a liberal arts university of which the law school is an integral part. We will take every opportunity to make the presence of the law school a meaningful advantage to our undergraduate students and faculty. And we will ensure that our law students and faculty benefit fully from being at a small institution, where legal education is enriched by close links to the academic and co-curricular opportunities across the university.

Washington and Lee is also the only top liberal arts college with an accredited undergraduate school of commerce and an accredited journalism program. Some regard this as impurity. They are mistaken. Such programs can be, and at other places they are, narrowly technical training. Here they are designed and taught with our liberal arts mission in mind, cultivating capacities that have broad application. John Wilson spoke to this in his inaugural address in 1983. A Yankee with impeccable liberal arts credentials — a Rhodes Scholar with a PhD in English literature, for whom our center for art and music is named — Wilson expressed gratitude that “Washington and Lee is not enervated as are some other liberal arts institutions, by endless debate on the question of the legitimacy of applied knowledge. This we owe to General Lee ... for his strong commitment was to see Washington College become a center of liberal and professional study so adjusted as to insure graduates who would value learning and mental discipline as ultimately good for their own sake alone, but who could also use knowledge to solve the pressing problems of a prostrated South.”

The oldest part of the university, the undergraduate college, has the most in common with other liberal arts institutions, but is distinguished by the sustained excellence of its traditional disciplines in the arts, humanities, and sciences. And the college is a driving force in the ongoing academic evolution of W&L, with students and faculty doing increasingly interdisciplinary work in many arenas, including the Mudd Center for Ethics, the Shepherd Poverty Program, and the Ruscio Center for Global Learning. These important initiatives also involve the commerce school and the law school – each of our three units is strengthened by its meaningful collaborations with the others, all in the service of our joint university mission: to prepare students to think critically, act with integrity, and participate as engaged citizens in a global and diverse society.

Washington and Lee's distinctive structure and curriculum reflect an abiding institutional spirit of innovation and public service, and the courage to be different, even anomalous, within higher education. Perhaps our most significant anomaly is the extent to which our students run their own incubator. They gain significant experience with the messiness and difficulty of self-governance. Most importantly, they are entrusted with the honor system, which is not a sterile code imposed and monitored by external authorities, but a living culture that asks and expects each student to take personal responsibility for being worthy of the community's trust. Such universal trustworthiness — manifested in and reinforced by the simple courtesy of the speaking tradition, the practice of looking each other in the eye and exchanging greetings in passing — makes W&L feel, as so many staff have told me, like an extended family. It is the reason our students don't want to leave and our alumni love to come back.

### *Non Incautus Futuri*

We are justifiably proud of our distinctions, but never complacent. Our motto — *non incautus futuri* — not unmindful of the future — reflects our commitment to self-examination, to asking how we can remain who we are while also getting better, to asking how we can contribute even more to the world in which our students will live their lives.

The job of a university president is to translate elevated philosophical questions such as these into tedious administrative processes. Upholding this solemn duty, I initiated Strategic Planning in the spring. We will spend this year, together, examining and articulating our strengths and weaknesses, our opportunities and obligations. Washington and Lee can be a national model for liberal arts education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our unique curriculum, tradition of student self-governance, and culture of trust and civility are a potent educational combination.

Our most precious asset is the quality of our community. Great liberal arts education depends upon the talent, dedication, and intellectual diversity that characterize our students, faculty, and staff. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it also depends upon greater racial and social diversity than we have yet achieved. This is critical to our mission and critical to our nation. George Washington understood as much when he explained his own commitment to higher education, which motivated his transformative gift to this struggling academy on the frontier: "If it should ever be apprehended that prejudice would be entertained in one part of the Union against another, an efficacious remedy will be, to assemble the youth of every part under such circumstances as will, by the freedom of intercourse and collision of sentiment, give to their minds the direction of truth, philanthropy, and mutual conciliation." Bob Huntley imagined the realization of Washington's ideal in the inaugural address he delivered in October 1968, only six months after the assassination of Martin Luther King. Although no African-American student had yet graduated from W&L, President Huntley envisioned "an institution which does not wish to cater to any particular ethnic or economic group, but which seeks a diverse student body and faculty where members may share in common only the ability and the conviction to learn from each other."

Significant progress has been made over the intervening half century. The Johnson Scholar program has enabled Washington and Lee to attract students with the most exceptional promise, regardless of their financial circumstances. Just last week we announced our participation in the American Talent Initiative, a collaboration of the nation's top colleges and universities committed to enrolling greater numbers of talented lower-income students. Here we are following the lead of Thomas Jefferson, who emphasized the public benefit that would accrue from educating "those talents which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as the rich but which perish without use, if not sought for and cultivated." In the coming years, with the support of our alumni, we will raise the resources to become one of fewer than forty schools in the entire country that practice need-blind admission, while continuing to meet 100% of the demonstrated financial need for every admitted student.

But there is work to do. Among the best liberal arts institutions, we remain the least racially diverse. We are missing out on talent and missing out on an opportunity to make a larger contribution to the future. To fulfill our mission, by preparing our students, and ourselves, to participate as engaged citizens in a global and diverse society, we all need to learn to live and work with difference, to discover and create commonality. We cannot be told how to find ourselves at home with others. As George Washington advised, we need to practice and make it happen.

Washington and Lee is unusually well-positioned to do this successfully. Danielle Allen rightly emphasized at Convocation that trustworthiness, which is the core of our institutional DNA, is the precondition of mutual respect, which is the precondition of being able to talk to each other, as equals, across differences and about difficult issues. Such high-caliber conversation, which we always expect from ourselves, is the key to building a community in which each individual can thrive and that remains unified as it becomes more diverse. Achieving this here will have multiplier effects wherever our graduates go, as they move into their own communities and bring their experiences from W&L with them.

One particular sort of difficult conversation that we need to have, and that our nation needs to have, concerns history and its relationship to the present. Contemporary struggles with issues of racial inequality have become deeply entangled with debates about the ways that the histories of slavery, the Civil War, and segregation are told and memorialized.

Washington and Lee is again unusually well-positioned to make an important contribution. Our campus is a living laboratory for the study of these periods in American history. We are seated between Washington Hall and Lee Chapel. Washington did not sleep here, but he made the place possible. Can you imagine a contemporary presidential candidate declaring, as Washington did when he provided the first endowment for an educational institution west of the Blue Ridge mountains: “to promote literature in this rising empire, and to encourage the arts, have ever been amongst the warmest wishes of my heart”? Lee not only slept here, in the house where I sleep, but in the five years that he held the position I now hold he laid the foundations upon which this university became the one we proudly celebrate today. We would be well served if our current national leaders, in either party, were as committed to liberal arts education in word and deed as were Washington and Lee.

The histories of our namesakes, of our institution, and of our nation are delightfully deep and multi-dimensional. It is a pleasure, as well as a necessity, to read them slowly, with open minds and an appreciation of nuance, with humility that mitigates against easy judgment, never forgetting that disagreement is compatible with mutual affection, and that respectful conversation facilitates communal cohesion rather than corrosion. Danielle Allen reminded us that “the enemies of freedom [are] those who do not wish to participate in an egalitarian project of responsiveness through talk.” That will never be us. Upon our university crest is written “*omnia autem probate*” — test all things. We do this here every day, and the members of our community excel at gathering facts, interpreting them judiciously, and evaluating their significance.

Toward these ends, I have convened the Commission on Institutional History and Community. I am also pleased to support our year-long series of related events. As we embark on this work, we should recall the words of John Elrod, who wisely counseled in his inaugural remarks in 1995 that “sharing a remembered and celebrated history holds us together.” He continued, “we are held together no less by our longstanding commitment to the ideals of honor and civility ... It does not matter whether your skin is white or whether you are a person of color, whether you are male or female, rich or poor, a domestic or foreign student; the only thing that matters at the deepest level of importance is respect for the personhood and the autonomy of each person in this community.”

### Conclusion

This is heavy stuff. These are heavy times. We are prepared to make a difference.

But what we do here is also a sheer joy. The joy of learning and of teaching — the best part of my week is the time I spend in my philosophy seminar with twelve first-year students and my colleague Professor [Robert] Strong. Time on a college campus is a gift. Let us not forget to celebrate.

Washington and Lee is an extraordinary institution and we are all fortunate to be associated with it. I am proud to be your 27<sup>th</sup> president. It is a privilege to work on behalf of and together with every one of you who gives so much of yourself to this place and to one another. I am excited about our future. Thank you.