

Fall Academic Convocation

Gardner-Webb University

August 27, 2019

I want to begin my brief remarks by congratulating Professor Moser for his well-deserved recognition as an outstanding teacher. Following an award-winning instructor allows me the opportunity to highlight what I think is one of our greatest points of pride here at Gardner-Webb University...and that's the fact that we have world-class faculty.

Now, in the interest of full disclosure, I have only been here less than two months. But the more I learn about Gardner-Webb, the more I like about Gardner-Webb. And I really, really like that we have such dedicated, innovative, and inspirational teachers.

We have faculty with stellar academic pedigrees, but they're also people who care—and care deeply—about the success of their students.

We have scholars and practitioners who go the extra mile to mentor their students.

So, to all of the faculty assembled here today, I say thank you. Thank you for your expertise. Thank you for the energy and passion you bring to the classroom. Thank you for the paths you illuminate...not only the path to graduation, but also the path to a meaningful life.

And to you, our students, I want you to know that these faculty are here for you. We are all here for YOU. And together we welcome you to this new and promising academic year.

August is my favorite time of year. You know, a lot of people see August as the end of summer...as something to be dreaded...something that gets here way too fast. But in my view, and in the academic world, August is a time of renewal and rebirth. Your return to campus energizes all of us. We are excited to work with you and to watch you grow and succeed.

As we get into the full swing of the semester, I could stand here and simply try to encourage you by saying the obvious...study hard, make good choices, get involved.

Those are all obvious bits of advice...and they're obvious for good reason.

But beyond the obvious, I want to underscore one important message as we launch this new year. And the message is this—we are a private university with a very public mission. We are a private university with a very public mission, and it is incumbent upon all of us to live up to that public mission in some way.

A lot of private schools keep their students in a bubble...we don't. A lot of private schools erect high walls to keep the community out...we don't. And at a lot of private schools, the faculty stay perched in some lofty ivory tower...ours don't.

Just think about Gardner-Webb's motto...*Pro Deo et Humanitate*...“For God and Humanity.”

Our focus is on God and Humanity. You simply cannot have a more public mission than that.

Let's consider, just for a moment, our own backyard here in Cleveland County:

- According to some recent data that I have seen, the poverty rate of households in Cleveland County is 19.9% (that's one in every five households);
- 59% (well more than half) of Cleveland County children are said to live in "poor" or "near-poor" households;
- 25.3 % of county children are reported to live in "food insecure households," putting at risk their immediate health, safety and ability to learn;
- We're told that only 56% of women in Cleveland County received early prenatal care, and 11% of babies were born at low birthweight;
- And, finally, the data suggest that 11% of high school students didn't graduate on time.

As you ponder these statistics, consider for a moment some of the strengths that we have as a university.

We have strong degree programs across all of our colleges and schools. But think in particular about our signature programs in the Health Sciences, in Business, in Education, in Divinity.

If we want to improve the physical health of our communities...if we want to make those communities more prosperous and better educated...and if we want to serve the spiritual health of Cleveland County, and western North Carolina and beyond...then who better...who better than Gardner-Webb University to do the heavy lifting? It rests on us, my friends...it rests on Gardner-Webb. For God and Humanity...that's our mission, and that's our charge.

Our university was founded 114 years ago by people with vision who wanted to lift up those around them. Ladies and gentlemen, every one of us in here has inherited that noble mission.

So, in the academic year ahead, of course I want you all to have fun...to enjoy each other and to enjoy your time here. Enjoy the Pancake Bingo, homemade ice cream parties, and football Saturdays at Spangler Stadium. But remember...always remember...that gifted people have great responsibility. As our Bible tells us, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded."

We are a private university with a very public mission. As you each pursue that mission in the year ahead, be bold...be distinctive...and be authentic.

If you do those three things...if you are bold, distinctive, and authentic...you will make an amazing and lasting impact on the lives of those around you.

Have a great semester, everybody! Have a great year! And, as always, Go Bulldogs!