

Opening Convocation: 2008-2009
“Park University’s Heritage: The Leadership Imperative”
Beverley Byers-Pevitts, President
Park University, September 17, 2008

Mayor Richardson, Mr. Arndtsen and other members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished guests, alumni, current students, officers of the Park Student Government Association, faculty, staff, campus center directors from around the country, to all of those here and those on the Web – Welcome to Park University’s Fall Academic Convocation!

Each year, we commemorate the beginning of our academic year, to celebrate our accomplishments of the year past and to consider the challenges which bring new opportunities in our year ahead.

Today, we join colleges and universities and others across the United States in commemorating Constitution Day. On September 17, 1787, the 55 delegates to the Constitutional Convention held their final meeting in which they signed the Constitution of the United States of America. This momentous assembly set forth the foundation and future of our great nation.

Forty-eight days from today, thousands of Park University students, faculty, staff and millions of Americans will exercise one of their key rights spelled out in that Constitution and elect the next President of the United States, a position frequently referred to as “leader of the free world.”

Leadership, according to Warren Bennis, author of numerous texts on leadership, “is a function of knowing yourself, having a vision that is well communicated, building trust among colleagues, and taking effective action to realize your own leadership potential.”

The American presidency carries the responsibility of moral leadership. Significant decisions made by presidents, and leaders at all levels, generate sweeping changes which affect the course of history and global community.

Sixty years ago, President Harry Truman, our Missourian President, signed Executive Order 9981 abolishing segregation in the armed forces and ordering full integration of all the services. That same year, he appointed the first African-American judge to sit on the Federal bench and bolstered the Department of Justice’s civil rights division. Truman’s bold leadership set historic precedent, making it possible for Thurgood Marshall to become the first African-American Supreme Court Justice.

Throughout the annals of history, we find countless examples of bold leaders who demonstrated moral courage in defending principle in the face of public scrutiny. These leaders inspire us to act beyond our narrow self-interest for the greater good of humanity. My father was such a leader. He taught me to always be truthful to yourself. He served as school superintendent for one of the five largest counties in Kentucky, and integrated our county’s five high schools and numerous elementary schools at a time when the concept that “All men are created equal” was not shared universally, and prior to federal law. The rotten eggs and tomatoes my siblings and I

helped our Mom scrape off our front porch demonstrated some of the local animosity. And yet he persevered, committed to providing all students in Southwest Kentucky access to a quality education, a commitment which has been shared by presidents throughout Park University's history, from John A. McAfee to the present.

In 1942, Park's 4th President, William Lindsey Young, admitted nine Nisei students (Japanese American students from the World War II internment camps) despite the vehement objections of the then Parkville mayor, local residents and local civic organizations. President Young's successor, J. L. Zwingle, joined students and faculty in welcoming the first African-Americans to live in Park's residence halls in 1950. Prior to that date, Park's African-American students had to live and eat in a designated area of Parkville. President Zwingle diplomatically handled the move-in of these first African-American Park residential hall students in a climate of local community intolerance.

These visionary Park presidents cemented our University's reputation as an exemplar of moral leadership, committed to fostering global understanding and, as our core value states, community among all peoples of the world. They understood, to paraphrase the New York Times: "the fierce urgency of change before it is too late." Today, Park University, through developing students' capability to access knowledge, critical and creative thinking skills, develops world leaders.

This Academic Convocation provides us an opportunity to gather together meaningfully and think about leadership and responsibility as one community.

Courageous individuals throughout our history made possible rights and freedoms that we often take for granted:

- Like suffragists who were denied their rights summoned the courage and inner strength to persevere –they marched to ensure that all women gained the right to vote;
- Like civil rights pioneers, both black and white, who were beaten and bloodied, attacked by dogs and water hoses – they marched to ensure that all Americans were guaranteed the rights promised to them in our nation's founding documents;
- Like the men and women of our "Greatest Generation" who faced the most significant threat to humanity the world had ever seen in the sands of North Africa, on the beaches of Normandy and in the jungles of Bataan – in the face of unimaginable horrors, they marched to ensure that fascism did not engulf the world;
- Like the men and women who persevered in Vietnam, and even those today in the current war in Iraq and Afghanistan, with great personal sacrifice, they march for our freedoms.

The courageous and visionary individuals, who sacrificed, defended their highest ideals and transformed the 20th century, shepherded democracy. Park students, citizens of the 21st century, each of you will persevere, and that will lead to your march, a march across a stage to accept your Park University diploma.

I know that you will march through your education -- leaders in your countries, in your communities and in your organizations which you serve, taking what you learn at Park University and, in the words of Gandhi, become "the change you want to see in this world."

Leadership necessitates prizing originality, in our students, faculty and staff. It demands creativity for change and continual innovation as a University. Unconventional thinking brings about original thinking.

This morning, we come together representing over 100 nations, multiple races and ethnicities. Yet, we share a common purpose and obligation; we have inherited Park's historic legacy of leadership innovation and cultural awareness.

I invite you to join me on the next stage of our over 133-year journey. This journey began when President John A. McAfee brought the original seventeen students, men and women including two Native Americans to Parkville in 1875 to found Park University as a 19th century center for cultural leadership to advance the Westward movement. Park University in the 21st century prepares leaders for change in a globalized world.

Americans have witnessed the widespread and multi-faceted effects of globalization over the past decade. Fareed Zakaria, editor of Newsweek International and author of *The Post-American World*, believes that we remain in a single-superpower world at the politico-military level. "But in every other dimension—industrial, financial, social, cultural—the power is moving away from American dominance."

The Beijing Olympic Games personified for many Americans the challenges and opportunities of globalization. Critic and author Frank Rich recently wrote, "You couldn't watch the television coverage without feeling bombarded by an ascendant China whose superior cache of gold medals and dazzling management of the Games became a proxy for its spectacular commercial and cultural prowess in the new century." Rich tells us that "Americans must band together for change before the new century leaves us completely behind."

And today Park University helps lead the way! Park University plays a meaningful role in creating and shaping a new interconnected world because, mandated by our mission, we prepare global learners through cultural awareness to lead, to communicate, and to conduct business in a world marketplace.

Please consider all we have accomplished working together as a community of learners and scholars – One University:

- As part of Park's climate commitment, we built a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified building for our students, your first new residence hall in 40 years. The Copley Quad buildings reaffirm what we know to be true. Students expect their universities to be "green" and committed to technological leadership. Students also expect their universities to provide safe and secure environments in which to live.
- We have enhanced our leadership in the educational arena, responding to our students' needs by delivering their education through varying modalities, including ELearning and MLearning (mobile technology) as platforms to enhance education with technology. According to John Kao, "This is the age of creativity because there's been a change of regime in the marketplace. The customer is boss now and has only one question: So what are you going to do for me tomorrow? Only creativity can give the answer."

- We have launched leadership programs in many academic disciplines, including new graduate and undergraduate degrees and community leadership programs. And I know there are other new leadership programs developing!
- Students, faculty and staff have created leadership and engagement opportunities, which prepare our students to become servant-leaders in their communities. Like at many other colleges and universities around the country, a commitment to lead and a commitment to serve our community are seamlessly intertwined.

We clearly have much to celebrate at Park, but we cannot rest on our laurels. Park University prepares student leaders to take on and to solve today's "global economic anxiety" referenced in all recent mass media. Our founding institutional commitment to access to academic excellence requires us to reject any social stratification between "educational haves and have nots." A world without education for all at the forefront slides toward economic inequality.

Last academic year, a group of Park students representing all class years, four continents and six nations, came together to fulfill a goal. Guided by their mentors, they learned and taught side-by-side, worked hard, played together and supported one another. In the end, they achieved their goal – the 2008 NAIA Men's National Volleyball Championship Team!

Imagine what all we can accomplish if we, students, faculty and staff, citizens of over 100 nations, work together committed to our shared vision and mission for your communities worldwide!

Park University must continue its innovative culture. We must innovate in the age of globalization preparing student learners as thinking, global leaders. Students, on behalf of Park University's faculty and staff, I assure you that we stand ready to assist you in your journey – your individual journey of leadership and our collective journey that establishes Park as a 21st century leader in global higher education.

We, at Park University, in the words of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, "...look to the future, not just to be a part of it, but to shape it." And students, this is your legacy.

As 21st century global leaders, Park University students have inherited several significant challenges, including:

- a global population expected to reach 7.9 billion by 2025, in which "80 percent of the population growth will occur in those countries least capable of supporting it – politically, environmentally, ...economically," according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies;
- increased demand for food, water and energy;
- a digital divide which limits access to global markets for individuals living in many developing countries;
- a global economy in which the accumulated wealth of the 225 richest individuals is equivalent to the combined annual income of the 2.7 billion people at the bottom of the ladder;
- a world in which the transfer of weapons and nuclear materials threatens to escalate regional conflicts; and

- widespread mistrust of free trade and, more specifically, multinational corporations.

Park University equips students with critical thinking skills to address the monumental challenges of our times through emphasizing Servant-Leadership and adding critical new courses and programs aligned with our 133-year liberal arts tradition. Students, through our curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular activities, Park University prepares you to develop the key leadership traits which our world so desperately needs.

Twenty-first century global leaders demonstrate self-discipline, personal responsibility and empathy - they personify Park University's motto, "Fides et Labor" - faith and work, faith in oneself to complete one's work, to be a global leader. Our student-learners, most of whom maintain work and/or family obligations while completing their studies, understand the significance of maintaining self-discipline. Our military student-learners epitomize this trait. Twenty-first century global leaders take personal responsibility for their actions as opposed to blaming others for inaction. Instead of "passing the buck," they mimic President Truman's adage that "the buck stops here." They are true to themselves. 21st century global leaders are empathetic. They see the refugee who has escaped the horrors of genocide and the orphan whose parents died after contracting HIV/AIDS as real people in need of solutions as opposed to impersonal statistics.

Fareed Zakaria, whom I referenced previously, came to the United States in 1982 from India as a freshman university student. In addressing America's future in a globalized world, he writes: "For America to thrive in this new and challenging era, for it to succeed amid the rise of the rest, it need fulfill only one test. It should be a place that is as inviting and exciting to the young student who enters the country today as it was for this awkward eighteen-year-old a generation ago."

To all our Park students today, whether you were born in Kansas City or Kyoto, in Spokane or Sao Paolo, I hope you will always find your Park University experience to be, in Zakaria's words, inviting and exciting.

Students, your Park University education determines your destiny as a leader in the world!

Thank you.

Beverley Byers-Pevitts, Ph.D.
 President
 Park University
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