



TRINITY WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Remarks to New Students Fall 2010
President Patricia McGuire

“If You Dream It, You Can Make It Happen”

Congratulations to all of our new students in the College of Arts & Sciences! You are 369 of the finest women ever to inhabit our campus --- and I do say that every year, so know that you are following in a great tradition. If you are just starting college this year, you are part of our Green Class of 2014. Class colors are very important here. Those of you who are transferring into upperclass years will soon learn your class colors --- wear them well! Seniors this year are our Gold Class. Juniors are Red, and Sophomores are Blue. And, if you're not sure what class you're in right now, you can never go wrong with purple and gold!

Today at this convocation you have recited the Honor Pledge, signed the Honor Book, and received your Trinity Medals. This is a very important day in your lives! You are now official members of an academic community with a lot of old traditions, important values and new ideas. You are now part of the legendary community of Trinity Women whose members include famous leaders like Nancy Pelosi (Class of 1962) and Kathleen Sebelius (Class of 1970) who spoke with you earlier this week, and rising leaders like Student Government President Morgan Kellman (Class of 2011) and the other students you have met in the last few days. Every single one of you has the potential to be a great Trinity leader.

At each new student convocation, it is my custom to tell you a little bit about yourselves. I have some statistics about you, and then, more important, I have a sociological and philosophical profile about you that I draw from the essays you wrote with your college applications. I quote from these essays in this talk, but not in a way that identifies you personally. Since we've just met, I have not had the opportunity to ask your permission to use your material, so I quote you anonymously, but give each anonymous author full credit for her thoughts and words.

First, your statistical profile:

Where are you from?

50% of you are D.C. residents; 36% are Marylanders, and 5% Virginians. You also hail immediately from 15 other states including: California, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas. Many of you were born in other countries including Ethiopia, El Salvador, Indonesia, Republic of Benin, Bangladesh, Dominican Republic, Algeria, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Jamaica, Nigeria and Namibia, Trinidad and Tobago.

What are your demographics?

67% of you identify as African American or Black; 17% as Latina or Hispanic; 4% as White or Caucasian; 3% as Asian.

You are Catholic and Christian, and a number of Muslims also are part of this class.

You speak many languages at home, including Afrikaans, Amharic, Arabic, Bangla, Cantonese, Creole, French, German, Indonesian, Krio, Spanish, Tigrigna, Vietnamese, Yoruba and, of course, English.

What have you accomplished already?

You are members of honor societies and have received many scholarships, including 22 DC Achievers Scholars in this class and 11 Girl Scout Scholars.

You are athletes, playing basketball and volleyball, softball and soccer, lacrosse and field hockey, running track and swimming. You have been cheerleaders and members of pep squads. You love to dance. You play tuba and marimba. You are lifeguards and yearbook editors. You sing in the choir and emote on the stage. You debate and march with ROTC.

Most of you have also worked many hours to earn money to support yourselves and your families. You are independent at a young age. You have survived homelessness and poverty; you have triumphed over some of the most daunting life circumstances imaginable.

You have achieved your dream of being the first in your family to attend college. You are determined to see this through, to be the first in your family to earn a degree.

What do you want to study?

Nearly one-third of you want to study Nursing. Another big major is Psychology, and then we also have a large number who intend to major in Business, Criminal Justice, Communication and Journalism, Biology, International Affairs and Political Science.

And, by the way, the most frequent first names in this group are Jasmine (or variants), Brittany and Alexis.

In your essays, some of you answered the question about people you'd like to have dinner with -- - many of you cited family members, and in addition, you cited:

Princess Diana

Mother Theresa

The Dalai Lama, about whom you wrote;

“Our conversation at the dinner table would be about what we can do as a society to make the world a better place. We could talk about global warming and poverty in third world countries and we could also talk about Tibet.”

President Obama
 Michelle Obama (gets the most votes!)
 Oprah
 Madam CJ Walker
 Jimi Hendrix
 Ghandi
 Abraham Lincoln
 Michael Jackson
 Martin Luther King, Jr.
 Rosa Parks
 Nelson Mandela
 Warren Buffett
 Maya Angelou
 Helen Keller
 Dr. Dorothy Height
 Tupac Shakur
 Nancy Pelosi

One student indicated she'd invite Eve, the Prophet Mohammed and Osama Bin Laden in the hope that Bin Laden would realize the error of his ways through revisiting the tragedy that Eve brought to the world, and that he would then listen and understand the Prophet's true words and meaning.

You write quite a lot about your parents, both good and bad, sorrowful and joyful. You have had many occasions to reflect on the true meaning of family.

This student wrote lovingly of the sacrifices her parents made to make it possible for the family to fly to Argentina to be with her grandmother for her Quince celebration, an old Hispanic tradition, a rite of passage when a girl turns 15. The family did not have much money, but the parents scrimped and saved. She describes the scene at the party: *“When it was time for me to give a speech, I praised my family and spoke about how I was nothing without them. After coming back home from Argentina, I wanted to show gratitude to my parents... When I could, I would help my mom at her job, or I would clean the house.... Having this Quince made me realize how important cultural traditions are... This celebration brought my family together after so many years.”*

Understanding, celebrating and cherishing tradition is an important Trinity value as well.

Another student writes:

“The thing that touches me most is how far my parents have come along. Both of my parents came from east Africa where coming to America was a chance for potential opportunity and

success...my father traveled all the way from Tanzania to receive a college education in America... He came to America for one thing, and that was to get the best quality education he could receive...My mother does everything she can do to satisfy me. She works long shifts, 7 days a week, to provide me with the things I want and to make me happy. However, there is one condition my parents gave me, and that was to focus on my studies..."

You write about fathers now gone, through death or other departures:

"It took my father's passing to realize what an extraordinary influence my father has been in my life. He was the kind of father who always had time for his children, and the kind of man who always valued the importance of helping others...His words still echo in my mind, "Go and do good to the world and help others.'"

Your grandparents have had special roles in your lives.

This student writes of her grandfather's steady guidance through her most formative years: *"It was the first day of tenth grade at a new school and I was scared out of my mind. I had no idea what I was getting into because this was the first school that I would be considered a minority and that scared me. My grandfather drove me to the front door, and I cried and didn't want to get out of the car. My grandfather told me that being black had nothing to do with getting an education. He said, 'Education doesn't have a color so go get the best one you can.'... That day was significant in my life and that new school was my step to new beginnings...My grandfather taught me that education is important and is the key to success."*

You have special reverence for you mothers:

This student writes about life with her mother after the family broke up: *"The screaming, fighting and crying had finally stopped. We were free, just her and me, but we had no idea of the struggles that were ahead of us...All she wanted was to make sure I was ok. She left for work before I was awake....she struggled with the bills...She got another job cleaning her friend's house. She cleaned toilets for me; my mother would do anything to keep me in a decent house and getting a good education....Watching how devoted she was to me taught me to be dedicated to the things I care about."*

Another writes:

"My mom is the reason I'm the person I am today. When she was still alive, she taught me what's important in life and gave me the tools to succeed in life. She never went to school but she made sure that my brother and I knew how important a good education was.... At a young age, my mother left home, got married and had children. After my father died, she was forced to find two jobs without an education. It was really hard for her to support our family. It's because of this that she kept us in school. Although she couldn't help us with our homework, she encouraged us to work harder and do well in school. It's because of her that I knew how to work hard enough to make the honor roll my first year in the United States [from Ethiopia]...I've made it my first priority to get a college education, not only for me but also for my mother."

Another writes:

“My mother is the reason why I am here today. I want to go to college and do my best for both me and my mother. I want to show her that all of her sacrifices have inspired me and they were not in vain... My mother works Monday-Sunday, twelve hours per day, 84 hours per week. We should be rich based on the amount of hours my mom puts into her job but we just barely make it. Despite the time she spends at work, my mother has always made the four of us a priority. She has always been there to encourage us in the pursuit of our dreams. No matter what our dreams were, my mother never thought anything was too far-fetched or that we could not accomplish it. With only a third grade education, my mother did not have the opportunity to attend college, in Vietnam education was a luxury that only the wealthy could afford. Despite the lack of access to an education, she always stressed that achievement in school was important so that we could go on to college.”

And still another writes:

“My mom is like oxygen to our family.”

You recognize in the stories of your mothers the motivating forces that will help you to focus on your college success:

“When my mom was my age, she got pregnant with me. Like me, she dreamed of going to college. One of her biggest disappointments was when she had to put those dreams on hold. So, from a very early age, the plan for me was to graduate from college....For a long time, I wanted to go to college to make my mother happy. By the ninth grade, I knew I wanted to go to college to make myself happy...I want a college degree. I want the chance to experience life on my own. I want to go to college because I want to be well-rounded in every aspect and learn more about math, science and other fields. I am excited about taking advantage of the wide variety of courses. I want the security that a degree brings and the connections to alumni.”

Another writes:

“My mother...like me, she was born in Trinidad and Tobago, but because of me she chose to immigrate to the United States so that I would have greater opportunities than she. As a single mother she knew it would be hard to come to a new place to start her life over, but she was determined to make our lives better. From the moment she arrived she always worked two jobs simultaneously...Fourteen years after coming to the United States, she still works two jobs to support us. But education is very important to her, so in addition to working and supporting her family, she has attended school part time and will graduate with her bachelor's degree from American University.”

Another writes:

“Just three days from becoming a woman at the age of 15, she arrived in New York alone. She had been living through the guerilla war in El Salvador... She did not know how to count to ten in English. By the age of 18 she was already the supervisor in a hotel...She did not see her

parents again until she was 26, already married and with three kids. She is my mother...She achieved her goals by attending college at age 38...She has shown me that anything is possible..."

You have had other heroes and role models:

This student was inspired by Sonia Sotomayor: "When I first heard that the first Hispanic female had been appointed in such a powerful position it nearly brought tears to my eyes. I have always been a person who supports civil rights in every way...nothing touched me in such a way as Sonia Sotomayor being appointed... I could relate in so many ways. She has inspired me and I now aim to work for the government. My goal is to eventually get my masters degree in Psychology and later enroll in medical school to achieve a PhD in psychiatry. Once I am a psychiatrist and have acquired enough experience, my goal is to work as a psychiatrist in the government....I always thought working for the government was something that was nearly impossible for someone like me. I am a female and I am a Hispanic, two things that can unfortunately still hold you back. I have attained hope through a woman that I don't even know (Sonia Sotomayor)... thanks to [her] I now know that if I strive for what I want to do I can definitely achieve it without fear."

This student wants to have dinner with her late great-grandmother, Michelle Obama and Maya Angelou: "I need a pep-talk with [them] because life for my daughter and I gets so hard that I feel like the whole world is against me, and then I think about these three women and how they didn't give up their struggle and I won't either, I want a better life for my daughter and me."

You are pretty strong women, yourselves:

"I come from a long line of strong-minded as well as spirited southern belles, only real difference between them and me is that I prefer not to settle...The only thing that I can think of that has had an impact on me in my entire life was the decision to want to be more than mundane and settled in my life...My life had been full of all the things that go bump in the night and maintaining hope and beliefs that I could get through was tough to do when your family and life are literally leaving you emotionally and physically any chance they can get. I held strong to the belief that getting a great and quality education was the key to get my happy ending...I realized that some of the most influential women in my life, those that really helped and challenged me were in fact college graduates. These were the women who took responsibility for their own lives. They take responsibility for their well being and happiness. Then it became clear to me that there are other women out there just like me that want to better not only ourselves but also the world around us..."

One of your guidance counselors wrote of her tremendous admiration for you upon discovering that you worked 40 hours a week to support your family while still a high school student, and you raised your siblings because your mom was sick.

Some of you have had to get a strong grip to overcome circumstances...

"It's not that I wanted failure in my future; the problem was I didn't know what success was."

Another writes:

"I was born addicted to drugs. Not at all was it my fault, and not at all would I sit here and wish I wasn't born inside a woman who was addicted to drugs. Being born addicted to drugs made me who I am today, it gives me more reason to look at my mother and try not to be what she has become.... With everything I've been through, I could honestly say it made me a stronger person, physically and mentally. Others may use their past as an excuse not to have a better future, but to me I look at it as memories that will keep me motivated and determined to have a better future. The thought of attending college is a wonderful thing. I would be the first person from my biological family's side to ever attend and graduate from college. My biological family has all been under the influence of not going off to college. I'm going to be the person to break that, I want to be an influential person for my nieces and nephews to look up to and understand that higher education is well worth it."

Another writes:

"When there was violence in my life I couldn't grow, instead, my soul began to die like a black hole. But when the violence went away I learned how to grow, be me and change for the better..."

Another writes:

"In my 17 years of my life, I would never vision myself applying for someone's college. I was that type that wanted to make fast money... A near death experience was all it took to bring light to my eyes. What I call a normal day of getting that fast money then going out with the friends turned into a "Am I going to die?" moment. I was supposed to be at school but I went over my friends' house. Sitting on the porch talking about how we goin get this money today and where we goin at after 3:15. Not thinking about nothing and not noticing my surroundings. A white car pulled up and shoot at us. Nine bullets came for us, and one glazed my back....That person got out the car and came to open the door, but I locked the door. I layed on the floor and thank God for my life. My life could have been taken over a fight the day before. I then realized that I did not need the streets. It's nothing out there but trouble. I rather get my education and educate the streets. I rather be somebody instead of being that person known in the streets. That year I was at school everyday. Raised my hand when the teacher asked questions, and raised my hand to ask questions. I realized that I can be somebody the younger people can look up to. To teach younger people that you're not going to get nothing from the streets but your life taken, a bullet or a life sentence. If it wasn't for the experience I would be in somebody's jail system, but I wanted to better myself in life. Give a good example to my younger sisters. Show that you can be bigger and better things in life. I believe that I can be successful without the streets..."

Another writes;

“My family and I have been homeless for the past two years...it was hard to cope with what was going on in my life...Many people who struggle in life always seem to drop out of school because they feel they may not make it. I always stick to what I believe, ‘I’m going to College!’...I aspire to make a difference and use my story to motivate others...I will never give up on my goal which is to earn a degree.”

You have a deep sense of service, and your world travels have reinforced your idealistic dreams:

This student traveled to India: *“India was not easy to get used to. I went into culture shock within the first week and wanted to return home, but I stuck through it... I met people who didn't have a lot to offer but were still offering the little that they did have... We visited Mother Teresa's Orphanage and that was a life changing experience.. The work that mother Teresa has done in India is amazing. by the end of the trip, I had plans to come back to India to start my own non-governmental organization (NGO) to help all people. This goal was inspired by Noah Levinson the founder of Calcutta Kids which is an NGO started in the slums of Kolkata to help pregnant mothers and children with access to health and nutrition services.”*

This student earned her Girl Scout Gold Award through service: *“Many people have asked me why I still do [community] service when “I don't have to”? Most teenagers need a certain number of 'service hours" I don't need the service hours for projects or club commitments, I do it because it's always something that has made me feel fulfilled.... For my Girl Scout Gold Award, I wrote to many local dentist offices requesting donations of dental health products such as toothpaste, toothbrushes, flouride and floss. I was delighted to see how many joyful responses I received. I took these donations to Arequipa, Peru on a Medical Missionary trip. I was fortunate enough to be given the chance to reach out to many of Arequipa's youth. With the assistance of the other teen volunteers, I led them in being able to teach many children proper dental hygiene. I had also created a nonverbal/pictorial teaching too that we used to break down the language barrier... My goal for my future is to be able to directly help the world's needy and make a difference wherever I can. I especially find myself drawn to helping the world's children because they are our lives and our future as a world community.”*

This student describes her trip to Egypt for an intensive study of classical Arabic and Quranic recitation: *“The apartment where I stayed for the duration of my trip was located in the middle of what appeared to be an impoverished neighborhood...Despite their poverty they were always so happy and willing to share their last piece of bread with anyone... I have known less fortunate people all my life and have witnessed how much better they handle difficult situations than those who are affluent, but not until I traveled to Egypt did I witness the dignity and contentment that came with the understanding that nothing in our reach on this earth is in our control. Being grateful for the breath of life is enough to smile about...”*

This student found her awakening in the middle of New York City: she joined the Global Action Project and learned the fine art of filmmaking: *“Global Action Project provided the foundation to the few things that newly interest me today. I gained the experience of video editing and new*

shooting techniques...Friends helped me to produce [my video] and I gained a new understanding of various other cultures...from my friend from Bangladesh that proudly wears her hijab and who dyes my hair with henna to my friend who is Swedish and Chinese who makes green tea and potato milkshakes...I developed a cultural sensitivity, infusing parts of these cultures into me and the art that I create..."

You have reflected on the heritage of women's struggles for equality and women's triumphs, and you want to carry the torch for the new generations;

"Women of the past share a common fight and responsibility. Women like my mother were raised in a time much different than me. They were raised in a time when a woman's place was strictly domestic. Women were not viewed as equal counterparts of men. They were seen as submissive and obedient. During my mother's generation for a woman to be a well-educated leader was frowned upon. However, many women like my mother chose to fight against the negative oppression of doubters and seize the opportunity for academic and social greatness. Armed with the courage of women like my mother, I along with other young women of my generation are better equipped and more responsible for bringing about change in the world."

Many of you have written moving stories of great loss, profound grief, and the long journey back from despair to become determined, triumphant women standing on your own two feet.

"I am someone who had to struggle to make it to where I am now. I had many challenges in my life. I witnessed my father being murdered. I watched as my family fell apart ... I watched myself fall apart and not care about my loved ones and myself. I let others use and abuse me...I stopped being a role model for my nieces and my little brother. Then this one day I had a breakthrough. A picture that I found in my closet of my father made me realize why I had to keep moving forward..."

Another writes:

"Living with my mother was never a fairy tale. From my early childhood to today she abuses drugs. Financial problems started to occur constantly, affecting my education... When I see how drugs have taken over her life and prevented her from finishing high school and going off to college, I am heartbroken. Although the troubles of my mother are always in the back of my mind I know I have to break the cycle and continue my education so my younger brothers can have a positive role model. Growing up without a father has also been an obstacle in my life. He was shot and killed when I was ten years old...After my father's death my mom started to abuse drugs the most. Without a father in my life I felt an empty void. I had no male figure to guide me, tell me who to and not to date, or explain to me what teenage boys are really like. ...Through these adversities I have learned not to be a victim. I can ensure my future is positive and drug free if I focus on my education and stick to my goals..."

Another writes:

"My mother along with three other family members were shot at [a club] in Southeast DC... before this event, my mother and I never shared a positive mother and daughter relationship. At

times she annoyed me and made me mad. However, I no longer feel that way. I almost lost my mother to a gun fight that wasn't even meant for her....Some females have both of their parents and are still ungrateful... I would give anything to go back in time so my father can watch me grow up to be the beautiful young lady that I am today. My father has been incarcerated since I was 6 years old for reasons that I am honestly unaware of. He is currently serving two live sentences, yet I speak to him from time to time. I am his only child and the reason he is sane. I plan to graduate from school with honors. Trustworthy, responsible and intelligent are all words to describe me. I want to attend college because neither my mother nor father attended college, let alone finished high school. My mother birthed me when she was only 14. My parents were forced to leave high school to raise me. Attending college is very important to me because I want to prove to my parents that if I am able to put my mind to it, I can be anyone I want to be... My point is this: I want to go to college because I WANT TO GO. Not because I am forced, but I want to succeed in life. ...I want to set an example for those who think college is not for them. Just like many youth today, I have been through many obstacles myself. But I have not let that bring me down."

Many of you write, "I refuse to become another statistic."

"I want to go to college because I know an education can take you further in life ... I live in a community filled with teenaged parents, drug addicts, welfare recipients, and high school dropouts. Even though I am surrounded by all of these people I will not become another statistic. I want to go beyond all stereotypes that I face as a teenaged girl and minority. I want to become successful and help motivate children who face different obstacles."

Another reflects on becoming pregnant while in high school: *"I did not want to forever be a number on the statistic chart of a Hispanic teen mother. So I decided to finish high school disregarding the looks and comments of those around me. It was not easy learning how to balance school and a newborn... The transformation of becoming an adult was overwhelming but not impossible."*

Another writes:

"I grew up in a city and in a neighborhood in which people around me stereotyped based on where I came from and because of my Latino roots. Perhaps most frustrating, the stereotypes came not only from people outside my community, but also from within. From the time I began high school, I was subjected to many stereotypes. Because I am a young Latina, people have assumed that I will end up pregnant or I will drop out of high school and that definitely I will not make it to college. Despite all those conflicts, I have made it to where I am now... I hope to change the ideas people have about young Latinas...."

Some of you have fled the horrors of war and oppressive regimes abroad.

"I am originally from Sierra Leone in West Africa. For years the country has gone through a devastating civil war, which still left the country with a lot of death and destruction. During the war, a lot of people were killed, injured and amputated, and females were raped. The civil war was so intense and traumatizing that I almost lost my life. I can recall a moment when my

mother and I were trying to find a safe place to hide from the rebels, when we suddenly heard gunshots and the bullets flying all over us to a point that my mother thought I was hit and dead. Fortunately, we both escaped from this dangerous situation. As a result of the war, some families and members and I have decided to move to the United States to seek a better education...Some students say that they do not want to go to college, and others say that college is not for them. As I sit in the classrooms of [my] High School, I wonder where I see myself a year or even 10 years from now. There are many thoughts that go through my mind because of all the obstacles that I had experience, and that have made me a stronger person. I have realized that when people make decisions in life, they just do not make decisions for the present, it is also about their future.....As I think back about my own decisions, it becomes obvious that the most important one, now, is to continue my education by attending college...I have a lot of goals that I am planning to achieve, including becoming a nurse. The reason why I choose this career is because I want to help injured and disabled people, especially the ones who were greatly affected by the civil war in Sierra Leone...”

This student’s parents had to leave her in Eritrea when they immigrated to the US. She lived with an uncle who was arrested for treason, and then she was arrested and held for 45 days and interrogated: *“...two armed policemen came to my home and said they needed to take me. ...they took me by force and put me in a small, dark place with seven people. I was taken for interrogation. They asked me questions about my uncle. After forty-five days they set me free, telling me that they were going to call me whenever I was needed. The minute I was released from prison I decided to leave the country. I stayed with my sister for three months after I was released. With the help of my brother who was living in Sweden, I was able to find someone who would help me escape. In 2006 at the age of 15, I left Eritrea with the help of a smuggler. One thing stayed in my heart throughout my troubles and that was hope. Hope to strive to be a doctor. Now I am here in the United States with my mom. I am a member of Amnesty International and Eritrean Human Rights and Refugee Protection.”*

You have lived through the immigrant experience:

“The day that I left El Salvador and came to the United States my life changed forever. I felt sad...lonely...When I got here...the thing that surprised me most was the skin color of the people I saw. White, black, it was the first time I had seen people with different colors of skin. This experience ...has shaped me because I have learned to grow as an individual person. I have learned another language, to have new friends and to understand new cultures.”

This student came from the Dominican Republic, and early on in school in this country her classmates made fun of her lack of good English skills; she writes: *“...learning a new language and new culture has taught me to help others especially new students. I have learned to be patient with others and myself. Most importantly, I have learned not to judge people and when trying to understand others, to put myself in their shoes. Remembering what I went through and how it felt to have people laugh at me has made me appreciative of others who are not like me.”*

You have a dim view of the behaviors of some of your peers:

“My generation is more concerned with fashion and violence than with their education. They come to school just to show off their new clothes and shoes and don’t pay the teacher any mind. They are the most disrespectful kids I know, well some of them not all. They don’t know how to respect their elders. They get on the bus being loud and obnoxious. They have kids by each other and don’t want to be parents. They have sex with multiple people and just pass around std’s like it is cake. Then when they know they have something they don’t even tell their partner...”

Another writes:

"My generation has a tendency of killing each other. From Junior High up until now, I've had a handful or two of friends who have been murdered by other peers. Most of the time it's for no reason at all or for something really stupid. Some kids even kill for a reputation. They want people to respect them and they try to get respect the wrong way..."

But in comparing generations, you also note that your parents grew up in primitive times, ‘back in the day’ before cell phones and computers. You note that in order to communicate, your parents had to write actual letters. One of you noted that your parents had only black and white television. Somehow, they managed to keep going! You know that your generation has the most advanced technology at your fingertips, but you also observe that this convenience also has many pitfalls, making things too easy at times.

You have had to overcome your own diffidence and fear-masked-as-cool:

This student used a rap song (underlining and beat words) to convey her diffidence toward the messages she was receiving: *“...its da thuggish ruggish boooone, ‘I know you hearing me calling you. I’m going to throw that MP3 player out the window!’ it’s da thuggish ruggish boooone ‘Yeah, I said I’m listenin’ womp womp womp That’s me three years ago, freshman in high school. College wasn’t always on my agenda. ...womp womp womp ‘Yeah, I heard you’ its da thuggishruggish boone ‘What are you gonna do with your life womp?’ ‘What type of question is that!?!?’ its da thuggish ruggish booneooneone ‘I dunno graduate high school, I guess’ oooohhhoooooh ohhh oh ohhh ‘how?’ it’s da thuggish ruggish boooone, it’s da thuggish ruggish booononne. ‘You know what? You’re gonna be just like your mother... You’re gonna drop out by the time you get to tenth grade if you don’t get pregnant first and drop out now.’ Ouch! Dead silence... I gazed out the car window attempting to escape. I never knew words to kill your spirit, not like this. Wow, and I never realized how salty tears were. And the words just continued echoing on and on like an insane merry go round, ‘Why don’t you just drop out now? What are you gonna do with your life? What is wrong with you are you pregnant or something? I guarantee you’ll drop out your tenth grade year’...I proved my doubters wrong! They said I’d drop out and I didn’t. They were so sure of it but I wasn’t. ...The same family members who said I would not prosper in life are the same people congratulating my success now. I didn’t believe I would ever be on my way to anyone’s college...Now I am wrapped in love, encouragement, discipline and positive reinforcement.”*

You have shown courageous leadership to stand against the bad behaviors of some of your peers. One of you started a program Students Against Violence Everywhere to help students caught in self-destructive cycles of fighting and gang activities.

You have high goals.

“I am a young, black female with a burning desire for a bright future and a lifestyle that fits me. No one can determine my destiny; I will do whatever it takes to become successful in life.”

Another writes:

Becoming a pediatrician will mean the world to me...I'll need to work hard for what I want. I know that the medical field requires a lot of reading, research and critical thinking. With all the determination and effort I put in it, I know I can make it...I'm the one that wants all the children to point to me and say, Mommy, she's the one who made me better.”

Another writes:

I decided to become a nurse because it will give me an opportunity to serve others and make a difference in the lives of others through care, prevention and wellness... I have a strong passion for health and wellness, and enjoy health.

Another writes:

“I am a girl who wants nothing more than to fulfill her dream of becoming a journalist.”

You have become women of achievement. Some of you are DC Achievers Scholars. Here's the voice of one DC Achiever, describing how she felt when she got the letter about her scholarship:

“I had convinced myself that I would not be selected. Once my mom placed the letter in my hand and as I saw that one word that had said congratulations, my morale began to boost and I cried tears of joy because finally I knew in my heart that I was going to be the first in my family to go to college...Being a DC Achiever has had a major impact upon me because it makes me not want to give up on life. No matter how many times you think you are not going to accomplish or achieve your goal, you can never have a negative mindset...I feel like anything that you believe, you can definitely achieve.”

This student wants to be a Nurse but also has demonstrated a passion for music, She was in the marching band in her school, and knows how to play trumpet, alto sax, euphonium and tuba:

“Being in marching band for three years taught me how to work with other people. If one person just one steps off on the wrong count or is in the wrong spot on the field that brings the entire band's performance down. Teamwork is key to everything in the work field, classroom and in everyday lives. Music and nursing have similar traits...”

Quite a few of you are young mothers yourselves, and the experience of bearing and raising children has changed you in remarkable ways:

“The day [my child] was born, I knew my life was changing for the better. I realized that life wasn’t about me anymore but making it the best for her...During the last few months of my pregnancy I was put on bed rest and I made out a list of goals to achieve so that I can become a role model for my daughter. At the top of my list was to finish school and get a job...My daughter made me realize that life isn’t something to breeze through but strive in... She has transformed me from a pessimistic underachiever to someone who strives to be the best person I can be.”

Another writes:

“My daughter is one of the reasons I want to go to college. She is my inspiration. In the past, there were days when I just didn’t want to get out of bed...Those days of laziness and doubt are gone. I look at my daughter and get up and go. I realize that I’m responsible not just for myself but for her as well. I want her to know that a college education is mandatory because education is key to success, it will take her wherever she wants to go in life and it will allow her to become a leader in whichever field she chooses. The only way she is going to have those ideals instilled in her is through watching me and how I choose to move forward in life.”

Another writes:

“...(my child) is the biggest reason for me wanting to go back to school. ...I didn't want to be another young mother uneducated with nothing holding her up... My friends often tell me that I've changed in some way. I tell them that maturity goes hand in hand with motherhood.”

You are here because you know that education will make all the difference in your lives:

“I feel so privileged to have the opportunity to go to college. As a woman from Haiti, education is something I have never taken for granted...In Haiti, all of the schools are private and it was hard for my single mom to pay for my schooling. My mother worked hard and spent most of her time traveling across the country, searching for jobs to pay for my sisters and me to go to school. With my mother's encouragement and guidance, I made it a priority to learn...”

Another writes:

“Attending college makes me want to work harder to reach my goal. I am in control of my own destiny...”

Another writes:

“If you dream it, you can make it happen...My goal is to start college right away and major in Political Science. I believe nothing can stop me now from being successful in college and fulfilling my dreams...I have the potential to achieve many things. With a Political Science major I expect to exchange many community injustices for justice.”

I love the hope and confidence in that thought: *If you dream it, you can make it happen.*

You must never forget these dreams, your driving passions, these grand visions that have brought you here to Trinity at this moment in your lives. Our job is to show you how to acquire and use the tools that will make you successful: the ability to read critically, to think in complex ways, to write and speak persuasively and correctly, to develop a philosophy about your life that is healthy and pro-active, to teach you the foundations of knowledge, to be sure that you are numerate – able to work effectively with mathematical concepts and statistical analysis, to help you to master the lessons of literature and science and art and sociology and politics.

We can acquaint you with the knowledge, the skills, the values of a higher education --- but your embrace and internalization of what we try to teach you is all up to you. The most important outcome of a Trinity education is to make you a competent, motivated, self-actualized learner throughout your lives.

Along the way here at Trinity, you will have extraordinary resources available to help you to learn and succeed. You will also encounter a few absolutely non-negotiable expectations.

Need help with math or writing or reading or figuring out what your schedule needs to look like to graduate on time? We have teachers and tutors, advisors and specialists galore to help you every step of the way. Take full advantage!

What is not negotiable, however --- and that means not acceptable --- is doing anything that offends Trinity's values.

Cheating is not negotiable --- cheating will lead to your dismissal from Trinity. The honor pledge you just signed, the medals you wear, all signify your commitment to live by the honor system.

Fighting, whether physically or emotionally, is not negotiable --- Trinity is a community of peace, a place of true justice which is a concept that does NOT mean getting an eye for an eye, but rather, living as if every minute of your life repays God for the gift of your life. True justice means embracing a personal philosophy of charity and hope, not vengeance and mean girl attitudes.

You are no longer children. By entering Trinity, you have become adults. You are now Trinity Women and we expect you to act as if our entire century-old tradition depended on you. Every day, every action, no holidays when it comes to behaving like mature women. If you appear unready for this expectation, if you behave like you are still in high school, then we will have to consider whether you can remain here.

But for most of you, that admonishment is not necessary. As I read your essays, I was so moved by your courage, determination, perseverance and hope for your futures. If your words truly reflect your philosophy, you do want to be here, you aspire to learn well, you intend to reach accomplishments that no one in your families ever thought possible. Trinity is here to make your dreams come true.

And as we sit here today, I am quite sure that the brave women who first made Trinity possible, the Sisters of Notre Dame, are smiling with great joy upon you. These were women with little money, a great deal of opposition, much doubt, and only big ideas --- and they took those big ideas, overturned the opposition, figured out the money, and built this great college. They never met you but they built Trinity for you. And while you don't know them, they knew, instinctively, that you would be here one day and that this great education would make all the difference in your lives and the lives of your children.

So as we conclude our convocation this morning, let us rejoice in Trinity and the gift of education that the Sisters of Notre Dame gave to all of us. Let us invoke the blessing of the Trinity on our new students by saying a prayer that is part of our Trinity tradition:

The Trinity Prayer

*May the power of the Father govern and protect us;
May the wisdom of the Son teach and enlighten us;
May the love of the Holy Spirit renew and quicken us;
And may the blessings of the Holy Trinity
Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Be with us now and forever.
Amen.*