



“Strong, Brave, Resilient and Ready to Conquer the World!”¹

**Remarks to New Student Convocation
College of Arts & Sciences
August 23, 2015**

President Patricia McGuire

Each year on opening day, I share some of the characteristics of our new students, and in doing so, I share some information you have given to us through your applications to Trinity. In some cases, I will be quoting from your application essays. Now, I’ve not had a chance to ask your permission for this, so in order to protect your privacy, I will be sharing some quotations anonymously and will disguise personally identifiable information where appropriate. I offer this class profile to show what a great group you are!

Let me tell you a little bit about yourselves:

You were born in Virginia and Maryland, DC and North Carolina, New York and Massachusetts, Flint Michigan and Fairfax, VA; in Dar Es Salaam and Duluth; in Kansas City and Karachi, Pakistan; in Barbados and Baltimore; in Cameroon and California; in El Salvador and Guatemala, Honduras and Hyattsville and Haiti; at Edwards Air Force Base and on Long Island; Pasadena, Texas and Philadelphia, PA; in Togo and Gabon and Peru and Angola and Nigeria and Serbia and Ukraine; in Dominican Republic and Chile and Arizona. You are the world! You are now all Trinity Women!

You want to have dinner with Cleopatra, Nelson Mandela, Albert Einstein, Ben Carson, Oprah Winfrey, John F. Kennedy, Barack Obama, Michelle Obama, Martin Luther King, Jr., Hillary Clinton, Abraham Lincoln, Billy Graham, and Corrie ten Boom who rescued Jews from the Holocaust during World War II. (I’d like the student who listed dinner with Corrie ten Boom to know that I did not know her amazing story, so I downloaded the book *The Hiding Place* and am learning so much --- you see, in college, even a freshman in the first week can help educate the president!)

You have been student government leaders and you’ve sung in your church choirs. You have marched with bands and with the ROTC. You have volunteered countless hours, worked with AmeriCorps, served the homeless and hungry at the DC Central Kitchen. You are Girl Scouts and have won the coveted Gold Award. You go bowling and swimming, captain your tennis

¹ Quotation from an application essay of a new Trinity student in the College of Arts & Sciences

team and excel at soccer and softball, basketball and volleyball. You have even been boxing and dancing, and you are great cheerleaders.

You aspire to be nurses and healthcare professionals --- nearly one-third of this class indicates your intended majors as nursing, occupational therapy or premed; another large group want to go into Psychology or Early Childhood Education. Some will be scientists in Biology or Biochemistry or Forensics. Others will explore majors in Political Science, International Affairs, Criminal Justice and Business.

While very diverse in your interests and experiences, you have much in common.

You have vision and determination. This student writes:

“This generation is strong. We are pioneers. We are the people that will bring about change to the world...” (New Student Essay)

You are women who are resilient. You have suffered grievous losses --- the illness and death of parents or beloved grandparents, or incarceration of family members, or homelessness, or losing friends to violence, or suffering your own illnesses. You have experienced the hope and uncertainty of the immigrant experience, being uprooted at young ages from your homes in other nations to make the journey to the United States. You have experienced discrimination, bullying, even abuse, but you have not let setbacks become roadblocks.

This student writes about her many struggles, and how she turned it all around:

“I learned that everyone has the ability to be a great leader, that even the girl that was depressed has the ability to bring smiles to people’s faces and the ability to make a difference. I learned to embrace my talents and gifts and not let others stomp around me.... I have become... strong, brave, resilient and ready to conquer the world.” (New Student Essay)

This student did not allow life-changing illness to stop her. She wanted to be a dancer or a fashion designer, but illness made her reconsider. She found a fresh perspective on her interests:

“I started to think about going into the field of Corporate Law. I thought about how all the things I wanted to do in my life from dancing to being a fashion designer and to helping people out and I decided to put all three in one. I realize that being a Corporate Lawyer I would have to support dancers, actors, fashion designers and more in my field of work that I wanted to do. So I asked myself why give up on the dreams you had for yourself were you can help the ones who had the same dreams as you. Over time I want to be the person that people call when something goes wrong with their contract. I believe that if you want to be successful in life then you have to be determine to not back down from everything that comes your way...” (New Student Essay)

Many of you have wonderful role models in your lives. You write with much love about your mothers. This student remembers the hardship when her father walked out, leaving no money and much pain:

"I came to the realization that my mother sacrificed everything for me and I owe it to her and myself not to give up.... My mother is my role model because she was brave and strong throughout everything, even when times were really hard. Her strength and sacrifice inspired me and helped shape my identity to help me become more strong, courageous and brave..." (New Student Essay)

And another student writes:

"The person who motivates me most at home is my mom. Through everything, she has been there with only positive things to say such as, "Stay in School," "Don't give up," and "Be better than me." ...I am determined to get my degree and become someone in life. Out of six kids I will be the first to graduate college." (New Student Essay)

And still one more:

"My mother makes me realize how loving and supporting a person can make such a difference in their lives. Watching my mother change other's lives with her gentle and loving nature is what makes me want to go into a hands on career that helps others. One day, I will make a difference in someone's life. Making someone's life better by showing them the love they need is what I believe is my purpose in life." (New Student Essay)

Some of you are also mothers, too, and your children are the motivating force in your lives. This student writes,

"By having a child at 16 I had to grow up fast and become more responsible.. Having a child has motivated me to want to be successful in life and to make a better life for my child..." (New Student Essay)

And another writes:

"My son is my ultimate motivation in life. I want to prove to him that you can still be successful even with having a child at an early age. ... I want to show the world that I am not a statistic..." (New Student Essay)

Many of you commented about that very negative word, the messages you received from various people that you could not succeed, that you would be *"just another statistic"* whatever that might mean to the person putting you down. Some of you faced such discouragement from your own parents or people close to you. But you are here today because you are determined to prove the naysayers wrong, to show that you can and will be powerful women determining your own lives.

Some of the barriers you faced came from being different, from being of other races or nationalities, or speaking in different languages. This student writes of her ambition to be an English teacher, and how people tried to discourage her:

“‘You want to be an English teacher? You don’t even speak English.’ That was the most hurtful thing anyone said to me. For someone to not see the effort I put in school, for someone to try to make me feel like my goal was unrealistic was heartbreaking....No one should make you feel inferior or try to discourage you from accomplishing your dreams. I have never failed an English class; ...for someone to tell me that I can’t be an English teacher because of my race made me upset....I can do and be whatever I put my mind to. I shouldn’t let people try to make me feel less valuable or capable....Someone’s opinion shouldn’t stop someone from achieving her goals.”(New Student Essay)

That’s an extremely valuable lesson, one that Trinity Women across the ages have had to learn about many things. Maybe people will try to block your progress because of your accent, your native language, your religion, your race or skin color, your body type, your sexual orientation or your choices about how to live your life and beliefs. We are here at Trinity because we believe women must have no limits --- and we must help women to overcome the biggest limit of all, which is your own fear of standing up to those who would put you down. Don’t let them. Stand up and say what you think, be who you can become, do not be a cipher for everyone else’s ideas about you. Be who you are, that is the only way to live a happy, authentic life.

People think of college freshwomen as young and carefree teenagers; but many if not most of you have had life experiences that defy that superficial, silly image. I was so moved to read this particular essay, by a student who survived the earthquake in Haiti. I want to share a little more from this essay because she states the lessons for life so powerfully:

“It was such a nice day, January 12th, 2010. The sun was shining. The wind was blowing my beautiful curtains. I always thought Haiti was beautiful, I still do. I was sitting on my bed. The ground underneath me started shaking. My TV had fallen to my bedroom floor. Suddenly, I could only hear screams. I thought it was a dream. Unfortunately, it was an earthquake, and I was wide awake.

“January 12th had become a nightmare. The news became my worst enemy. It was telling me hurtful things. ...I lived on the streets for a while. I learned to lay next to strangers and be comfortable. Nothing was strange to me and no one was either. I grew some sort of love for the people around me. ...I sat with my new neighbors on the soccer field grass, which at that moment became a new home to all of us. A place where we bonded. We talked about everything and anything. ...Everyone on that field became family to me. We suffered together. We gave each other strength to move forward ...Who knew so many of us could learn, learn from such a catastrophe, and learn from a bunch of strangers?” (New Student Essay)

Who knew so many could learn from a bunch of strangers? Everyone on that field is family --- just as you now sitting here in Trinity’s arena are becoming family to each other and to your Trinity sisters across the ages.

You have learned to be authentic in so many ways. One of you wrote a beautiful essay about how a soccer field in the middle of the city became the place where you could dream and feel free. Others have written of conquering terrible personal situations that are too personal to

mention here, but with hard work and the help of some very wise and wonderful people in your lives, you lived to move past those moments, to be here today to start your new lives at Trinity. One student writes about being left behind by her parents when they moved to the United States from her native country, about how hard it was to try to reunite with her mother a decade later, and her journey to full maturity:

“I have struggled at times and made decisions that weren’t perfect, but every experience has pushed me as a human being and forced me to learn how to work hard independently...I am thankful to be in a country where opportunity is all around me and my passion to accomplish my dreams is welcomed and encouraged. The self-confidence and determination I have developed have helped me to continue to light the path to my future and my dreams... My dream is to be an international business woman and the first in my family to graduate from college. This dream motivates me every day...” (New Student Essay)

Quite a few of you are from other nations, some of you had to escape war or other treacherous conditions back home. This student grew up in a country in Africa that was torn apart by civil war. She writes,

“During the civil war, people did not know what day, time or month it was. Tensions were high in the country. My mother gave birth to me at home because it was not safe to go out, and because she could not afford to go to the hospital.... I did not have the money to buy textbooks, lunch or clothes...This experience has made me want to work harder because I don’t want to go back to that time in my life... It has made me who I am today and is central to my identity as a young woman determined to make a better life for myself.” (New Student Essay)

You want to change the world for the better. You consider studying majors that will help you to do just that. This student wants to study Criminal Justice to be prepared to make the changes she sees are necessary in our world:

“I keenly feel that once mankind stops being selfish and starts working together; the world will have reached a change that is essential for survival. ... This change would consist of people avoiding the distractions that cause violence, demotivation to succeed, and chaos. Instead, people would focus on rebuilding our communities, improving the errors around us, and focusing on what's really important in life; achieving a higher level of success...we are going to work together to create a better world for ourselves.” (New Student Essay)

This student exemplifies the hopes of so many:

“My dream of becoming a doctor began when I was little. I would go with my mother to free clinics and the hospital for her annual check-ups to translate for her. As I would listen to the doctors, I became interested in medicine more and more. For me, medicine is exciting because of the service I would provide to others. I would love to help people, especially my Hispanic community that has ... a lack of Hispanic doctors in hospitals. I want to change that scarcity.” (New Student Essay)

We have some athletes in this class, and I know you all will work very hard. Remember the wisdom of this classmate who learned the hard way that while playing sports can be fun, you must focus on academics and keep up your grades if you want to enjoy doing what you love. This student focused on sports at the expense of academics, and wound up sitting out a season. That hurt! But she learned this:

“In the end, my initial failure helped me build character and determination that helped me to improve my academics, further my athletic career, and develop valued friendships with students that shared similar hobbies. Since this experience, I have worked hard to keep my GPA high enough to allow me to continue playing sports. From these sports, I learned the discipline is necessary to achieve academic success. In hitting rock bottom, I understood the essence of my failure and developed a resolution that I would not make the same mistake twice. Ultimately, the only failure you can guarantee is the one you experience if you do not get up and try again.” (New Student Essay)

Discipline IS necessary to achieve academic success. You are here at Trinity not because we are an easy college, but rather, because we are an effective school to teach you what you need to know to be successful throughout your lives --- “teach them what they need to know” was the phrase of St. Julie Billiart, the great woman who founded the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, the nuns who founded Trinity 118 years ago. For 200 years, the vision of St. Julie has lived on in schools, colleges and universities founded by SNDs around the world for the purpose of educating girls and women who become leaders in their families, communities and places of work.

Learning well is hard work, and on some days you may be discouraged. We have many wonderful faculty and staff here at Trinity to help you along the way. No matter how hard the moment, keep focused on your goal --- graduation is the goal! Put that “Pomp and Circumstance” ringtone on your phone to motivate you! Play that song when you are feeling down! Remember that every semester, every year that you delay completing your degree costs more money, causes you to lose your earning power, delays the sheer gratification and powerful satisfaction you will feel when you receive your Trinity degrees on graduation day.

In just a few minutes, you will receive your Trinity Medals as signs and symbols of your entrance into the Trinity community. The tradition of the Trinity Medal is one of the first of the great Trinity traditions you are experiencing this week, along with your class colors and signing of the Honor Pledge.

The Trinity Medal has, on its front, the image of Our Lady – Notre Dame – the patron of the Sisters of Notre Dame who founded Trinity in 1897. In those days, women did not have the opportunity to go to college in Washington, D.C. The Sisters of Notre Dame saw that was wrong, a grave injustice, so they organized a large effort to raise the money to buy this property and to build the first part of Main Hall. They were very radical women at the end of the 19th Century, doing things that people thought they could not do. They found their own pathways, kept swimming against the tides of opposition to women’s education, prejudice against the idea that women were equal to men. When they opened Trinity in November 1900, they did so with

the conviction that women could truly change the world through the power of a great education, and in so doing, they believed that women would find the pathway to salvation.

As we start the new academic year and welcome you, our latest Trinity Women, let us rededicate ourselves to that heroic vision of the Sisters of Notre Dame, to the idea that we can truly change the world through the force of an education rooted in faith, acting for social justice, teaching women to be leaders through service to our families, communities, nation and global village. May you now take up their cause to be leaders for justice and peace in a world that knows too little of either virtue.

May the blessings of the Trinity be yours as we welcome you now, our new Trinity Women!