

“I Am My Parents’ American Dream”

Remarks to New Students

August 24, 2018

President Patricia McGuire

Welcome to our new students in the College of Arts and Sciences! What a glorious week we heard from so many colleagues that you are a remarkable group of new Trinity Women, eager to learn, very bright and ambitious, and full of great potential. I will have more to say about you in a minute!

This morning we have three important things to do at this convocation: to celebrate you and share some information about this new class; to bestow upon you our traditional Trinity medal as a symbol of your membership in our Trinity community; and to take the Honor Pledge and sign the Honor Book as part of your commitment to live by Trinity’s values of honor and integrity.

Class Profile:

Before we move to the medal ceremony, I want to tell you a bit about YOU, the new students of Trinity, and the Class of 2022:

If you graduate four years from now with the Class of 2022, you will be part of a very historic year for Trinity, since 2022 will be our 125th Anniversary. We will have many festivities to mark that occasion. Well before then, you will learn a lot about the great women who founded Trinity in 1897, the courageous Sisters of Notre Dame who had a firm belief that women had every right to a great higher education equal to that afforded to men. They founded Trinity in spite of opposition --- they were the original “persistent women” --- and you are here today thanks to their glorious vision and deep commitment to women’s education.

Who are you, our latest Trinity Women following in the footsteps of many great women who sat here on opening day in years past?

You are, mostly, Millennium Women --- more than half of you were born in the Year 2000 or 2001.

You are a remarkably diverse class, hailing from 17 states most immediately --- DC, MD, VA, NC, GA, NY, FL, SC, NJ, CA, IN, KY, ME, MS, NM, OH, PA, WA --- with birthplaces in 15 different states and 29 different countries including the United States, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Jamaica, Israel, Dominican Republic, Honduras, Bolivia, Venezuela, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cuba, Ecuador, Egypt, Gambia, Guinea, Guyana, Haiti, Indonesia, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Portugal, Russia, Sierra Leone, Vietnam, Zambia. You are truly citizens of the world.

You plan to major in Nursing, Business, Biology, Criminal Justice, Psychology, Education, Political Science and many other disciplines.

You speak many languages including English, Spanish, Amharic, French, Creole, Malayam, Arabic, Italian, Tagalog, Portugese, Vietnamese and American Sign Language. About half of this class speaks multiple languages at home.

You are called, most frequently, Ashley, Maria, Erica, Jennifer, Valeria and Katherine.

The top high schools in this class include Roosevelt, Capital City Public Charter School, Don Bosco Cristo Rey, EL Haynes, Coolidge, Einstein, Friendship Collegiate, Kipp-DC and Cardozo.

You are very talented: you dance, you play the saxophone, sing in the choir, march with JROTC, volunteer countless hours, play many sports (soccer, volleyball, basketball, tennis, softball --- we need you on our teams at Trinity!), and quite a few are student leaders.

Trinity Medal and Honor Code Ceremony

Before I move on to your essays, let me tell you more about the Trinity medals you are receiving today, and the fundamental importance of the Honor Agreement you will sign. The Honor Agreement is our way of life at Trinity, and it's been our tradition since the founding. We expect you to live lives of honor and integrity, and to help each other to do so. This sets Trinity apart from many other schools and many places of business today.

You are starting your academic lives at Trinity in a time fraught with national concern over racial hatred and symbols of egregious racism, over the treatment of immigrants and extreme bias against persons for other reasons --- Muslims, gay or transgender individuals, persons whose beliefs, language, culture customs, skin color or political beliefs seem different from those who claim center stage. The mission and values of Trinity, as embodied in our Honor System, reject any and all acts and words of hatred against other individuals; we welcome, honor and respect everyone here at Trinity and we expect you to treat every other person you encounter here with the respect and dignity they deserve.

In the same way, the Honor Code also rejects lies and upholds truth. Unfortunately, too many people in the headlines these days do not seem to have any respect for the truth. They are not your role models. Make no mistake about it, despite what you might hear someone say on television, Truth IS Truth and it matters a lot at Trinity. And there is no room at Trinity for "fake news" or "alternative facts." We expect far more of you here at Trinity, and telling the truth, doing your academic work with honesty and integrity is fundamental to everything we do. Live by the Honor Code and you will do well.

As part of this ceremony you will also receive the Trinity Medal, a symbol of your entrance into the Trinity community and commitment to the values of the Honor System.

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. Your Trinity Medals are symbols --- symbols of the power of women to change the world. Wear them well, wear them with pride, never do anything to disgrace them, show the world why you have the distinction as a woman of power to wear this medal starting today and every day henceforth!

[Following this part of this talk, Director of Campus Ministry Sr. Ann Howard, SND, blessed the students and the Trinity Medals; Vice President Karen Gerlach gave remarks, and Dean of Students Michele Bowie led the students in reciting the Honor Pledge. The students then came

forward and received their Trinity Medals and signed the Honor Book. Earlier in the program, Provost Carlota Ocampo also offered remarks.]

Closing Remarks: Reflections on Phenomenal Women

Before leaving today's ceremony, I have a few more reflections about you, our newest Trinity Women. I have read your applications to Trinity, including the essays you wrote in those applications. I have taken some anonymous quotes from your essays as evidence of the strength and resilience and power of this class.

You are remarkable, tenacious, ambitious, phenomenal women. You have experienced a lot in your lives already. Your essays are full of hope, sorrow, love, anger, fortitude. You have triumphed over illness, the deaths of loved ones, homelessness, poverty, perilous journeys across borders that were both physical and psychological. You have demonstrated the grit, resilience, inventiveness and vision to succeed. You are now Trinity Women!

As you embark on this journey, you will do so with the love and support and guidance of so many of us you will meet along the way --- your sister students, faculty and staff, alumnae and alumni and many friends of Trinity, many of whom are making large financial contributions to support your scholarships because they believe in you and want you to succeed. You will succeed if you pay attention to our directions, uphold the Honor Code, live up to the expectations of Trinity's mission and values.

In the next section of my talk, the statements in italics are taken from student application essays:

This student, the first in her family to go to college, lost a loved one and knows that she wants to learn to help others through grief:

"When I was younger, all of my peers wanted to be teachers or doctors, typical aspirations during that time, but I always knew that I wanted to do something differently to make a positive change in society. After my experiences with loss and grief, I decided that I would give back, go to college and study to be a psychologist, to help children and adults deal with their pain..."

Many of you have high ideals to find work that is truly meaningful. You have had some great volunteer experiences. This student worked with City Year and that gave her a whole new perspective and new goals:

"I want to change the world, one step at a time. City Year reminded me who I really am. I am a girl from the inner city who got out. I care about people, I care about the general public, and I care about the greater good. I want to do something that benefits a group of people, whether it be working in the United Nations to fix the water crisis in South Africa, or working as an ambassador to another country to maintain harmony..."

Many of you are young mothers. This student had two children in her teenage years and her words reflect the feelings of so many moms in this class:

“They [my children] don't even know how much I have learned from them. Having them was a life lesson that I wouldn't trade for the world. I am very proud to be a mother. It is also this reason alone that it is so important that I continue my education. I not only want to do this for me, but I also want to do this for my children. To make an example for them to follow and to give them the very life that they truly deserve. I want to show them that giving up is never an option and that education is extremely important.”

We welcome about 30 Dreamers to this class, joining a large group of Dreamers here at Trinity. You have written remarkable stories about your journeys to this day. Some of you made perilous trips through mountains and across desert terrain and scary border crossings. This student writes:

“Had I not faced this challenge (making the journey to America) I would not be the person I am today. By enduring this journey I learned that the worst thing I could have done was given up...I would not be sitting here writing this statement because my chances of getting a higher education would be very slim...”

How many college applicants write statements like this:

“When we were finally able to cross the river that divides Mexico with the United States, I was very afraid because many people die trying.”

You are aware of your identities and you are proud to be who you are:

“I'm proud to be a woman of color. Being a minority in the United States comes with huge responsibility, along with expectations and stereotypes that all minorities face and cope with on an everyday basis. ...Through the process of protesting and raising awareness, either through social media or physically doing so, we as a whole, endure multiple hardships in order to get respect and earn a name for ourselves.”

She is a young woman with a great deal of ambition:

“I feel as though failure is not an option especially as a young black woman arising in Washington D.C. In my community there is not many black women who are successful, so that makes me want to further my education and be a role model for not only my city but for young girls who share similar stories.”

This student came to the U.S. from an African nation and has learned to overcome hardships through hard work and determination:

“I came to the United States to make my dream come true by getting a better education. It was not easy at first because everything was new for me, but it has been a year and five months now, and I adapted to the system to some extent. I am working especially hard to improve my English communication skills. I joined the JROTC program in my school and earned the rank of cadet

second lieutenant as Alpha company platoon leader. I am in charge of the platoon in my company, which constantly teaches me about responsibility. Being in a leadership position also helped me succeed in and outside the classroom as well as become a better sister, student, and friend.”

You are all persistent women! Some of you plan to be scientists. This student had an excellent experience in her high school laboratory that prepares her well to excel in Trinity’s labs:

“In the biotechnology program of my high school, participating students, including myself, prepare for occupations, such as genetics, forensic science and technology, laboratory technology, and other related careers. We become proficient on the practices, protocol, procedures, business, and activities involved in biotechnological careers as done in a laboratory setting. In my junior year of high school, one such laboratory activity, the act of genetically transforming organisms, presented a problem that lead to questioning the success of the experiment. By performing an independent extension of the experiment, with my instructor's permission, I was able to isolate successful experimental results and preserve the transformed organisms.”

As a child in an African nation, this student did not understand why her mother was gone so often, but when she learned the reason she became inspired:

“[My mother] explained to me the healthcare problems in [our country]. According to her, shocking numbers of women and children died daily due to lack of quality healthcare. She told me personal stories that motivated her to do her best for maternal care. She explained that several women died during pregnancy and many women were afraid to get pregnant. The reason was partly due to absence of enough qualified nurses as well as lack of seriousness on the part of the government in providing quality care. Therefore, her nursing career was not only a job but a personal commitment to save lives. After she pleaded for my understanding, I began to develop interest in her work. Over the years, as I assisted my mother in her clinic, I developed interest in nursing and started telling everyone that I was going to be a nurse.”

This student was 7 years old when she made her journey from a South American country:

“After a four-hour hike across the Mexican-American border, a three hour wait in a car filled with eleven people, and one police scare, we finally arrived to the United States. ...Shortly after my arrival, I came to understand from my parents that everything that [my country] was going through was not normal. ... My family members tried everything to fight the corruption. They received nothing but false promises..., low pay, lack of medical supplies, arrests, kidnappings, hunger, and even death. Somewhere along the fight, they started to give up and migrated to safe havens. ...I have felt that our pilgrimage from [my country] to the United States was well worth the risks my parents took.”

This student was always the pillar of support for her family, but she felt trapped in a stereotypical gender role. She is taking the big step of moving out of state to come to DC to develop an independent persona:

“I have grown beyond tired of hearing the words “because he’s a man.” My sex does not dominate my intelligence, and my race and status do not determine my limits. I have decided to take a chance and do something for myself. So here I am with much ambition to explore the world, learn more and grow in pursuit of my dreams. ... I have spent all my life breathing life into others and now it is time for me to breathe for myself. I’m taking control of my life, I will prove myself that I am strong and diligent. My culture will no longer have the keys to my ignition, I will drive myself. I will be stronger because I am Latina...”

This student is determined to work for justice:

“As Desmond Tutu once said, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” I cannot stand still and do nothing while injustice occurs all around me. ...I am the first person in my family to have made it past the 6th grade; I will be the first person to graduate high school, and I hope to be the first to attend and graduate from college. After earning my bachelors degree, I plan to attend law school. ...I plan on becoming a civil rights attorney so that I may fight for others’ civil rights... I am my parent’s American Dream.”

From reading your applications, I know this about you: most of you have lived lives that I cannot imagine, and I admire you so deeply for what you have had the fortitude to overcome. My job, the job of all of us on the faculty and staff of Trinity, is now to work with you to grow intellectually and mature into the powerful women leaders you aspire to be for your families and communities.

In this process we will challenge you, we will push you, we will insist that you can do better when you think you have given your all. On the hard days remember this: we are working with you to build the intellectual and moral muscles you will need to lead this world to a far better place than we are today. You will need the strength and courage that you can develop here by mastering academic subjects that may daunt you, but you can do it!

You crossed rivers and climbed mountains and walked away from remote villages and rose above low expectations to get here. You collectively have vowed that you will never be “just another statistic” --- unless you become the cherished statistic of women of achievement, women of color, women of vision and courage who rise to the top to lead our society forward. Be that statistic --- the first woman, the one of few women, the woman who takes on challenges few or no women have taken on before. Fewer than 7% of the world’s women have ever been to college --- you are now part of that statistic, and you will be leaders to improve the odds of success for all of the women who come after you. You can do it!

And always know that you are here thanks to some very brave women who made Trinity a reality 121 years ago, our Founders among the Sisters of Notre Dame, courageous and faithful religious sisters who founded Trinity for every student across those 12 decades --- they founded Trinity for YOU, and they are surely smiling with immense pride on you today. May the power, wisdom and love of the Trinity be with you through your Trinity journey.