

New Student Academic Convocation 2018

- September 25, 2018
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Good morning new students of Seattle University. Welcome to your new home in higher education, in what we call academia. All you have studied, and learned, and applied in practice and service has prepared you for and led you to this morning of being welcomed into, included with, and belonging within a new kind of learning community.

As I welcome you I am glad to present you to your professors whom you will get to know and who will get to know you. The university entrusts you into their education, intellectual formation, and mentoring of you. The university's two key statements about this relationship is:

“We put the good of the students first.”

“We value excellence in learning with great teachers who are active scholars.”

Both of these statements—which are our first two values—are important as you begin your higher education experience under the guidance of your professors. It is your good that they are interested in and they know what that intellectual and educational good is. They put that good first, your good first, know that and trust it. What that good is, is your “excellence in learning”. They are able to help you have excellence in learning because they are, in fact, “great teachers” and “active scholars”. Focus on your own learning, make it excellent, rely on your “great teacher” to help you learn and know just what “excellence in learning” looks like at the highest level from how your professors manifest to you their own learning as “active scholars”.

At this Academic Convocation for New Students I want to explain something which I think is important as you begin your studies at Seattle University. Let me get into this subject by telling you that I am resolved this year never to reply to anyone who brings forward an issue or a problem to me by saying to them, “It’s complicated.” I am going to abandon that phrase from my vocabulary. Why? Because it is just too easy to say, can be said about anything, and often is a “cop out”, a “stopper”, an excuse for not doing anything because, quote, “It’s complicated.” Duh, of course it is. All problems, all issues, are complicated: homelessness; white privilege, white supremacy, racism; immigration; poverty, discrimination; global warming; gender and intersectionality; political polarization, incarceration; ethical issues in technology; the oppression of indigenous peoples, the formation of a just and human society.

I am often asked, “What do you think we should do to solve the problem of homelessness?” A friend the other day said, “Homelessness is not a problem: housing costs, mental issues, addiction, domestic abuse, economic disparity, discrimination, huge holes in the safety net for the needy, lack of care, lack of will, loss of hope. All of the problems or issues I mentioned are simply not one problem, but many problems, and that’s why we say, “It’s complicated” and get stuck in not doing anything because of that.

My response to this is that we really need one another and you need one another in your education to address the issues of your lives. The scientist needs the social worker, the doctor the economist, the criminal justice professional the ethicist, the lawyer the minister, the psychologist the computer scientist, the journalist the teacher, the politician the poet, the business person the philosopher, the demographer the historian. Rather than saying “It’s complicated”, let’s say together we can address any and all issues because we have persons from multiple angles and sides and positions and capacities and expertise, and that from those multiple approaches we can solve any problem.

I say this on your first academic day at Seattle University because whatever the major you have or on which you will decide, and whatever course you take in one subject or another, and whatever friendships you form with persons focused on different things, you can learn from many angles and with many different methods and skills, and from many different people with their contributions to make that are able to untangle what seem so complicated.

Rather than letting ourselves off the hook by using the word “complicated”, what if we used words like community, common good, compelling, commitment, contribution, conflict resolution, consideration, combined efforts, compromise, communication, collaboration, concerted action, collective understanding, and compassion. We need one another and in our education we need scope of knowing and welcome of others to address any of the important issues of our times.

In the Jesuit higher education tradition there is a little phrase that captures this. The phrase is what we want our students to have as they face issues. The phrase is “a well-educated solidarity”. Yes, a “solidarity” with other persons as important as oneself, and a solidarity with their challenges, sufferings, and experiences. Yes, solidarity. And also yes “well-educated”, not just a feeling of oneness or even a love, but a solidarity that is “well-educated” so that it knows who and what to be in solidarity with and what to do to make the solidarity effective for addressing our common issues. I challenge you to practice “a well-educated solidarity” here in your studies and lives and actions. Let your experience of Seattle University open you to and teach you about and develop in you’re the capacity for “a well-educated solidarity” by which you know how to act in concert with others. Isn’t this the very best answer to being stymied by thinking or saying “It’s complicated”?

There is one last thing I would like to mention which is not complicated. Let me see a show of hands. How many of you are 18 or older? You can vote. You can vote absentee from your home state or you can vote here. All you need to do is to register now. It is easy and we can show you how. And then you need to vote. That’s a very simple act of “a well-educated solidarity”, a simple way of acting on the belief that we really all do need one another.

Again, welcome. Thanks.