

Chancellor's Convocation
Friday, August 22, 2008

Today I'm very happy to meet you, and to welcome you. We're thrilled that you're here! This is your campus, this is your city, this is your world, and this is your time to shine!

As you know, you've come to a place with great traditions and history, and we are proud of it – this dome is full today of amazing alumni who have sat in your seats – would they all stand for a cheer [pause] – and faculty and staff who will accompany you on your journey – and let's cheer for them once again. [pause].

It's taken many years and much effort by you and your families to arrive at this place in your lives, and I know, at least for your families, there is both excitement and some anxiety today – personally, I'll never forget the day I went to college – many years ago. I was of course nervous, but my mother was so nervous she walked right into a glass door. Now, I'm sure you are all a bit calmer than we were, yet it is a major moment, and worth some reflection on why you're here and what kind of journey you're undertaking.

The two-way street of thinking and doing

In a knowledge economy, you are here, understandably, to gain a foothold on your future, though probably not the one you envision today. For this, you'll need an agile, flexible attitude that is *entrepreneurial* in a sense that goes far beyond its conventional definition in the world of business and commerce. You'll need to be able to innovate and be willing to take risks. Beginning here, there will be times you'll need the imagination, the inner resources, and the courage to just "jump in" and "do it."

We hear time and time again from our most engaged students that getting out there, with faculty, with student groups, in communities and organizations, here in

Syracuse and all over the world, helps clarify and expand what they are thinking about in class. Many of our signature programs, from the life sciences to disability studies, from biomaterials to LGBT Studies, are addressing critical issues of our times while pushing the frontiers of discovery. This is the two-way street of what we call Scholarship in Action. We want to frame your work – and our work – in the broadest possible context of learning and discovering that makes a difference in the world. Those insights can occur in the laboratory and library or in collaborations with diverse communities of experts, from residents in the South Side of Syracuse who want to create a community newspaper to disabled veterans who want to start new businesses.

We are committed to creating a green and sustainable campus, and we want your help. There are a wide range of programs here centering on the environment, studying everything from indoor environmental quality to the degradation of our waterways – and the fish in them -- by acid rain. But we all can make a difference by our actions – recycling, conserving energy, and soon, you'll be able to rent one of our new eco-friendly ZipCars – an idea promoted by our Student Association. So, next year when you are allowed to have cars on campus – don't!

Now, as you walk on campus, stop in to the SU Art Galleries in the Shaffer Art Building to see the magnificent exhibit, "Michelangelo: The Man and the Myth," including Michelangelo's original drawings associated with the Sistine Chapel, and many of his works never seen before in North America. As the semester unfolds, you'll be invited to an eye-opening series of lectures, concerts, and special events called "Rethinking Michelangelo." I promise you that it will enrich your sense of history and your sense of self.

The arts can keep us going as nothing else can. Consider poetry for example. As Wallace Stevens defined it, poetry is "the imagination pushing back against the pressure of reality." It has, "something to do with our self-preservation," and "the expression of poetry, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives."

And we live our lives by sharing that imagination with others. Perhaps it is the social psychologist in me, but I worry that the ethos of education today – the prototype of the educated person – is too squarely centered on the individual, the so-called journey of individual discovery. The reality of that journey is that there's nothing solitary about it – it's always richly embedded in our experience of others, of history, and languages and cultures, of opinions and debates, of others' achievements and failures that put such perspective on our own. Education is a distinctly *social* process.

For this reason, we believe that *participation* is an integral part of education. This involves doing as well as thinking, being responsive to each other, and engaging the world. If you've come here to prepare for some future life, I invite you today to start that life right now and not to wait for graduation. Don't stay on the sidelines. Don't even stay up here on the hill.

You can begin right away, tomorrow night, by joining us at “Feel the Pulse of Syracuse,” an evening downtown where you can have a Taste of Central New York and explore the nightlife in Armory Square with an extra dose of music, dance, recreation and entertainment.

To get there, buses from the Schine and Goldstein student centers, will take you along the Connective Corridor, which is coming to life as a signature strip of cutting edge cultural development connecting our University Hill with more than 25 arts and cultural venues. The Corridor goes right downtown to our Warehouse where artists, architects, designers and journalists all mix.

Our faculty and students have already done some amazing work on the Corridor, helping to design streetscapes, lighting, and an Urban Video Project that will make Syracuse the first city in the nation to offer a permanent home, every night of the week, for artists who want to project huge images---movies, gaming, simulcasts, even weather maps---on the sides of buildings. This year we'll start with three or four giant video walls.

The Corridor is a work in progress, and students with a wide array of interests--- art, architecture, design, engineering, film studies, history, journalism, and marketing, to name only a few---have contributed ideas and worked in class projects on it. But you are special, for your class will be the first class to see it truly begin to come to life! This is a creative campus, and you're part of it!

Dewey's participatory democracy

It is especially appropriate as we go into a national election – in which you can vote – to think deeply and creatively about what it means to participate in a democracy. As the philosopher and educator John Dewey said – it's about more than exerting your individual right to vote or own property – it's also about caring for and about others – associated living! It's about engaging with others, endorsing or disagreeing, acknowledging our interdependence. This is a world where we need each other more than ever before. We need to cultivate empathy, to bridge divisions in our society and world that are deep and wide.

Our connections to the world are all over the world, from immersions on Theater Row in NYC, to studies of Muslim Cultures in London, and internships in civil engineering in Dubai. One new program, called South Africa Meets the South Side, includes a transatlantic conversation about sustaining development in under-resourced communities. We take seriously the notion of a local-global resonance, but we also know that inter-cultural dialogue starts right here, in our CARE dialogues – Conversations about Race and Ethnicity -- in the residence halls, in courses on inter-group dialogue, international relations, and religion and society, in dialogues that work to transcend inter-faith boundaries that so perilously splinter our world.

Our shared reading for the summer, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah, illuminates precisely these twin themes of *participation* (even if it was thrust in the most dire of ways on him) and *humanity* (in this case – how to maintain one's humanity in the midst of extreme strife and inhumanity). He, unlike you, was

thrust, forced into both participation and humanity-seeking; you have a choice. He *couldn't* run or hide; and neither will you – responsibility takes many forms, and part of yours is to use the opportunity that you have of being here, amongst extraordinary faculty, staff and peers, to engage, to be part of the world's solutions – you will benefit, and so will the world.

You've come to a university community that is really trying to make a difference in this world, and our commitment to excellence is defined by *doing* as well as by *knowing*; by our courage to try, and to risk being wrong, and most of all by the compassion we mount for being *in the world*, for caring about others and seeing ourselves as defined as much by their success as by our own.

It'll be challenging, fun, anxiety-provoking, and exhilarating, all at once – take it on, *Go Orange!*