



EXECUTIVE REMARKS

2017 New Student Convocation

Oakland University O'rena
Tuesday, September 5, 2017 – 1 p.m.

PRESIDENT PESCOVITZ'S REMARKS

Good afternoon, and welcome to all of you.

To all of our new students, we are so excited to have you join the Oakland University community.

Like you, I am also starting my first year at OU and so, I feel like a freshman too.

And, like you, I share in the excitement of this moment. All of us here today cannot wait to see all of the amazing things that you will accomplish with the education that you gain here at Oakland University.

You are embarking on an exciting and wonderful journey and the college education you acquire here will serve as the strongest possible foundation for whatever career you pursue.

Oakland University's motto, "Seguir virtute e canoscenza," is taken from Dante's epic poem "The Inferno," in which the seafaring Greek hero Ulysses tells his men to "seek virtue and knowledge."

Knowledge is power, and I encourage you to seize it.

Along these lines, I would like to share a short story that you may find enlightening and even useful in your own lives.

It has been tremendously empowering in mine.

Those of you who are modern American history lovers will know that it was during the early to mid-1960s that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., worked feverishly to bring the issue of civil rights to the forefront of our nation's consciousness.

And, you will remember that Selma, Alabama became a focal point of racial strife, demonstrations and marches that sought to bring about justice and equality to our country.

Prior to the famous March in Selma in 1965, Dr. King enlisted the support of faith leaders from a host of different races and religions to help him advance this campaign for change.

And, he asked many of these leaders to join him on one occasion as he spoke to a large crowd of supporters at a church in Selma.

After delivering his remarks, Dr. King surprised a prominent Jewish faith leader by telling him that he would be next to address the assembled crowd.

The rabbi had come completely unprepared to do this.

Quickly putting together the best spontaneous speaking plan he could, the rabbi chose to limit his remarks to three simple thoughts that he drew from Jewish tradition.

These were fundamental ideas to his faith – tenets that he had learned and committed to memory long before this particular day in Selma.

The first thought the rabbi shared with the assembled crowd was that when God created man, he created only one man. This was so that no person would ever be able to claim that his or her father was better than any other person's father.

The second thought was that God created man using dust from the four corners of the Earth so that no person would ever be able to say that the place from where he or she came from was better than the place from which anyone else had come.

The third and final thought the rabbi shared was that God created man using every color of dust so that no person would ever be able to say that the color of his or her skin was better than the color of any other person's skin.

Now, I want you to realize that in less than one minute, I have shared with you the full essence of the rabbi's remarks that day.

But, what you should also know is that it took the rabbi more than 30 minutes to deliver these remarks to the assembled crowd.

Why is that?

Because the people listening to him were so exalted and so grateful to hear his words that they could hardly stop applauding and cheering after each thought the rabbi delivered.

His sermon generated shouts of “hallelujah” and “you give it to them, brother,” and it rallied inspiration and enthusiasm among the people who listened to him.

Again, knowledge is power – particularly when it is applied in an effective way.

Why am I sharing this story of the rabbi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. with you? For two reasons.

First, it is the foundation of many formative experiences that helped make me who I am today; experiences that set the stage for my childhood, adolescence, young adulthood and much of what I might have accomplished in my life.

You see, the rabbi in that story is my father, Richard G. Hirsch.

He taught me through his words and his actions that when you acquire and effectively use knowledge, you can achieve your goals. And, you have the power to change the world.

I am proud of the fact that through his words at the church in Selma, at the March on Washington in 1963 and, more importantly, through many of my father’s actions, he helped play

an important role in the civil rights movement that brought about important and positive changes in our country.

More than telling me, he showed me through his actions that I, too, can seize the power of knowledge to change things for the better.

With role models like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and my father, I have embraced that objective, and this is one reason I am now standing before you as President of Oakland University.

My goal is to create change for the better – to help ensure your experience at Oakland University is as empowering as it can be so that you, in turn, gain knowledge and unlock discoveries while you are here.

There is nothing stopping you from doing this, so I encourage you to acquire all of the knowledge you can gain.

But, there is a second reason I wanted to share this story with you. And that is because it is clear that my father's work and that of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s is still not finished.

I was disheartened to see the appalling events that took place on the campus of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville early last month. What these events revealed is that although progress has been made, our country still has bigotry, racism and anti-Semitism.

You have joined a new community. You are now important members of the Oakland University community.

And, here is what I want you to know about our community.

Regardless of:

your faith tradition or your life experience;

your race or ethnicity;

you or your family's place of origin;

your age;

your body size or shape;

your skin color;

your physical, mental or emotional state;

your gender identity or sexual orientation –

regardless of any quality that makes you who you are, know that you are welcome here.

Know that you are enthusiastically invited and encouraged to be as active and involved a member of this community as you wish to be.

Know also that everyone you meet on this campus is just as welcome here as you are. Because, like you, they are human beings fully deserving of dignity, respect, consideration, inclusion and all of the same opportunities.

I will tell you that there is just one kind of person that is not welcome on the campus of Oakland University.

That is any person who would take action to compromise or deny any other person of their right to enjoy and thrive in the warm, welcoming and inclusive environment we have created.

Over the coming years, you will be exposed to many new ideas, perspectives and even revelations.

Some you will find acceptable, others will be illuminating and some you may find to be repulsive.

As you encounter these ideas, always remember that knowledge – regardless of the package in which it comes – is power.

Knowing what you accept and advocate is important. It is equally important to know what you oppose and why you oppose it.

Know also that no one can deprive you of your right to maintain your own beliefs, nor your right to express those beliefs within the confines of civil conduct.

I can assure you that this campus is and always has been a sanctuary for free speech and free exchange of ideas.

As you discover new ideas, put them in safekeeping for a time when they will help you achieve the remarkable goals you set for yourself.

Along those lines, I want to invite you to take part in a brief thought experiment involving the story I shared a moment ago.

Remember that the event I spoke about took place more than 50 years ago – at a time when many of your parents were not yet even born.

Consider that there was no Internet at the time. Also, access to a college education was more limited then than it is today.

In a broader sense, consider that at no point in human history has the pool of our knowledge been more comprehensive or more readily accessible to any of us than it is right now.

Now consider that people like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., achieved astounding accomplishments without any of these advantages.

Just imagine what you will achieve with all of the knowledge you have at your fingertips.

Better yet, do not just imagine – start planning all of the remarkable things that you will accomplish.

My challenge to you during your time here at OU and well beyond it is to be open to new people, new places and – most importantly – new ideas.

Always pursue knowledge, and continually use that knowledge to create a world better than the one you find yourselves in today.

Achieving these goals is well within your reach, and there is no one except you who can stop you from realizing this.

Know that Oakland University offers you innumerable academic, research, work-study, travel abroad, athletic, recreational, social, community service and other learning opportunities.

Explore them. Pursue them.

Remember, the college education you are about to embark on is your investment. You should get as much from it as you can.

Also remember that while a college education is an investment, – and probably the most rewarding one you will make in your lifetime – it is not like other investments. It is not a product that you can simply purchase.

You are investing in the raw materials. These raw materials are the ones from which you will build your future.

And later, you will be able to use that education to help you achieve whatever you seek in life – personally or professionally.

You will be guided on your journey by amazing faculty who have expertise in fields of study that truly span your imagination, and

they come from across the globe to teach and conduct research here.

Also, know that nowhere will you find faculty and staff more dedicated to helping you make the best of the learning experience before you.

You have come to the right place.

The truth, however, is that the quality and value of your Oakland University education will be most significantly influenced by the way you put the raw materials together.

By that I mean the courses you take, the interactions you have with faculty and your student colleagues, and the experiences you have as a college student.

Only you can decide to give your education the time, attention and passion it requires to make sure it is truly a sound investment.

I invite you to do that with focus, curiosity and ambition.

I encourage you also to savor and enjoy the years ahead of you. Have fun! I predict you will create friends and memories that will last a lifetime.

Once again, welcome to Oakland University. I wish you the best as you look to enhance your personal and professional lives

through the power of knowledge. As Sir Francis Bacon says,
“Knowledge is power.”

Thank you.