

First Year Convocation

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We welcome you to a campus in which together, your dreams can be made real. Our mission is to cultivate an environment of engaged, experienced based learning, enriched by active community services, that prepares students of diverse ages and backgrounds to succeed in their lives and their careers.

It is a great honor for me to be able to address this audience in this extraordinary location. Spivey Hall has been identified by one artist as the best small performance hall in America-period. The faculty and staff of this institution have created the conditions which led US News to characterize Clayton State as fifth among public regional colleges in the south, and conditions that have supported students over the last several years to achieve either the second or third largest growth in the number of graduates of University System institutions in Georgia. And this first year student convocation marks one end of a continuum which should conclude for most of the students here with graduation—which indeed is the reason why you have invested your time, talent and treasure to come here. While certainly given before, Defari’s admonition in I can’t wait (LA City), “Don’t start what you can’t finish” should apply to your efforts over the next several years.

So today, I would briefly like to do three things. First, I want to offer you congratulations. Second, I want to provide a few reasons why you should indeed finish that which you are about to start. And third, I want to offer some modest advice on things you can do to improve your chances for completion.

So first, Congratulations. Not all of Georgia’s students have accomplished what you have done so far. Georgia’s high school graduation rate was 69.7 percent in 2012—or some 30% of your contemporaries could not be where you are—and even fewer had the scores and grades to have been admitted to this class. And this gives you a chance to be a part of the Georgia Economy of the future. Daniel Smith in New York magazine observed: “Last year, in response to a Times article titled “Plan B: Skip College,” The New Yorker’s Rebecca Mead published a rousing defense of college’s ability to, among other things, “expose individuals to the signal accomplishments of humankind.” In an essay published in March in The New York Review of Books, critic and professor Peter Brooks dismissed the swelling discontent with college as cranky and narrow-minded. The university is, he wrote, “one of the best things we’ve got,....”

The Wall Street Journal reported earlier this year of higher education values—even in more skeptical times. “the hard numbers show Americans with higher levels of education tend to benefit long-term — and that the U.S. is struggling with a divide not just of income but of education. The unemployment rate for Americans 25 years and older with a Bachelor’s degree was 3.8% in February, far below the nation’s overall 7.7% rate. The jobless rate for people without a high-school diploma? 11.2%. High-school graduates without college faced a 7.9% rate. “

Higher education has never been a guarantee for economic success—but it continues to dramatically improve your chances. And a college education will inevitably lead to individuals who are healthier, are more likely participating citizens, and whose children are more likely to be successful than the children on non-graduates. Estimated that over a lifetime there is a difference of a million dollars in purchasing power—but you need to try to do all you can to reduce the costs you will face early in your careers—that will be included in the third part of this presentation.

But you have to work for completion—and that is the second major observation—you must complete a program to have the best chances for success—At the heart of the Complete College America and the Complete College Georgia programs is an understanding of the job market facing the US between 2020 and 2025. By that time, and as many of you heard me report over the summer, the American economy will need some 60% of workforce participants to possess some post-secondary credential. And yet currently, only 42% of the Georgia work force has these credentials. And so we together we want all we can to increase dramatically your chances for completion. A few bits of advice to help you along that path come next.

In the third part of this presentation, I want to leave you with a number of pieces of advice that I hope some of you will attend to. These are not just my observations, although it is fair to say that the advice is consistent with literally decades of my own observations of first year students who succeed. They have been gathered from an array of sources—of Yahoo Voices, of US News and World Report tips for college freshmen, of Huffington Post. And I would divide that advice into three categories—academic advice, general well being advice, and personal well being advice.

To start, there is advice that is associated with academic well being. Here I would offer five brief suggestions. 1) You don't have as much free time as you think you have—if you are finding yourself with a great deal of time on your hands, check your list of assignments for the week again. There may be more to finish or more to do to stay ahead. 2) read your syllabi early and carefully—note then all assigned activities 3) Familiarize yourself with locations that can support your academic success—such as the Center for Academic Success, first year advising and retention center. Seek out your faculty members in the first week—introduce yourself; do not hesitate to admit if you are having problems with material. And ask questions!! Many of us have spent decades studying material in our area of expertise. 4) Vary between group and individual work in preparing for courses. There are times you need to quietly read and work through material. But there are other times in which group study, focused on quizzing and challenging, can be the best way to foster learning. Do all you can to develop team work skills, communication skills, and your ability to analyze situations 5) show up to class and study hard!!! Show up to class and study hard!!! Show up to class and study hard!!!

There is advice that is based on long term general well being 1) you should begin to consider career plans—and this is not to equate university life with vocational education—but it is to say that there are skills knowledge and abilities that people will ultimately pay you to do. Universities are places to visa (check your values, your interests, your skills, and your abilities—and start to inventory them as you precede with your career plans—and this includes getting selectively involved in activities that give you joy, whether that is community engagement, working out in the SAC with friends, or running for student

government) 2) watch use of social media—consider setting your face book on private, and rethinking the pictures you post. Your twitter posts should be assumed to be read by audiences beyond your immediate followers—retweets are always unpredictable. Be careful with what you think is humorous on vine or instagram—six seconds of video fame could be years of horror.

There is finally advice that is associated with personal well being—1) use tech to manage activities—higher and low. Keep a schedule, record where you are supposed to be and what you are supposed to be accomplishing—whether it might be going to class or completing an assignment or working out at the gym 2) maintain a budget, record your expenses, including purchases or night out with friends. 3) be proactive in addressing stress—get sleep. Schedule exercise, even if a walk around the lake talking about a class is all you have time to accomplish.

And of course there is some guy named Carlo Rotella—from whom I give the last suggestion—when in doubt, and especially when you are certain, double check everything.

Execution of these actions, or any of these plans, will often mark the difference between success and delay in success. And so it is not enough to plan to do one or more of these suggestions—you must act on those plans. And so if you have promised yourself to visit the Career Services Center, place a note on your schedule to call and make an appointment first thing next week. If you promised yourself to get engaged in the community, complete a voter registration form today in the campus center. At the end of each class next week—and you should attend each class next week—record in a calendar—paper or electronic—the days you have assignments due or exams scheduled. And any other item, the key to success is a plan, plus acting on that plan.

And so, again, we extend congratulations to you on this first step toward graduation. Together, we can be the kind of co-producers of learning that will be so important to all of our success. And with that success, your dreams, made real.