



Education for Individual and Social Responsibility

**The Inauguration of Steven M. Corey, Ph.D., as 27th President of Olivet College
September 7, 2011**

Steven M. Corey, Ph.D., Inauguration Comments

Embracing Our History - Envisioning Our Future

Thank you, my friend; thank you for that introduction and thank you for being here with us today. Thank you to David Hayhow and the rest of the board of trustees for not only placing your faith in me and bringing me to this great institution, but for personally extending yourselves to me and my family in so many ways since my arrival. I accept your offer of leadership and agree to partner with you, this great faculty and staff, our students, alumni and friends here in Olivet, around the state and across the nation to make Olivet College the best it can be in service to our students and our community.

I also want to thank each of the speakers who have shared with us today about the special role and history that Olivet College has played in the lives of students, faculty and staff, this fabulous community of Olivet, and for so many others. One of the best parts about this job is that I get to sit down and hear from many about their experience with this great college and I can attest that our positive impact on lives and communities is significant and the opportunities before us are tremendous.

Before going forward with additional words about the college, I'd like to take just a moment to make a few personal remarks. The first is that I'm so pleased that my family could be here with me today. Many of you have come to know my wife, Traci, and my daughter, Karli, and my wife's mom, Marie, who supports our family in so many ways. Without their love and support, I wouldn't be able to be here with you today. They've fully committed to joining with me and our college community in this great adventure. My parents, Cecil and Marjorie Corey, are here today all the way from California. From my earliest days, I can't remember a time when I doubted if I was actually going to go to college and have success in life. While they weren't college graduates themselves, they instilled in me a value for education and a confidence that I could be successful. Thank you for your love, encouragement and support. And, while my sister Beth wasn't able to be here, my sister, Sandy, is with us today, also from California. I'm certainly fortunate to have my family here and supporting me as I join this new family here in Olivet. Thanks and I love you all.

As most of you here today are aware, I assumed the presidency in December 2010, almost nine months ago. Yet, here we are today with much pomp and circumstance engaged in an "inauguration." Now, some of us might ask, "Does this mean that he hasn't really been president until now, which of course I have been, so then, if he has been, why are we doing all of this today?" Well, in a couple of hours we're going to have a pretty fun community block party - that's a pretty good reason. But, more importantly, inaugurations provide us with an opportunity to pause, to reflect, and to gain a degree of focus on our

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past, present and future, and to celebrate our accomplishments and our opportunities as a college and community. As a college and community, these rites of passage are important and I'm pleased and honored to be here with you today, to be your president, and to help us to pause, reflect and focus on our past, present and future.

You've already heard in earlier remarks about the founding of the college in 1844 and the principles on which this college began. While almost 168 years ago, those foundations and the events since, worked to shape who and what we are today.

Our roots and history in the church, which gave rise to our contemporary relationship with both the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches and the United Church of Christ, helped to ground us as a college in a values-based mission embodied by *Education for Individual and Social Responsibility*. Today, whether your connection to this mission comes from a commitment through faith (like mine), or from an ethical or social justice imperative, or from the simple understanding that with individual success comes a responsibility to make a positive difference in the life of others and the communities in which we find ourselves, this values-based mission comes from our history, has been shaped by our past, remains with us today, and helps to shape and define our opportunities for the future.

When Father John Shipherd and the others with him committed to founding a college here in Olivet, they did so with the intent of extending work he had done in the founding of Oberlin College some 11 years earlier. At Oberlin, he founded the first college in the nation to admit women on a co-equal basis with men. At Olivet, he committed to an institution that became, by charter, the first in the country to admit all persons, regardless of gender or race. As with today, creating positive social change wasn't easy and the state legislature refused to charter the college with such a commitment to equality. The college persisted anyway and eventually received its charter 13 years later. In the century-and-a-half since, we have continued to bring a diverse array of students together here in the intimate community of Olivet to live, to learn, and to develop into the responsible leaders of our communities.

It hasn't always been easy, but the commitment to doing so has endured. Today, we have one of the most ethnically diverse student bodies of any private liberal arts college in the state. But the measure of our diversity doesn't stop there. While some of our students come from families of means, almost half of Olivet College students receive Federal Pell Grant assistance with about one-third in the highest need category. This makes us one of the most socio-economically diverse student bodies. When combined with our ability to attract students from both our largest urban centers and the smallest rural communities, Olivet College has developed into something distinctive and special, a community made up of a truly diverse array of people, each bringing their background and perspective to bear on the richness of the living and learning environment unlike that which is found at most small private colleges.

Throughout our history and certainly today, we have called ourselves an "opportunity college." Now, that might not have been the term we've always used, but it certainly describes our commitment to welcoming all types of students, many of whom wouldn't have had the chance to attend a small private college but not for Olivet. To this, I have ample evidence in the testimonials of the many alumni who span several decades who've told me just that. Certainly, part of this has resided in our commitment to a diverse student body in the ways I've already described. However, it's also been embodied by a resistance to the notions of academic prestige which so often result in a drive for academic exclusivity and elitism where success is described by how many students are rejected. Instead, we've focused on

providing a genuine opportunity for those who are committed to engaged learning in close relationship with faculty, not just those who have simply demonstrated an ability to get the highest grades or excel on standardized tests. Now, some will say the absurd that we're just taking all comers and we're not getting "the best students." This is simply not true; since my arrival, I've seen the data myself... and our students. In fact, we have valedictorians, students with 4.0s, high ACT scores, Academic All-Americans, and achievers in just about any way you want to measure it here in our midst today. However, these are not the only marks of an engaged learner or the sole signs of future success in business, civic leadership, or life. Our faculty and this college have made a longstanding commitment to the effort required to identify student potential and to provide the opportunity associated with that potential. It's harder to do, it takes effort, we need to get better at it, and it sometimes even looks a little messy, but we remain committed to providing that opportunity for students who are a "good fit" for Olivet College and what we stand for.

At the time of our founding, our curriculum was committed to the traditions of the liberal arts. A review of the *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of the Olivet Institute* of 1851, outlines six major areas of study: the classics in Latin, Greek and French; English, mathematics and science; moral and intellectual science; and a miscellaneous category that included subjects such as bookkeeping, the study of the constitutions of the U.S. and Michigan; and vocal music and art. Although it's evolved into a more contemporary form, our commitment to the development of students as well rounded critical thinkers, grounded in the liberal arts and sciences, remains. However, today's students and our society require that we also facilitate their development of the knowledge, skills and experiences to be successful in professional vocation and, in many cases, graduate school preparation. For many colleges grounded in a long liberal arts tradition, this migration has been difficult and far too slow. I'm pleased to report that this college is ahead of the curve. Now we're not fully there yet, but we have demonstrated our ability to develop programs which are strong in professional preparation, grounded in the liberal arts and sciences and integrated with our values-based commitment to *Education for Individual and Social Responsibility*. In this regard, we believe we can have it all, and that our students and greater communities will be the better for it.

So, while I've alluded to some of it, what does the future have in store for us? Since my arrival, our college community has been working to answer this question. We must do so, however, with an understanding of society, and the higher education landscape of the future and our place in it. It's clear that in the years and decades to come, students will be increasingly diverse, socioeconomically, geographically, ethnically, in faith, in age, and in their learning style and needs. The higher education marketplace of schools, colleges and universities will likewise present an increasingly diverse array of options. This has already begun and we see this evolving today with changes in state universities, community colleges, our private nonprofit colleagues, and the ever increasing emergence of for-profit colleges and schools. Elements of return on investment and curricular relevance to the needs of individuals and society will play an ever increasing role in the competitive market mix of higher education providers, not to mention in the minds and decisions of students, families and policy makers. Those colleges that determine and define correctly their core competence and distinctive place within this landscape will survive and thrive. Those who don't... won't.

So with this in mind, together we've begun to chart our course into the future. As we look toward the Olivet College of 2020 and beyond, we envision a future where the college:

Embodies in its curriculum and campus life our values-based mission of *Education for Individual and Social Responsibility* where success necessitates a responsibility to others and community.

A future where the college facilitates the vibrancy of campus and community life, where students are empowered and engaged learners; where we support a culture of diversity and global inclusion; where each person feels included, supported and respected; where we build community and have fun together; and most importantly, where faculty, staff and students want to be, live and learn.

A future where the college provides a unique educational opportunity, where students from a wide assortment of backgrounds and abilities succeed as engaged learners, and where “providing opportunity” is defined (not only by admission, but) by high graduation rates, graduate school acceptance or vocational placement of our graduates, and the social contributions of our alumni.

A future where the college facilitates through an international perspective the development of productive and responsible global citizens who think critically, communicate effectively, work well with a diverse array of others, and embody individual and social responsibility.

A future where the college ensures an educational experience that is strong in professional preparation within a contemporary liberal arts foundation and develops critical, independent thinkers who possess a strong ethical compass.

A future where the college prepares students for a rapidly changing, technologically-enabled global economy and society.

A future where the college is financially healthy and stable, and effectively directs financial resources at achieving priorities.

And finally, a future where the college has a regional and national reputation as a college that effectively prepares students to be not only economically successful, but to take responsibility to make positive change in their local and global communities.

This future holds promise for Olivet, not because we deserve it, but because with effort and focus on who we are and what we can become in service to our students and society we can achieve it. Much of our future is grounded in our past and present. But this doesn't mean we can simply do more of the same and then tweak around the edges. If we're to be successful, we must gain a clear sense of self, both of present and future. We must be able to articulate this clearly and with distinction, to ourselves and to the students and families who value what we are, what we do, and want to join us in this effort.

Those that have come before us have provided us with the foundation on which to build this future. Together, faculty, staff, students, board and alumni in partnership with our local and regional community can realize this future.

In closing, let me say, “thank you” to each one of you for choosing to join with us here today as we paused to reflect upon our past, present and future. As a good friend of mine likes to say, “You can't be nowhere doing nothing; you have to be somewhere doing something,” and you chose to be here doing this with us today. Thank you for coming and may God bless you and may God bless this great college.