

Olivet College
Opening Convocation President's Remarks 2013
Steven M Corey, PhD

Charting the Course to 2020 and Beyond: We Were There When...

As we open the new year, let me give a special welcome and recognize the Class of 2018, our first year students who are joining us for the first time. And, special congratulations to the Class of 2014, who are joining us for Opening Convocation for the last time! For you and the rest of your colleagues, the beginning of the 2013-14 academic year represents your chance to set new goals and reinvigorate long-standing goals; don't let this opportunity pass you by.

For Olivet College, as with society as a whole, we find ourselves in a period of tremendous transition. The economic downturn of 2008, which a friend of mine aptly termed "a blizzard storm" has in many ways cleared and moved on. Much like a blizzard, the aftermath has created a cleansed environment where many of our assumptions about the past and our views of the future must be revisited if we're to be successful going forward. Those organizations, like Olivet College, who have taken the opportunity to reassess their place in the world and to create a well thought out, intentional strategy that ensures relevance and meaning in this reimagined future, dramatically increase their chances to not only survive, but thrive in the years to come.

Setting the Stage

So, let me back up and take a moment to revisit for some of us, and introduce to others for the first time, where we are and where we're headed.

In early 2011 we began the process of assessing where we were as a college and where we needed to be in the future; not just the next year, or the next year, but in the decades to come. We recognized that the notions of "college" and "college student" now mean many things: traditional, non-traditional, classroom-based, online, MOOC's, community college, research university, liberal arts, for-profit, non-profit, 2-year, 4-year, public, private, adult-learner, vocational, commuter, residential. We recognized that as "college" and "college students" become more and more differentiated and segmented that the need to be clear about what kind of "college" is Olivet College and what kind of "college student" is a successful Olivet College student becomes more and more essential... critical even to the surviving and thriving future potential for Olivet College. In the end, we recognized and planted our stake on a future which insists that there remains a clear and compelling value for an intimate learning community where 18-24 year old students can be nurtured in a relationship-based educational environment which gives them an opportunity to become empowered and to tap their potential for success.

We know that Olivet College is... a total experience; active learning; a collage of classroom, dorm, and co-curricular experiences; relationship-based education; engaging; empowering; and developing of student potential. We also have acknowledged, and I want to emphasize this point, that the future of Olivet College is contingent upon ensuring that this is true... to the fullest extent possible... to our very core!

2020 and Beyond

Our plan, “Charting the Course to 2020 and Beyond” guides our way to this future. Many of you participated in the development of the 2020 and Beyond plan. Some of you are hearing about it for the first time. It envisions a future embodied by the attributes described on the banners here at the front:

*Where the college truly embodies **Education for Individual and Social Responsibility**.*

*Where the college facilitates the **vibrancy of campus and community life**.*

*Where the college provides a **unique educational opportunity**.*

*Where the college facilitates the development of **productive and responsible global citizens**.*

*Where the college ensures an educational experience that is **strong in professional preparation within a contemporary liberal arts foundation**.*

*Where the college prepares students for a rapidly changing, **technologically-enabled global economy and society**.*

*Where the college is **financially healthy**.*

And,

*Where the college has a **regional and national reputation**.*

Now I’ll admit, this is a bold plan. What we know is that the key drivers for success include: growing the enrollment from the current 1,150 to 1,800; increasing the residential culture and growing our on-campus residents from the current 650 to 1,500; continuing to improve our fiscal health; ensuring the quality of our curriculum; and demonstrating and clearly articulating the success of our students. And, I’m pleased to report, we’re making good, yet early, progress on each of these fronts.

Enrollment

In enrollment... the spring 2012 saw the largest graduating class in college history with this last spring almost matching it. Last fall’s class was the largest in college history and we anticipate

that this fall's class will settle out to be one of the largest of the last several years. Our emerging new admissions approach, being deployed this fall, will emphasize our academic programs like never before. This will not only allow us, but will by necessity require us, to understand them and articulate their quality and success in new and meaningful ways. I've had the chance to share this approach with admissions leaders around the country and, let me confirm for you, they're very interested in what we're doing and we have their attention.

Exciting increases in enrollment are being driven by our invigorated Global Citizens Honors Program, which is bigger than ever before. Last year's honors medalist Hailey Willet has been joined by Nate Petoskey from Constantine HS, this year's honors medalist. Hailey and Nate, we're glad you chose Olivet College. Exciting growth in the insurance and risk management program, the enhanced bands program, gospel choir, and lacrosse is also underway, just to name a few.

Another new and exciting program is our emerging boxing program under the direction of boxing instructor and alum, Loren Partlo who's bringing his passion and experience from his coaching at the US Military Academy back to his alma mater. I also want to recognize and give a special welcome to one of our new students, Claressa Shields. While in many ways Claressa is simply one of our typical new students, she brings unique skills and experiences with her to the college and our boxing program. For those of you who may not know, Claressa is an Olympian, but not just any Olympian. She's the only United States Olympian to win the gold medal in boxing at the London 2012 Olympic Games, making her the second youngest boxing medalist in Olympic history, for men or women. Welcome Claressa.

I'm also pleased to announce today that, for the fall 2014 season, Olivet College will begin sponsorship of men's volleyball, men's tennis, and women's bowling.

Residential Culture

In the area of strengthening the residential culture... in the fall of 2011, on campus housing was at 85% occupancy, the result of a multiyear decline in the number and proportion of students living on campus. One year later, last year, we exceeded capacity and had to add additional beds. This year, through substantial renovation of Long Apartments and a few other changes, we've added more housing and, again, we're full. Today, I'm pleased to announce, that this fall we'll begin the design process for new construction on Gillette Village Phase II, a \$7 million project which will house 165 additional students in apartment-style suites, hopefully opening in the fall of 2015.

Elsewhere on campus, if you haven't noticed yet, there's something missing; earlier this month, the old and closed Kappa Sig house was removed to make way for the new Kappa Sig house planned for that site. Fundraising is nearly complete and I'm excited about seeing a new house begin to go up in the months ahead. I'm also pleased to say that I've had conversations with several other Greek societies who are exploring options to acquire houses, an important part of a strong and sustaining Greek society and system.

Last year saw significant expansion and improvement in the College's fitness centers, both at the Cutler Event Center and the Laimbeer Fitness Center at Upton. On a related note, I'm pleased to make another exciting major announcement that design for the new Student Center will also begin this fall. The new Student Center, which will be designed with strong student input, is expected to include space for student life and organizations, food, and recreational amenities in an \$8-10 million project that will be done on the site of McKay Gym and in relationship to the Upton Center.

And, no comment on improving the residential experience would be sufficient without mentioning the fabulous \$1 million renovation and improvement of the Kirk Center dining hall.

Fiscal Health

Relative to improving fiscal health, I know that many students don't really think about this aspect. Let me assure you, what I do know is that you want your college to be strong and for your degree to have meaning for many years to come. No one wants to have a degree from a failing college or one that's no longer around. So, you'll be pleased to know that not only is Olivet College definitely still going to be around, but that it's strong and getting stronger. Part of this effort is continuing to try and keep tuition, room & board as low as we can, ensuring we're one of the very best values of any private college in Michigan. We're also evaluating our financial aid programs to determine what changes can be made that will better serve students in the future. We have a long history of providing a strong opportunity for low income and first-generation students and we want to make sure that tradition continues. You also need to know that the college is balancing its budgets, reducing its debt, and strengthening the endowment, most of which funds scholarships for students.

Quality Curriculum

To ensure a quality curriculum, the faculty have done tremendous work which will continue this year and in the years to come. They are to be commended for their commitment and willingness to look hard at themselves and at the curriculum and to make the changes necessary to ensure quality. For students, you need to know that this is happening and that your input and feedback is important and is heard. Specific examples include the change in the accounting program from a concentration to a major, as well as the new major in Business Analysis in Insurance. Over the last year or two this has also included significant quality improvements in the teacher preparation program, the initiation of the actuarial science program, and investment in the science labs, graphic arts lab, and other academic resources. The commitment to internships, co-op experiences, student-led research, or other experiential components related to post-graduation opportunities for every student in every academic program has also been made; and faculty are earnestly working to determine how to best implement this goal across our various academic programs.

Student Success

All of this is useless and meaningless without student success. And, we can't attract the students we need and deserve without an ability to accurately and effectively articulate the student successes we enjoy. I'm pleased to say, while we're always working to increase student success, our students are successful. Increasingly, others recognize this too. Once again, last year Olivet College was recognized by the White House as a member of the President's Community Service Honor Roll. US News has once again this year, identified Olivet College as one of the best colleges in the Midwest. And, Washington Monthly has for several years identified Olivet College as being one of the best colleges in the country at making a difference in the lives of the students and communities we serve.

Three specific student successes I want to mention today are Stephanie Craw, Katelyn VanMeter, and Lindsey Winters. Stephanie and Katelyn graduated last year and were President's Leadership Institute fellows. Stephanie was invited to and just returned from a prestigious art program in Florence, Italy where she studied art this summer at the Florence Art Academy. Upon her return, Stephanie told me she was highly competitive with the other art students from around the world and that her Olivet College experience was critical to her preparation. Katelyn VanMeter represented not only Olivet College, but all private college students, as one of only a few college students in the State invited to share the stage with the Governor at last year's Governor's Economic Summit. Lindsey, who I think is here today, has been named as the inaugural recipient of the Cutler Fellowship in math, science, and computer science, a great testament to her accomplishments and potential.

Lest you think I'm picking and choosing select examples to make a case for overall student success, I'm also happy to say, as I mentioned at last spring's graduation, Olivet College graduates students at 7-percentage points higher than would otherwise be expected. At the last graduation, this represented about 30 students who graduated last spring from Olivet College who would not have graduated had we been "the average college." That's substantial... especially for those 30 students. We also know that graduates at Olivet College do so on time, with 70% of graduates doing so in 4-years or less and 95% doing so in 5-years or less. With the cost of college and the lost earnings from being out of the post-college job market, the economic value of graduating on time is substantial. In short, there's no question that student success is strong at Olivet College.

Conclusion

So, in closing, I think we can all agree, there's good stuff happening at Olivet College. In fact, I'm a believer that we're part of the "we-were-there-when" generation; the generation of folks who will say at some time in the future, "we were there when... all those great things were happening at Olivet College." So let me challenge each of you... students, faculty, and staff... don't stand on the sidelines; get involved; help us to define the future of Olivet College. You'll be happy... and proud you did and later be able to say, "I was there when..."

Thank you... and have a great year!