

Opening Convocation 2018
President's Remarks
President Steven M Corey, PhD
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175 Years: Values, People, Conviction and Persistence

Let me welcome you again to the official opening of the 2018-19 academic year, Olivet College's 175th year!

To our seniors who will graduate this fall, great work, keep it up. I subscribe to a work hard, play hard philosophy. This is the time to work harder than ever at developing yourself into the successful citizen and young professional you're about to become. Work with intensity and with intent. Also, have fun and enjoy your final year as an Olivet College student.

To our new incoming students, particularly our freshmen, you're the graduating class of 2022. It's great to have you here; you're now members of a special community. Four years will go by fast, just ask the seniors. Take advantage of the opportunity before you; fully commit yourself, you won't regret it.

Today's Opening Convocation is the formal kickoff of our 175th Commemoration, which we'll continue to celebrate throughout the rest of the academic year and conclude at Commencement. So in commemoration of our 175th year, I'm going to talk today about our founding values, the people, and the conviction and persistence that shaped the college in the founding era and continues to do so today.

Now, many of us know our founding story, that Father John Shipherd, after founding Oberlin College in Ohio, came to the wilderness of Michigan in February of 1844 and founded Olivet College. We've heard, a number of times, that he was originally headed north of here to the Grand River Valley but stopped overnight at a primitive settler's cabin here on this hill. He then headed out the next morning for his intended destination, following the rudimentary game trails, got twisted around and ended back here, on this hill... several times. As a man of God, he determined that, since he kept ending up back here, it must be God's will that he found the college here, and named this hill Olivet after the biblical Mount of Olives.

Father Shipherd and our founders held a number of key values that they believed were essential in the founding of the college. Among them were:

First, that education, particularly higher education, is an essential key to success, for individuals and for society. Through higher education we can develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to be more than we otherwise could be.

Second, that all people should have the opportunity and access to a quality college education. Therefore, Olivet College was founded as the first college in Michigan to admit women and persons of color on a co-equal basis with white men. As if that wasn't radical enough, we also educated all students in the same classrooms and same curriculum. This doesn't seem unusual today, but in 1844 women and persons of color had limited college opportunities... and remember this was 17-years before the beginning of the Civil War and an estimated 88% of African-Americans were still enslaved across a vast swath of this country. Those colleges that did admit women and persons of color had separate curricula,

where white men were assumed to be capable of “real college” and others weren’t capable of the same achievements and therefore had a separate, lesser educational offering and experience. So, Olivet College’s commitment to equal opportunity was quite new and upsetting to many.

The founders were also committed to equal opportunity, regardless of economic status. In 1844, the vast majority of college students and graduates came from families of wealth. There were a very limited number of colleges and there were no need-based financial aid programs back then. But Olivet College’s founders made a different commitment, as was printed in the first Academic Catalog of 1846, “We wish to have it distinctly understood that the whole object of this institution is, has been, and we hope ever will be, the education of young men and women – especially such as are not rich in this world’s goods...”

As we know, these values of inclusion and a commitment to providing access to a quality education for all, regardless of gender, race, or economic status remain central to the college today, 175 years later. In many ways, we take it for granted. But one of our founders, Professor Ormel Hosford tells us in his remarks in 1884 when the college celebrated its 40th year, “Strong objections [by the legislature] were... made of two features of the proposed college. First, they had no sympathy with its manual labor character (interpret this to mean access for lower income students); and secondly, they were most decidedly opposed to joint education of the sexes.” Founder Reverend Ruben Hatch adds a third objection that he received loud and clear when he personally went to the Michigan legislature in 1845 to secure the college’s charter, “...I shall never forget the grand pro-slavery scorn with which the dignified legislator [who’s support the college must have] replied that the success of my petition [to get a college charter] would depend upon the question whether our enterprise had anything to do with the propagation of anti-slavery views, or not... After staying a few days in Detroit and using up all the money I had, seeing not the least prospect of securing a charter, I turned my face again toward Olivet.” He wouldn’t compromise the college’s values and was rejected.

Fourth, the college was founded on the value of doing good. As stated by our founding fathers and codified in our mission today, “...our hope is that our graduates will embody the divine art and science of doing good to others.” We recognize today, as our founders did in 1844, that a higher education provides great opportunity for success that otherwise simply wouldn’t be possible. But we also acknowledge that with this success, comes responsibility, responsibility to make a positive difference in the lives of others.

But holding a set of worthy values was not enough to found and sustain the college. Believing that what they were doing was right, just, and would lead to a better society was also not enough. It took conviction and persistence to carry it through, not just in 1844, but over the course of 175-years.

The initial founding was tough. Not only did the founding group travel from Ohio into the wilderness of Michigan to an isolated hilltop in the winter of 1844, but its leader, Father Shipherd, died within six months. Some decided to go home, back to Ohio. Most remained committed and stayed. Founder Ormel Hosford tells us that, “During the summer of 1844 the people had by great exertion erected the frame of a school building, but the almost universal sickness that prevailed put a stop to the work.” Thankfully, others came in the fall who had yet to contract the “malarial fevers” which ailed the founders to help complete the work, even in the midst of driving snow storms that winter. They worked on the college building all though that first summer, fall, winter, and into the spring while holding classes in a small cottage they had constructed, working furiously to finish in time for the first Commencement. But as Hosford states, “...a sad disappointment awaited the little community. [Just a couple of days before completion,] the building took fire and was entirely consumed.” But, they persisted and rebuilt it. A few

years later, repeat. It burned again. This happened several times in the early years, but again they would not be deterred.

The founding era was also one of scarce financial resources. Frankly, the college's founders had none. The first academic catalog states, "Poverty is our endowment. On this basis, sustained by diligence, perseverance, and faith in God, we have advanced thus far..." The founders also established a no debt policy. Hosford tells us, "The [board] passed a resolution that the college should not run in debt. The salary of professors was placed at \$400 (\$10,691 in today's dollars), but at the same time a vote was passed, that whatever deficiency there might be at the end of the year, it should not remain a debt against the college. This was necessary in order to carry out the previous vote. The teachers, it should be said, heartily approved this action." This means that in the years where there wasn't enough to go around, and payroll couldn't be met (and I understand there were quite a few in those early years), the faculty agreed to forgive the debt, effectively donating their service to the college and its students.

In 1849 S.F. Drury and his wife arrived from Otsego and was so inspired by the college's efforts that he pledged a gift to complete a college building if others would join him. Members of the faculty gave, local citizens gave, and Hosford tells us, "Many of the students, although poor, gladly contributed, even beyond their ability." These stories of faculty, local citizens, trustees, and students contributing of their time, talents, and treasure are numerous and persist well beyond the founding era.

As though forging a college out of the wilderness, overcoming sickness and death, fighting snow and ice, devastating fire, securing building materials and constructing buildings, opposition from a resistive legislature and prevailing culture set against the college's mission and values, and recruiting and educating students wasn't enough, a little event known as the American Civil War shortly broke out. As Professor Joseph L Daniels stated about those years, "[The college] was alike fortunate and unfortunate in the period of its birth. It was on the eve of national disaster that threatened the very overthrow of the Union. A few months later, and the question here as everywhere was not whether we should have a college, but whether we should have a country. [Olivet College] was therefore baptized in blood, and christened in the name of patriotism as well as religion... It sent many of its best young men to war, while but few [women] were left to graduate." We know that the first four classes of the college were composed wholly of women and that the first graduating class in 1863 were three women. The first man didn't graduate until 1867, and that class totaled only six students.

Today, at the beginning of our commemoration of the college's 175th year, we want to acknowledge and celebrate the values the college was founded upon, the people who have given of their time, talent, and treasures... and in some cases their lives, and their enduring commitment and persistence. Now my story telling today was of the college's earliest years, the happenings of the first 40 or so years out of 175. I could just as easily spoken about the most recent 40 years, 1978 to 2018, and it would have been the same message... different story, but same values, same giving of time, talent and treasure by the faculty and staff, trustees, alumni and friends, and students. And, the same commitment and persistence to the mission and success of Olivet College, not just for today, but for another 175 years.

My challenge to you today, as we begin Olivet College's 175th year, is remember. Remember that you are a part of the Olivet College community, a community with a long history of values that aspire to something greater than just ourselves and the society around us. Remember, that many have given of their time, talent, and treasure so that we can be here today, benefiting from the fruits of their labors. Remember, that our labors today, our commitment and persistence today, will determine our own

success. It will also determine whether the many others that will follow us will reap similar benefits tomorrow that we enjoy today. I, for one, am all in... are you?

Thank you. God bless each one of you and God bless Olivet College.