

New Student Orientation
Trabant Multipurpose Room
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Vice President for Student Life

Introduction/Acknowledgements

Good afternoon. I'm Michael Gilbert, vice president for student life. First, I want to add my welcome and congratulations to all those you've already heard today.

This was an extremely competitive admissions year and it's a credit to your hard work and talent that you're joining UD as members of the class of 2014. I hope you're proud of your accomplishment.

Parents, I also want to congratulate you on your student's success and thank you for entrusting them to our care.

The role of my division—the division of Student Life—is to support student learning on both sides of the classroom door and make every student's experience at the University of Delaware the best it can be. Student Life is responsible for directing the SHS, CCSD, Career Services, Student Centers/Activities, Res Life, Student Conduct and half-a-dozen other departments that promote student health, safety, personal development, and engagement.

We also work closely with students, staff, and faculty to lead campus efforts that build a diverse and stimulating living–learning community for all UD students.

Diversity/Path to Prominence

I'm excited to talk to you today about two things that we believe promote community development and student success. They are really important to this University—they're things we value and nurture; things we consider enormous assets—diversity and student engagement.

Diversity is important enough that it underpins the University's strategic plan—what we call our Path to Prominence. We released the plan a couple of years ago, outlining what we consider our most critical obligations and priorities. But before we ever got to any specific goals, we decided we needed to predicate them on sound principles—principles that would be present in everything we do here and serve as a **guide** and a **support** on our way forward.

There are five of those principles:

- There's **Delaware First**. UD is the flagship of higher education in Delaware, and “Delaware First” means we'll use the University's expertise and assets to benefit this state and its people.
- There's **partnership**, which means we'll work with other groups and institutions to build a strong economy and a strong community.
- There's **engagement**, which means we'll involve the University's students, faculty, and staff in the most compelling problems that confront us as a region, a nation, and a world.

- And there's **impact**, which means we won't rest until our work makes a real and significant difference close to home and around the globe.

The fifth principle is **diversity**.

I want to read to you what our strategic plan says about diversity at UD. It says "the University of Delaware will foster a robust educational environment in which all people **are** welcome and **feel** welcome—one that supports critical thinking, free inquiry, and respect for diverse views and values." It says that, "as a community, we will embrace diversity as an integral and vital part of everyday life and cornerstone value of our University."

The Benefits of Diversity

So why is diversity so important ... important enough to be listed alongside obviously essential things like engagement and impact? There are a lot of reasons.

Some have to do with our obligation to help students develop not just intellectually, but socially, emotionally, and culturally. We need to build an environment that encourages this kind of academic—and **personal**—growth, and gives you the skills you'll need to navigate what has become an incredibly complex world.

This isn't just for **you**—it's for **all** of us; it's for a better, more functional society—a society that's predicated on pluralism and that is, by nature, wildly diverse. Going into it, we encourage you to be open to different cultures, communities, and perspectives. To **learn** from them.

The exposure to different backgrounds and approaches can foster new ways of thinking about problems, new ways of imagining their solutions, new ways of making connections and communicating important or difficult ideas. This is what strengthens a community and the relationships within it. This is what encourages civic engagement and ethical action.

Of course, globalization has just strengthened the argument for embracing diversity. Our world has shrunk. Around the globe, borders are more porous, and corporations are multinational. Technology has made communication and commerce with even the remotest nations instantaneous. With global media streaming to our hand-helds, there **is** no country too far away.

Isolation is the exception now; interconnectedness and interdependency are the rule. And the learning curve in a global society is pretty steep. You need to be able to step into this world with the skills to navigate it, to communicate and collaborate effectively. Effective collaboration requires the ability to recognize the value in expressing different points of view.

Although your careers may seem a long way off, it's not too early for you to consider what employers tell us:

- That they need employees who are good at **communicating**—which isn't just speaking and writing, by the way. Employers consider good **listening** skills just as valuable.
- They want employees with effective **interpersonal skills**—the ability to relate to their co-workers, to inspire those around them, and mediate conflict.
- They want **leadership** skills—the ability to manage and motivate others.
- They want employees who can work on **teams** and find their way to a common goal.

- And they want employees who are sensitive to **multicultural differences**. Every office, every lab, every classroom and factory floor is a microcosm. Employers need professionals who can build relationships and rapport with people who look and act nothing like them.

Diversity at UD

Maybe this is all a little theoretical—the implications, a little far off or abstract. That’s okay, because there’s a much more **immediate** reason we value diversity so highly at UD: For the next four years of your life, we’re all in this together.

The University of Delaware isn’t reality TV. You can’t vote anyone off this island, extinguish someone’s torch or deny anyone a rose. Everyone’s in—your roommate, your classmate, your TA, your professor. Now we all have to **live** and **learn** together. We’re not going to do that well unless we practice civility, tolerance, understanding, and respect. As I mentioned before, we’ve made a fundamental commitment to ensuring that UD is a place where everyone is welcome and **feels** welcome.

And let’s be honest, “everyone” is a really big group of people—very **different** people, who bring with them different backgrounds, identities, opinions, and perspectives. It’s true the University of Delaware isn’t as racially diverse as some other universities, but diversity is trending up. One in five of your classmates is a student of color. And every year, that number rises. Students from 48 states and 77 countries applied to become part of this class. And our international students come from all over—Bahrain to Zambia, Kazakhstan, Korea, and Kenya. ... China, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Germany, Great Britain, Trinidad & Tobago.

But when we invoke diversity, we’re not **just** talking about race, ethnicity, or country of origin. Believe me, you’ll be encountering a **lot** more diversity than that. This University—**any** great university—is an incubator of ideas—a marketplace of thought and opinion, ideologies and, yes, agendas. There may be many you disagree with. There will be some that offend you, and others that make you uncomfortable.

But, remember, we **expect** healthy debate and respectful disagreement over intellectual, political, and social issues. If the issues are important, they’ll engender passion on all sides—those endorsing and opposing, and those who can find some compromise in between. This very disagreement has merit, as does the dialogue it prompts. A campus that values diversity will **cultivate critical thinking** and **support intellectual freedom**. A campus that values diversity will tolerate different opinions, and respect those who espouse them.

I won’t tell you this is always easy. It’s not. The civility principle was tested last semester at UD when a student-sponsored anti-abortion exhibit was erected on The Green, our main thoroughfare through central campus, right outside many of our classrooms. The exhibit equated abortion to genocide and featured some pretty graphic photos drawing the parallel. And as you might imagine, it prompted complaints from students, faculty, and staff members who were offended by the argument, or the images, or both.

We fielded a lot of questions, and talked through a lot of emotion. How could we have sanctioned this? How did the students get permission? Even those who told us they were pro-life asked why the group was allowed to display such provocative ideas and pictures.

And that's when we explained that ideas have value, even if they're in opposition with our own—maybe **especially** when they're in opposition. College campuses all across this country are crucibles, where ideas are debated and opinions tested. Our goal is to make UD a place where this can happen freely and constructively—for everyone.

Here's an example: In 2008, at the height of the presidential campaign, Bloomberg, one of the country's biggest media companies, called UD "the epicenter of politics." How many of you have heard that reference? It's fair, really. I think you all know by now that Vice President Joe Biden is a Delaware alumnus. But so are two other people who played huge roles in that election. David Plouffe was Obama's chief campaign strategist, and Steve Schmidt was McCain's. Both men are Blue Hens. And we're incredibly fortunate to enjoy a close relationship with them. They come to campus together, they talk politics and, of course, they disagree on some fundamental issues. But their frank and always-civil exchange has really enlarged our conversation about political ideas and strategies.

It was during the campaign that we began planning the launch of our Center for Political Communication. The Center explores how social and non-traditional media—like blogs, Facebook, and Twitter—are affecting the political process and civic engagement. It's the cornerstone of a much larger non-partisan public affairs/public policy effort here at UD. The non-partisan piece is important to us, because we want this Center to be inclusive of thought and people—not to polarize us, but to bring us together.

This exchange of ideas won't always be so courteous. In four years here, you'll probably encounter some inflammatory speech. But speech doesn't **have** to be civil, or respectful, or even accurate to be protected.

So, students, if you're exposed to speech that's bruising—or if certain language or views offend you—we **want** you to talk through your concerns. There are a lot of people and resources around campus that are here to help you through them.

We might ask you to counter the offending speech with more and **better** speech—speech that finds constructive ground, so that true discourse can begin. We also might determine that University policy and your rights have been abridged and, in that case, will discuss the resources and the administrative protocols available to redress your concerns.

Student Organizations

If you have strong opinions and interest that you'd like to express, we might suggest you get involved with a like-minded student organization. There are hundreds here drawing on a common cause or culture, a shared spirituality or religion, the same political affiliation. Believe me, these are some of the most dynamic groups on campus, and they're critical to helping us sustain this diverse environment.

There are organizations for Indian and Filipino students, Italians, Koreans, Germans, French. There are groups for Asian students, Hispanic students, African and African-American students. There are organizations for Baptists, Lutherans, Catholics, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Latter Day Saints, pagans. There's probably a group here for you. Republicans, Libertarians and Democrats each have their own group. If you come out to the Howard Dean/Karl Rove debate we're hosting on October 25, I'm sure you'll see a lot of them there.

There are a lot of groups vying for your attention and your membership. It **can't** be a bad idea to hear them out, and if you don't find a group that supports your interests, look into forming your own.

Student Engagement

Student organizations are a great way to get involved, even have some fun. And there's another pretty compelling reason to give them a chance. Decades of research show that students who are engaged—who are involved in campus organizations and clubs—are happier with their education than those who aren't. They have better GPAs, and they graduate at a higher rate.

This is true of students who talk with their professors and know them personally, who work with faculty on projects, or who get involved as researchers or assistants. It's also true of students who are in healthy relationships and have a cohesive peer group.

Students who do all these things are **connected**—connected to fellow students and faculty, to mentors and advisors, and to the campus community. And when you're connected, you don't just feel better about yourself and better about each other—you feel responsible for each other. Connection builds **cohesion**. It builds **persistence** and **passion**.

I think you know this already. You've been connected. You told us so on your applications and in your essays. You certainly weren't the students who bolted out of the building when the last bell rang.

- Nearly 8 in 10 of you were athletes.
- 7 in 10 were active in community service.
- More than half of you were in an academic club.
- 30% were musicians or singers.
- One in five was in student government.
- 12% were in theater; 9% were in dance.
- One out of every 10 entering freshmen was an editor for the school newspaper or yearbook.

I think it's safe to say this is **not** a disengaged class. You'll have a lot of opportunities here to continue these connections. And I hope you'll take advantage of them.

Not Everyone Values Diversity

I started out this discussion talking about the University's Path to Prominence, about the principles on which we based the goals.

Our very first goal is to create a diverse and stimulating undergraduate experience. This is how we describe it: "A University of Delaware education will ensure that intellectual curiosity and a passion for learning become habits of mind. The University will attract students who bring brilliance, talent, and life experiences—and who embody the ethnic, cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic diversity that's characteristic of great universities. We'll enrich students beyond the classroom with shared experiences and traditions that bind them to the University and to each other, and create pride in their alma mater." These values and aspirations go to the core of our mission.

But I don't presume that all of you buy into them. I don't **expect** it. I imagine some of you think we over-emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion. Certainly, there are faculty, staff and students already on campus who think the very same thing. **I get that.** The University gets that. We understand that not everyone will see the world this way. And we respect that point of view, too.

And so our valuing diversity cuts both ways. But, no matter how you view it – we **are** a diverse community: diverse in race, ethnicity, wealth, and address; diverse in sexual orientation and gender identity; diverse in thought, opinion, perspective, and purpose. And we **all** deserve tolerance, civility, and respect.

What to Do if You're Struggling

If **ever** you feel you're not getting these things—if you're having problems fitting in, if you feel shut out—don't keep it to yourself. There are plenty of people here to help. You can talk to your RA, or your hall director. You can talk to your faculty and the dean of students. You can talk to **me**. There's nothing unusual about it. Please, you should never feel too shy or embarrassed to ask for advice.

Because, for all our focus on getting students acclimated **academically** to college, it's the **social** acclimation you'll feel more in September. Your first impression of UD—of college, in general— isn't going to be made in the classroom. It'll be made in the dining hall, the residence hall, where you'll collide with maybe 600 other freshmen.

You already know how to “do” school. You wouldn't be here if you didn't. The lectures and assignments are more challenging than high school, but I doubt the experience itself will be earth-shatteringly different. Now, settling into your new home with unprecedented freedom, a home that's been crashed by hundreds of others—some who look like you and some who don't, some who can relate to you and some who can't—**that's** earth-shatteringly different.

It's **normal** to wonder about who your friends will be. It's normal to worry about whether you'll like your roommate, and whether he or she will like you. It's normal to wonder how others will see you and if they will help you find your place at UD. And it's normal to wonder what faculty, staff, and others students will do over the next four years to help you feel more welcome and included.

This is a major transition; it will be accompanied by excitement and anxiety both. But you're not alone. There are 3,361 other freshmen all around you wondering if **they're** cool enough, if **they're** accomplished enough—and they're on this path with us.

So, my final bit of advice for you to consider over the summer is this: An outstanding education is **available** to you at the University of Delaware, but it's not **required**. You will play the critical role in determining what you take away from this experience. I urge you to carefully consider your goals, engage fully in the life of the University, be open to new experiences, and express yourself while you're here.

And remember the confidence that got you here to begin with. I think you're going to have a great year.

Conclusion

We're really excited to welcome you to the University of Delaware. You're a Blue Hen now; and that **is** something special.

I know this has already been a pretty overwhelming day, and I thank you for your attention and patience. I'm happy to answer any questions you have.

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