

**“ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE:  
THE APEX OF THE LAND-GRANT VISION”**

Convocation Address by Dr. William B. Allen  
Charles James Daniel Gymnasium  
Virginia State University  
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Good evening. It is both a pleasure and an honor to speak at this University, which has the distinction of being the nation’s first “fully state supported four-year institution of higher learning for Blacks.” I suspect President Moore would quickly point out that the phrase “fully state supported” may not be as apt as it once was - if it ever were. For on numerous occasions in the University’s history, officers of the Commonwealth have placed obstacles in its path rather than greasing the skids. While historically black colleges and universities have often enjoyed public support, they have no less frequently had to fend off public indifference - or worse, public antagonism. Now that I know more of the history here, I see in a new light the ploy to portray me as an enemy to historically black institutions upon my initial appointment. One thing you may be sure of, though, is that a new SCHEV will greet the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one that supports the impressive accomplishments of President Moore in particular and HBCUs in general.

One of many strengths that President Moore has brought to Virginia State University is his understanding that colleges and universities today must look to private giving to sustain the level of excellence they seek. He is putting that awareness into action through his effort to build endowment funding. With friends like James Ukrop to aid in the effort, and with the support of loyal alumni and faculty, Virginia State is bound to succeed. Meanwhile, you can be assured that I will work diligently with the Council of Higher Education, the Secretary of Education, Governor Gilmore, and the General Assembly on budget reforms aimed to determine and secure for all of Virginia’s public colleges and universities the funding they need to do the job we have asked them to undertake.

The three individuals who will receive the Outstanding Faculty Awards this evening - Dr. Oliver Hill, Dr. Murel Jones, and Dr. Yaw Badu - remind us what is possible when that job is done well. I have taught for many years and I know that its most satisfying reward is the joy of seeing our students grow in intellect and character. But a little external recognition doesn’t hurt. Awards such as those that were given this evening also provide an opportunity for the entire community to acclaim excellence and to reaffirm our shared commitment to it.

President Moore has set “Excellence through Teamwork” as the theme for this academic year. It is a theme that strikes a responsive chord in my heart, as I hope it does in your hearts as well. It is a theme to which he has given more than just lip service. Since his arrival at Virginia State in 1993, he has steadily advanced a vision that demands excellence from students, staff, and faculty. His vision is to make academic excellence the “apex of Virginia State University’s restructuring initiative.” Advancing toward that vision has required tough decisions, hard work, and determination. Reaching that vision will entail dedicated participation by all members of the

extended Virginia State University family - students, staff, faculty, alumni, parents, and citizens of the local community and state.

The progress that you have already made in moving toward that vision is one of the success stories of higher education in Virginia. This story is not yet as well known throughout Virginia as it deserves to be. Virginians should know that your wise decision to raise admissions standards appears to have already resulted in greater numbers of students who return to Virginia State in their sophomore year. Your Summer Transition Enhancement Program - which SCHEV has supported financially as well as philosophically - offers a good model for other institutions seeking to assist students in making the transition from high school to college. The Meat Goat program demonstrates the success of a land-grant university in combining instruction, research, and public service. And, the renown of the Virginia State University Gospel Chorale shows that you will settle for nothing less than excellence in your co-curricular programs as well as in your academic programs.

I commend you for the progress you have already made and I urge you to continue on the journey. Academic excellence is an apex worth reaching. And, it is within the reach of every student here tonight.

The most important message I want to convey this evening is to challenge each of you to set academic excellence as the number one goal for your program of study at Virginia State. You can be confident that if you set excellence as your goal, there will be an entire team of faculty and staff committed to your success in reaching that goal. Think of them - as well as your fellow students - as your academic family who will challenge you to do your best and will support and encourage you in that aim.

President Moore has suggested that I talk with you this evening about my vision for higher education for Virginia. Academic excellence figures prominently in the landscape of this vision. You can glimpse an overview of my vision in three statements that might seem like paradoxes but which will, upon examination, reveal their truths.

First, my vision insists that access to education and excellence in education are compatible and equally essential goals. Second, my vision declares the value of a liberal arts education in preparing students for a lifetime of work as well as for the work of living. Third, while acknowledging that the value of education to individuals and society cannot be fully measured, I envision new ways for our colleges and universities to assess and articulate that value. I will elaborate on the first two of these statements in my remarks this evening.

Virginia State University embodies many aspects of this vision - both in your founding and in your current mission and goals.

As a historically black institution and as a land-grant university, your history is grounded in two important emancipations within American education. The nation's HBCUs tell an important story about the stunning rate at which ex-slaves, so soon after slavery, launched themselves into paths of education. The schools that followed - pre-collegiate and collegiate - grew at an unparalleled pace as long pent up energies and curiosities broke free. Within thirty years, we

went from virtually none to more than one hundred and twenty HBCUs - and America found students and professors to fill them. One such student was my own relative, Emma B. Delaney, who put the education she had earned to use in missionary service in Africa by the opening of this century.

The early success stories of these colleges were marred by the chapters written by the Jim Crow laws that followed. Although Jim Crow impoverished black higher education as it did so many other dimensions of black life, black colleges continued to offer students a wealth of learning. Throughout their history, and to this day, the black colleges of the United States have given more than just degrees to their students. As Samuel D. Proctor describes in his essay on "Land-grant Universities and the Black Presence," HBCUs have offered their students "dignity, overlook, overview, perspective and fortitude."

The story of Virginia State University, and of the other historically black colleges and universities of this country, underscores the value placed upon access to higher learning and its potential to transform lives. Virginia State's story is eloquently told in Edgar Toppin's history of the institution, titled *Loyal Sons and Daughters*. I want to thank Dr. Toppin and President Moore for their gift to me of a signed copy.

The story of the land-grant vision within American education is also a compelling one. Not yet fully realized, the educational and political ideals that shaped Justin Morrill's vision when he introduced the original land-grant legislation in 1857, can and should inspire us yet today. He modeled that Act on Michigan State University, where I last taught. In that post it was my good fortune to discover that the daughters and sons of ordinary American families could receive the benefits of a rigorous liberal education and flower into works of genius. In my present position I aim to realize the identical goal for Virginia's land-grant institutions, and that work must begin - I want to remind the General Assembly - by making Virginia State University a full land-grant partner to the renowned Virginia Polytechnic Institute.

Signed into law in 1862 -at a time when the United States was in the midst of a fratricidal war - the Morrill Act had three purposes:

First, to train the manpower needed in a swiftly developing industrial nation;

Second, to open up postsecondary education to those who were part of what was called at that time "the industrial class;" and,

Third, to guarantee that all classes of society had the opportunity to receive an excellent education. What was meant by an "excellent education" was the opportunity to pursue a liberal arts education rather than to be limited to vocational training.

Over 130 years later, these three purposes - workforce development, access to education, and quality of education - continue to be defining goals for higher education. Virginia State University has been dedicated to achieving these purposes from the time of your bold founding in 1882 through the addition of a land-grant purpose to your mission in 1920 and up to this day, despite encountering obstacles that have at times in your history blocked you from fully achiev-

ing the goals set for you.

The Morrill Act, which was amended in 1890 to provide support for black institutions, envisioned a curriculum that would combine “liberal and practical education.” There is a built-in tension between these dual aims that has at times been a source of conflict within the land-grant mission. This same tension has, at other times, been a source of creative vigor.

Maxwell Goldberg describes this “fruitful tension” as the “great ongoing dialectic between liberal arts and other educative components” within the land-grant system. He goes on to say:

In spite of this historical and logical contradiction ...the paradox ‘liberal and practical’ works in actual operation. It has proved an effective formula for implementing the great historical venture to which American higher education committed itself, namely, to combine the personal and social strengths and benefits characteristic of an aristocratic society at its best with the corresponding strengths and benefits characteristic of an egalitarian society at its best. This paradox is summed up in the Jeffersonian ideal of a natural aristocracy of character and intellect ...

This creative tension between what I will call liberal education and workforce development is found in nearly all colleges and universities today - in part because so many institutions of higher learning have incorporated the land-grant vision into their missions. The workforce development half of the equation has received much attention in the past two years. Virginia’s colleges and universities - including Virginia State - are responding to the call from business and industry to generate graduates with scientific and technical expertise. With the appointment of the Workforce Training Advisory Council, these issues will continue to shape the education agenda for Virginia.

SCHEV has recently undertaken a project that also places liberal education prominently on the agenda. We are conducting a survey about the goals, content, and outcomes of the general education programs of Virginia’s public colleges and universities and of the many private colleges and universities who have voluntarily chosen to participate in the survey.

Education that is worth its name lasts a lifetime and indeed develops one’s appetite and aptitude to become a lifelong learner. We do a great disservice to our students if we focus too much on developing specific job-related skills. These skills will have shorter and shorter half-lives as the rate of technological change continues to accelerate. For many students today, the general education program is their primary exposure to the aims and programs of liberal education. Through the survey, SCHEV seeks to surface a shared understanding of those aims. The aims certainly may, and should, vary from one institution to another. But these aims should be based on objective principles that may be judged by independent observers.

Developing this shared understanding of the aims for general education is an essential step toward raising academic standards. While we have never ceased to claim academic excellence as our standard, published research and our own experience tell us that American higher

education has experienced a decline in acceptable levels of accomplishment across broad subject areas. Restoring excellence as our standard will require a team effort within and across institutions.

Our first team is the faculty, of course, who own the curriculum and have the greatest responsibility for assuring the success of the educational enterprise. It is important for faculty to remember, however, that like physicians only a few years ago, they now experience pressures to reform that they dare not ignore. The physicians tried to ignore the fact that economic realities no longer could leave their god-like status unchallenged. Managed care filled the vacuum and imposed reform on them. Universities have undergone restructuring and performance based budgeting, but I do not know if professors yet realize that the reform process has only just begun. The public - and public bodies - still await demonstrated results from these processes. There is good news and bad news in this. The good news is that they are still waiting for us to do something on our own, and the bad news is that they are still waiting for us to do something on our own. Unless we are timely in responding, they may stop waiting and our fate will surely not be different from that of the physicians. It is up to the first team, the faculty, to assure that the whole team can move smartly toward controlling its own fate.

Within higher education, we recognize that the team needed to do this job extends beyond the college campus. We must work as partners with our colleagues in secondary and elementary education. But, we cannot wait for K-12 educators to reach their destination before we in higher education take our own steps. One step that SCHEV hopes to take jointly with our K-12 partners is the development of the Virginia Graduate Guarantee program. This proposed project is modeled on the Hanover County Public Schools' Graduate Warranty Program. As currently envisioned, Phase I of the project would create a structure and incentives for two Virginia public school divisions to guarantee that their high school graduates are ready for postsecondary education. In turn, Phase II of the project provides a structure and incentives for Virginia colleges and universities to guarantee the competence of the graduates of their teacher preparation programs who are employed to teach in public school divisions throughout the Commonwealth. You will be hearing more about this innovative proposal later this fall.

The most critical step we must take is to reconsider the demands we make upon our students - our expectations. I have learned through time that youths almost invariably respond to direct requests to perform at high levels. But I have also found that they must be asked, directly. It will not do to categorize and program them. One must rather, and quite literally, put before them the large ambition if one wants the joy of seeing their souls expand. I urge the faculty members who are here this evening to continue to demand the best from your students and to recommit yourselves to their success. Nothing has so much deflected us from the task of challenging students to perform at the highest levels than the fear of failure. More specifically, we have bought the false hope that to protect our students from the fear of failure would reinforce in them a feeling of competence. In fact, nothing builds the feeling of competence so much as the recognition of high standards and working tirelessly to achieve them.

To the students here, let me stress that your determination and diligence are at the heart of this team effort. Your academic success is the pinnacle we seek. You have already begun the ascent, or else you would not have arrived at this "University atop Fleet Hill." There will be obstacles in your path - temptations to party, to settle for simply completing coursework rather than completing it with distinction, to become frustrated if you do not meet with immediate success. Do not let those obstacles become insurmountable. You can find a way around them - and

there will be faculty, administrators, and fellow students who will help you to find that way.

Why do I encourage you to reach for these heights? I spoke before about the sheer joy we can experience when we set before ourselves a difficult challenge and then meet it head on. I shall never forget the first year student who failed my course, "What is Political Power," a course reported in a national publication as the "toughest" at Harvey Mudd College. So stunned was this high school "A" student with high SAT scores that he returned to my course the next year determined to pass. And he did so, with an "A" grade. Moreover, he went on eventually to undertake Ph.D. study in political philosophy under my guidance. He gives me the courage to urge a like resolve in you. And I encourage you to aim high for other reasons as well.

One reason is a concern for your economic well being. Study after study documents that, on average, college graduates earn a higher income than individuals who have not attended college. The economic prosperity of the nation and its citizens depends in large measure on the democratization of higher education that was fostered by the Morrill Act, the G.I. Bill, and the development of the community college system. Education, particularly higher education, has been the chief means by which families in this country have improved their lot in life from one generation to the next.

Concern for the well being of the Commonwealth and the nation is the second reason I urge you to aim high. You will be the civic and business leaders, the teachers and professionals, the artists and scholars, and the parents of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The education you earn at Virginia State can equip you to fulfill those roles with vision and compassion.

Finally, I urge you to aim high out of concern for the well being of your own mind and spirit. The best college education aims to support students in reaching toward universal aspirations that go well beyond securing a good job upon graduation. These aspirations include the pursuit of perfection, love of beauty, largeness of imagination, liberality of spirit, and devotion to justice and social responsibility. These aspirations have long been the goals of liberal education. They are the hallmark of the natural aristocracy of intellect and character that formed Jefferson's vision for education.

Jefferson's vision, however, was limited in this crucial aspect. While he saw talent and hard work - rather than inherited wealth or station - as the path to this aristocracy of merit, he envisioned that only a small portion of the population would enter it. I hold rather with the land-grant vision, which sets higher learning as a worthy goal for all citizens. It is a goal that we can reach through dint of individual and team effort and insistence on excellence as the apex of our effort.