Inauguration Remarks
President David W. McInally
March 14, 2014

I am deeply grateful to all of you for joining us today, and I am overwhelmed by the personal support--and more importantly, by the devotion to Coe College--that is in evidence here and around the world, wherever Kohawks and friends of Coe may be found.

We are honored by the presence of our guests today, including delegates from many of America's great colleges and universities, representatives from the higher education world and the Presbyterian Church in the USA, the Cedar Rapids community and region, the Coe College faculty, staff, trustees, alumni, parents, and friends. Because all of you love Coe and are devoted to our mission, I know that you will forgive me if I neglect you in my comments today, and address most of my remarks instead to the most important group of people here: Coe's students. After all, we are educators, which means that we can never resist an opportunity like this.

To the students of Coe College: you have welcomed and inspired me, and every day you remind us why we are here. You are the proof that Coe's mission matters. So I would like to say a few words about that liberal arts mission and what it means for Coe’s future.

You chose to attend a liberal arts college. The reasons are as numerous as the people present in this room, but I think we have a good sense of the broad themes that describe what you hoped to get out of this experience. You wanted an institution with a reputation for academic excellence, you wanted a supportive campus environment, and you wanted to be prepared for the next stage of your lives, including fulfilling careers and opportunities for graduate study.

But what does that mean for Coe?

What kind of college should Coe become if we are to provide an education of surpassing excellence in a future that is difficult to predict? In an environment defined by emerging technologies, a volatile economy, and expanding globalization—in a period now known as the information age—we must be as clear as possible about precisely what our mission is. And that begins with you.

There is no way to know for certain what our society will become two or three decades from now. I’m a member of a generation known as the baby boomers (I squeezed in at the tail end, for those who are calculating my age), and believe me, when I was young we did not know what today’s world would look like. We need to be nimble and responsive to changes in cultures, communities, and workplaces—but unless we want to blow with the wind, changing our educational paradigm with every trend that emerges, we must hang on to something. I believe that the liberal arts should provide that stable, deeply-rooted foundation.

The problem is that we don’t all have the same understanding of what liberal education is. Let me begin by opining on what it is not.

First, liberal education is not solely about breadth. Like many colleges similar to Coe, we tend to emphasize breadth because it’s inoffensive. Who doesn’t think it’s a good idea to learn about a
range of topics in the natural sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities? But the fact is that breadth—at least to the degree that it is defined by distribution courses across a range of disciplines—can be found at nearly all colleges and universities, including those that make no claim to liberal learning.

Second, liberal education does not equate to the arts and humanities. The national dialogue on higher education misses this point again and again. For example, in Malcolm Gladwell’s recent bestseller *David and Goliath*, he contrasts the job prospects for liberal arts graduates with the prospects for those with degrees in the STEM fields.¹ I worry about the future of liberal education when one of our society’s more provocative and influential authors doesn’t understand that the liberal arts actually include science, technology, and mathematics.

Third, liberal education is not defined by a particular set of academic disciplines. The liberal arts taxonomy has evolved over time as new areas of inquiry emerged, but the higher education community frequently becomes stuck in definitions that matter a great deal to the academy, but that are generally meaningless to society at large. When colleges and universities tie themselves up in knots over this question, it is a sign that we are worrying more about impressing one another than about our students’ experience. Let me illustrate with a point that hits close to home. Coe offers programs in some areas that the education world labels as professional training rather than liberal learning, including business, nursing, and education. But I guarantee that graduates of these programs at Coe are in fact liberally educated.

This is not the case everywhere, which suggests to me that liberal learning is influenced at least as much by how we teach as it is by what we teach. Great colleges have cultures that value teaching, that understand the relationship between teaching and research, and that are student-centered. By those measures, Coe may well be the greatest college in the nation. For all of you representing other colleges and universities today, I trust that you have similar sentiments about your institutions. In any case, that is how I feel about Coe College.

Finally, liberal education is not an arcane artifact forged in the ivory tower. It is actually superb preparation for success in the world beyond our campus, including the workplace. In a recent survey, employers reported that they are “highly focused on innovation as critical to the success of their companies,” and that they place a priority on “critical thinking, communication, and complex problem-solving skills over a job candidate’s major field of study when making hiring decisions.”²

Don’t get me wrong: I think that breadth and a grounding in the arts and humanities are essential components of any well-rounded education—the former for reasons I am about to explain and the latter because the arts and humanities point the way—with apologies to John Keats—to truth and beauty, and they guide us in making meaning and finding purpose in our lives. But since I have told you what liberal education is not, let me share my view on what it is.

The purpose of the liberal arts is actually straightforward and has been at the core of our enterprise since its founding: to prepare people for self-governance in a participatory democracy. It traces its roots to ancient Greece, where workers were trained in a single technical trade, while rulers were educated in a broad array of subjects, including languages, mathematics, literature, and art. In short, the purpose of liberal education is to preserve our freedom.
When the very essence of our way of life is on the line, the mission of colleges like Coe becomes something bigger than you may have imagined. It moves from an educational philosophy to a moral imperative. I am grateful to Professor Emeritus Al Fisher for introducing me to the work of James Freedman—an expert in liberal education with strong local connections—who believed that college “demands a commitment from each of its students to undertake a set of public responsibilities that will make this world a more just, more civilized place in which to live.”

Because many of you have grown up in democratic societies, you may take for granted that they are stable and will endure. That is a mistake. History is filled with examples of free people whose liberty was lost, and there is no evidence that our democratic experiment is divinely appointed. You must fight to keep it, and you must fight to create a society that is just, that is sustainable, and that values the health and prosperity of all people. No matter where you are on the political spectrum, no matter what your beliefs about the issues of the day, liberal learning is the one proven strategy for preserving freedom and advancing our society.

New presidents are often asked to share their vision for the institution. Mine is grounded in this philosophy: that providing a liberal education of surpassing excellence is a sacred mission essential to the health of our democracy. We have taken the first steps with our new strategic plan, but the truly transformative opportunities for our educational program still lie before us. We will develop them together, but first I would like to share a general principle that should define our work in the coming years.

Quite simply, the time has come for Coe to scale the dizzy heights.

We must affirm our place as a national, residential liberal arts college, we must innovate in our academic and student life programs, we must be genuinely and deeply engaged in our community, and we must prepare all students for success in a diverse global society where information is the coin of the realm. We will climb to these dizzy heights despite our fears, limitations, or disagreements. We will do so because we believe that liberal education is the first and best hope for a peaceful, sustainable, and prosperous future for America and the world. We will scale these dizzy heights together, until (in the words of songwriter Neil Finn) “we’re ascending higher and higher each day and there’s no turning back.” We will do this because excellence in liberal education matters.

With such lofty goals, such important work to do—where does a presidential inauguration fit in? We take note of events like this because it is convenient to group periods of time into presidential administrations, but this is not the most important moment in the life of Coe College. Let me tell you what is.

The most important moment occurs when a sleep-deprived faculty member chooses not to tear herself away from the computer at 1:00 a.m., because she can’t track down the perfect video to convey a concept she plans to address in class the next day.

The most important moment occurs when a student who has never left the Midwest summons his courage and walks down an airport concourse for a May Term abroad, wondering all the while why he signed up for this.
The most important moment occurs when two parents exchange sighs as they open the tuition bill, choosing to postpone a long-awaited vacation in order to support their daughter’s Coe College education.

The most important moment occurs when a faculty member asks you a difficult question, and a new dimension of your intellect springs into being—one that integrates knowledge from multiple courses and experiences, one that is curious and alive, one that will solve problems we haven’t imagined yet.

These moments—or others like them—take place every day here at Coe. We can’t have an event to celebrate each one but it is important for you to know that we know about them. In the meantime, although I pointed out that this inauguration is not the most important moment in Coe’s life—I want you to know that it is the most important moment in mine.

For that reason, I am deeply grateful to all of you for being here. I take immense pride in introducing my old friends and colleagues to my new ones. I would like to call particular attention to the three presidents with whom I have worked: Dan Sullivan, Richard Cook, and Jim Mullen. I am pleased that you had the chance to hear from Richard today, and I invite you to join me in congratulating Jim, who earlier this week was elected Chair of the Board of the American Council on Education. They are my mentors and they taught me through word and deed how to do this job. Little did I expect that coming to Coe would also offer me the opportunity to acquire a fourth presidential mentor, but Jim Phifer has become exactly that and his presence here today means a great deal to me. I am keenly aware of how privileged I am to follow him, and how fortunate I am to have joined a college with such a talented faculty and staff and dedicated board of trustees. On behalf of all of these people, I assure you—our students—that (if I may borrow from the book of Hebrews) you are “surrounded by a cloud of witnesses,” and if you recall only four words from today’s ceremony, let it be these: we believe in you. We believe in you.

For those who have supported me for years and who have traveled a great distance, my gratitude knows no bounds. For the members of the Coe College and Cedar Rapids communities who have welcomed Janice, Will, Susannah, my mother Barb and me so warmly—you are why I have full confidence that Coe will indeed scale those dizzy heights.

May God smile upon Coe and all who love this College. Thank you.


