



NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURATION SPEECH
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Thank you so much for being here, when we both honor the bold vision of our founders AND look ahead to the exciting future of New College. I am filled with gratitude today: to the search committee, the Board of Trustees, and the Board of Governors for giving me this opportunity; to my family—my mom and my husband Dr. Richard Edging for joyously embarking on this unexpected adventure, and to our grown children, our “living proof,” Kate and Jack for cheering us on; and to the faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community members for welcoming us so warmly. I also want to add a special thanks to the planning committee for today’s event and to the grounds crew for preparing this beautiful setting.

I am honored to serve as the sixth permanent president of New College of Florida, an institution founded by citizens from Sarasota and Manatee counties who loved the artistic and intellectual vibrancy of their community. It was, they said, a college town without a college. These were visionary people, not content with replicating someone else’s success. As a community, they wanted something New.

Rejecting lock-step curricula that dampened curiosity, our founders and the early faculty members designed—in curriculum and the physical campus—a college that emphasized undergraduate research, creativity, and independent thinking. Defying educational conventions, they encouraged risk taking and what we would now call a growth mind set. Their goal—and ours—was to nurture true innovators able to see new and better ways of doing things, new solutions to our most pressing challenges.

This visionary commitment to a liberal arts education of the highest caliber was renewed in 2001, when Florida welcomed New College into the State University System, now the top ranked system in the nation. Never having to choose between the highest quality education and affordability, Florida students can attend, to name just three options, a top five research university, the nation’s top historical black university, and, yes, a top five public liberal arts college (among more than thirty).

Higher education has changed dramatically since New College was founded. Many universities rely on large lecture classes in which students follow a standardized curriculum and have little opportunity for shaping their own education.

Here at New College, we do things differently, not to be unconventional for its own sake, but because we know the power of our founders’ vision. We understand that developing the next generation of innovators is as needed now as ever. As we consider today the

future of New College, I want to return to a challenge left by our founders. they specifically charged every generation to ask: What is New about New College?

I have three answers to that question.

First, New College empowers students as individual learners. The two key ingredients to this amazing curriculum are curiosity and challenge. Here at New College, students are expected to find their passions, to be curious, and to take an active role in their learning. We don't believe in a "one size fits all" approach to learning. Curiosity isn't a tagline at New College. It guides everything we do.

And because our mission is to nurture these individuals to their full potential, we need a much more sophisticated way of assessing student learning. Here, the focus isn't on meeting some arbitrary number or letter. It is instead on ensuring that each individual learns how to learn.

In comparison with many other honors colleges, we also have a very different understanding of challenge. Like virtually all honors colleges, we proudly describe our curriculum as challenging, but ours is of an entirely different sort. The point isn't to "weed out" students or to create arbitrary distinctions between gifted students and the rest. Here, students find challenges that they are passionate about, and our curriculum is structured so that they build their skills and confidence in tackling these challenges. In the process, they learn for themselves what they are capable of and develop the resiliency that will enrich their entire lives. If our curriculum were easy, our students would never realize what they are capable of. And, unlike many schools that offer such opportunities to a select group of students, often only in their last year, we provide this education to every New College student from the moment they arrive on campus. This combination of self-directed learning and challenge empowers students, and I have seen its effect in virtually every interaction I've had with alumni. You are a bold group of individuals who have developed, over time, a confidence in your ability to do hard things, even things that other people see as impossible. As an educator, a marathoner, and, yes, someone who loves to pick up heavy barbells, I admire this quality of New College alumni.

So, yes, I know that New College is still new because we empower students as individual learners.

But that is not the only way that New College is still new.

We are also as new as ever because New College embraces the power of relationships and community.

I know that learning, good learning occurs at large universities dominated by large lecture halls.

But that is not the kind of learning we aspire to here at New College.

Again, we do things differently because ours is a different vision. Our purpose is not to produce the largest number of graduates but rather to nurture those innovators with the biggest impact. And to achieve that kind of innovation, we remain committed to a different level of learning. We understand the conditions that make deep learning possible. Long before neuroscientists identified the crucial role of relationships in human learning, New College's founders understood that learning of the highest order occurs when we feel supported and loved, when we can take risks and be vulnerable. It is then—and not in times of great anxiety and stress—that our brains are most receptive to new ideas and new ways of thinking. This isn't about having a “soft” approach. It is, quite simply, how humans learn.

This focus on authentic human relationships is one of the most profound stories that New College has to tell. At a time when more and more universities move large numbers of students through classes without any real opportunity for 1:1 faculty engagement, New College has never wavered from the authentic relationships among our faculty, students, and staff that are essential to learning.

In the eight months that I have served as president of New College, I have asked many of you to share with me your “New College story.” These are inspiring stories of the power of human relations, stories of a staff member who taught a struggling student to become a brilliant writer, a faculty member who nurtured intellectual potential that had never before been recognized, a fellow student who encouraged someone to take a risk and do that crazy ISP they were dreaming about. You have told me stories of coming back to campus after decades away and being recognized, immediately, by a beloved professor. And you have told me stories of life-long friendships that continue to enrich your daily lives.

Here at New College, these relationships extend beyond personal connections. Many colleges of liberal arts and sciences are seen as intellectual retreats, cut off from the rest of the world.

Again, we do things differently at New College because we have a different, bolder vision of nurturing the next generation of innovators.

Our campus extends far beyond our physical perimeter. Through coursework, internships, independent studies, and senior thesis projects, New College students are engaged community members, conducting research in Sarasota Bay and Manatee River and contributing to many of the finest assets of our community, including the Multicultural Health Initiative, Mote Marine Lab, the Ringling Museum, Visions of the Black Experience Film Festival, Unidos Now, and so many more.

We are small but mighty because of the extraordinary support and partnership we receive from this amazing community.

So yes New College is still new because we embrace the power of relationships and community.

And I have one last reason why New College is as new as ever: New College produces innovators and solutions.

In the more than forty years I have been in higher education, I have never seen an intellectual community so devoted to solutions as New College. The foundation for this solution-based approach is, I'm convinced, our unique way of assessing student learning. I see this focus in student efforts to revise our policy regarding certain herbicides and to introduce legislation on mental health issues and food insecurity. I see it in Staff Council's community building efforts, the care that our Black History Month Planning Committee took in creating this year's programming, and the generosity of our donors who know the transformative power of student scholarships. I see it in the amazing array of Independent Studies and theses projects that our students design and complete, whether that be the beautiful new mural that students created in Ham Center or the bold production of a gender-inclusive play performed just a few weeks ago right around this corner.

New College also produces innovators. The creativity of New College alumni is simply astounding. You have founded transformative nonprofits, developed new technologies, opened up new areas of research, and led innovations in everything from finance and banking to education and community development. You've advised presidents, led international organizations, and created art that has transformed individuals and communities.

You've also launched a staggering number of new businesses. I confess I did not see this pattern when I first arrived at New College. But then I met one New College entrepreneur and then another and then another. Now I understand. Of course New College produces entrepreneurs: what else would you expect with a curriculum that nurtures curiosity, encourages risk taking, and develops resiliency in the face of challenge?

New College is rightly proud that, per capita, among public institutions in the US, we are the largest producers of students who go on to get a PhD in STEM disciplines. This attests to our success in developing original thinkers and researchers. But I wish we also had a data point for per capita production of entrepreneurs. My hunch is that we might lead here as well.

So yes, New College is still new. But what about our future? Where are we headed? How do we ensure that in another five or ten years we can still proudly proclaim what is new about New College.

My vision for New College's future is to realize—to fully live up to—the vision of our founders.

As I look around at the students and alumni of New College, I know that much of our founders' vision has been realized.

Still there is more work to be done to fully realize the vision that is New College. I want to close today with two specific challenges as we embark on this next chapter of New College:

First, we must continue to become an inclusive community where all independent thinkers and innovators eager to learn in an engaging academic environment experience a strong sense of belonging. Our founders understood issues of equity, but they did not see the rich diversity of our state and our nation today. Our NEW vision for New College is to bring their vision into the 21st century, to ensure that our students, faculty, and staff reflect the beautiful population of our state and our nation.

But it is not enough to focus solely on diversity. We must foster a sense of belonging—for all. For example, we must ensure that the Black and Brown members of our community experience a powerful sense of belonging here. We must make sure that our policies and processes create an environment where our LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff can thrive. We must ensure that our neurodiverse community members and people with disabilities and people with mental illness know that they are valued for the essential contributions they make. We must develop new programs to create solutions to the national challenge of young men turning away from college education, while also continuing to work for gender equity. And we must ensure that people from all sides of the political spectrum are welcome here not as visitors, but as valuable, respected, and necessary members of our community. Why is this our first charge? Because talent and creativity are not confined to any one demographic. If we truly seek to produce the next generation of innovative leaders—and we do—we must ensure that New College attracts talent from our entire community.

Second, we must challenge ourselves to fully realize the transformative power of integrating career education with a challenging honors curriculum. Our founders—ahead of their time as ever—specifically called for “career and work experiences” that would be integrated into the academic program. We have much to be proud of here. We have invested in curricula that meet our state’s most pressing needs, including computer and data science, environmental science, and health and humanities, to name just a few. Every student at New College is paired with a professional career coach before they even arrive on campus, and our career education curriculum builds over four years in a full collaboration between our faculty and team of career educators. We also have launched an incubator for student entrepreneurs and a mentorship program that links students with industry professionals. And thanks to the support of local and national philanthropic organizations we have a thriving internship program that starts with asking our local partners what their top workforce needs are. These efforts have already received multiple national citations for excellence.

But there is even more we can do: Our goal with internships, for example, is to have 100% of our students to have at least one for-credit internship before they graduate, as internships are a key predictor of career success, especially in the first year following graduation. We also need stronger, deeper relationships with employers. Given our strengths in producing entrepreneurs, we also must do more to connect with young people, both in our community and beyond, who want to develop their entrepreneurial passions. And we need more discussion of how we, as the state’s designated honors college, play a key role in Florida 2030, our state’s ambitious plan to grow Florida into a top ten global economy. We will never have the volume of graduates that our sister SUS universities

produce, but our focus on producing innovative leaders is a necessary piece of the state's bold plan for the future.

If we take these two challenges together—becoming an inclusive campus that provides a sense of belonging for all and also fully realizing the integration of career and academic education—it is exciting to imagine the thriving New College of the future: a New College community of students, faculty, and staff that reflects the diversity of our state; a re-energized bayfront and an even more robust residential experience that helps students to thrive in body, mind, and spirit; places and opportunities, on and off campus, for students to interact with community members and employers; and a curriculum that ensures that every student understands how their academic passions and skills can address our nation's most pressing challenges.

In just a moment we are going to proceed to our beautiful bayfront, where we will celebrate and renew our commitment to this wonderful New College community. It is a fitting place to do so. From this view we can see the Sarasota and Manatee counties that birthed us into existence and continue to nurture us every day.

As we do so, let us all remember the delicate balance of “I” and “we” that is the foundation of New College. New College was founded on a bold vision of the power of independent thinkers to have a transformative impact on our community, our state, our nation. This “I” and “we” is in our DNA.

Some may say that it is an audacious idea to think that a school our size can make the world a better place. But if I have learned anything in the last eight months, it is that the size of a school does not predict the size of its impact. Having met so many of you bold New College thinkers, I am filled with great promise and hope, not just for our college, but for a world that desperately needs solutions, relationships, and innovators. Thank you for welcoming me into this audacious community. Thank you for keeping New College new.