



Speaking of DUKE

Leading the 21st-Century University
RICHARD H. BRODHEAD

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RICHARD H. BRODHEAD

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PREFACE

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From 2004 to 2017 I had the honor to serve as president of Duke. It would be hard to name a more interesting job. First, there is no overstating the miscellany of a university president's work. In no other post could you have the responsibility to recruit a dean of engineering, a chaplain, a football coach, and a leader for a massive health care system, while being ready to talk with any student who walks through the door.

To increase the interest, it's the special nature of universities that they focus the deepest hopes and most perplexing challenges of our culture. In many ways, the first years of the twenty-first century were a bright time for higher education, especially in private institutions. Financially there was some margin for investment (never enough), so these years allowed for renovation, innovation, and experiment. But as they advanced in some directions, universities found themselves facing new forms of difficulty in these years, Duke along with every other.

Unlike the previous great period of expansion for universities in the 1950s and 1960s, in recent decades prosperity has been much more unequally distributed, such that even when gifts from generous donors have run high, access and affordability have grown more challenging. After the Great Downturn of 2008, the cost issue was compounded with another challenge. Suddenly even well-educated people were asking, Is it really worth it, this mysterious thing colleges provide? As rarely before, universities needed to defend the most elemental assumptions of the education we offer—but it would not do to just stay in place. While preserving the best of tradition, universities have needed to re-create their programs for new times, having the courage to change while resisting facile nostrums of reform.

All the while, there were other challenges on the horizon: how to accommodate the increasingly global world our students will live and work in, to name just one. Meanwhile old questions took challenging new forms. Having opened their doors to excluded groups many years

ago, universities now wrestle with the question of how to achieve the deeper integration—the full measure of inclusion for all and the optimal enrichment of each *by* all—that more diverse campus communities could deliver.

These are questions university presidents wake up to every day. The point is, there is no picking and choosing among them. Approaches to such issues need to be endlessly recalculated in changing campus situations, with dozens of audiences to listen to and coax along and without forgetting our basic mission: advancing knowledge and unleashing human potential.

If you are the president of Duke, the job has a further interest. It's different being president of Duke because Duke is just a very different kind of place. Having come here as an outsider and having looked every institutional fact in the face for thirteen years, I still find Duke's mythology to be substantially true. The youngest of America's top universities, Duke still has some of the spirit of a start-up. Compared to other leading universities, Duke's culture is deeply communal, broadly collaborative, and quite receptive to innovation.

At a school with that temperament, you would not escape a single one of the hard facts of higher education at this time. But you would have some prospect of working together, answering questions in new ways, striving to create the version of education that will yield the fullest benefit for individuals and our society today.

This book is a chronicle of my work as president of Duke—not in the sense that it lays out all the tasks I was enmeshed in but in that it registers my attempts to work through the challenges and opportunities higher education confronted during my years in office. The book is a series of talks. Each originated as an actual person speaking to some particular set of people gathered for some particular occasion. As such, the pieces mean to underscore the fact that, however complex and cumbersome universities may appear, at their core they are places of personal interaction and personal exchange. I call the book *Speaking of Duke* because, as I have come to understand, speaking is not an ornamental or incidental part of the president's work. Day by day, a president will be involved in a greatly varied mix of activities, but the job that is the president's before any other is the job of voicing the ambitions of the university, enlisting

others to share those ambitions, and proposing new ways those ambitions can be fulfilled.

The talks come in a variety of genres. The convocation addresses were addressed to freshmen as they arrived at college, uncertain how to make use of this strange new world. The baccalaureate addresses were delivered to students as they prepared to graduate, uncertain about their new life and how a Duke education would assist them. At Duke the president gives an address to the faculty academic council every year on major issues before the university. I include samples of this genre, speaking on financial aid, international strategy, race, athletics, urban revival in Durham, and a host of other topics.

Increasingly as my Duke career went on and especially after I chaired the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, I spoke to national audiences on liberal arts education and the too easily ignored value of my own specialty, the humanities. Several of those pieces are included here. Two talks were given at institutions very different from Duke where I had the honor to be the commencement speaker: Fisk University, one of the country's oldest historically black universities, and Miami Dade College, arguably the most diverse and democratic institution of higher education in the United States.

A sad but important work of the president is commemorating people who created the university through the devoted exercise of their gifts. Three pieces here honor three Duke giants: John Hope Franklin, Reynolds Price, and Mary D. B. T. Semans.

I first thought to arrange these pieces by genre, but I came to believe it more revealing to order them as they appear here, gathered by the year in which they were delivered. In effect the book is a chronicle, registering highlights (and occasional lowlights) of successive years, while allowing the reader to see how issues entered the consciousness of the university and played out over time—as the 2008 financial crisis reverberates across genres here for a period of several years.

I am the speaker in these pieces, but they are not about me. The story is of an ambitious university navigating its way forward through difficult currents in ever-changing weather. I hope, however, that a few things will be clear about the author: how grateful I remain for the privilege of serving

Duke, how engaging I found the challenges of this job from first to last, and what confidence I have that Duke will continue to flourish long after I have passed the baton.

Finally a few words of thanks. A university is the collaborative labor of thousands of faculty, students, alumni, and staff. I offer thanks for the inspiration and good company of all who shared my adventure at Duke. They are far too many to name, but my gratitude is no less for remaining tacit.

There are a few people I must single out for special mention. My closest daily associates in the Office of the President were Lisa Jordan, my executive assistant; Richard Riddell, my chief of staff; and Carolyn Gerber, my special assistant. Their invisible hands helped with every good thing that happened during my term of office. I thank them for their loyalty and support.

A group of extraordinarily talented administrators were my partners in leadership over many years. Many of Duke's most promising initiatives had begun when I arrived; most bore the mark of Provost Peter Lange. Peter continued as provost for ten years of my presidency, serving with an unrelenting energy and creativity to which all Duke is in debt. In my final three years, Sally Kornbluth brought a different temperament but the same high quality of intellect and leadership to the role of provost. Utterly unruffleable, always able to see a way out of even the most daunting problem, Sally taught me a phrase that had never been in my vocabulary before: "It'll be fine." Thanks to her, it usually was.

Victor Dzau agreed to leave Harvard and take the plunge as chancellor of health affairs at Duke shortly after I agreed to take the plunge from Yale. He was a brilliant and imaginative leader to the half of Duke that lies in the Health System, and he remains a good friend. When Victor left Duke to head the Institute of Medicine, it was my good fortune to recruit an outstanding successor, Gene Washington, whose warm humanity and acute strategic sense will lead Duke Health forward long into the future.

Tallman Trask, who has served as executive vice president for more than twenty years, saw me through my entire presidency, handling every issue of university finance and construction (among many others) with a mix of integrity and ingenuity that remains a wonder. The Duke we know would not exist without the intelligence of Tallman Trask.

Invisible in their effect on campus but absolutely critical to Duke's success have been the men and women who served as university trustees. No university has been more fortunate in its board. Totally devoted to Duke and deeply appreciative of faculty and student talent, the trustees I served with have supplied this university with wisdom, judgment, all manner of expertise, and many forms of support. I could not have asked for better partners or friends. I will name my five board chairs as my way of thanking all my trustee colleagues: Pete Nicholas, Bob Steel, Dan Blue, Rick Wagoner, and David Rubenstein.

My last mention is of a person I met in a university in our early twenties who, to my endless good fortune, has been my partner and companion in everything my adult life has contained. This is my wife, Cindy Brodhead. We took on this job as a joint commitment, and she has more than done her part. Duke has no more ardent fan.

I became who I am thanks to my experiences as a student, and, such is my luck, my education has never stopped. I have embraced every part of the president's vast portfolio, but the heart of my work has been serving the primal mystery by which minds are awakened and discover their powers. In that expansive sense of the word, I dedicate this book to the students of Duke University.

Durham, North Carolina
September 4, 2016

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Remarks on Being Named President of Duke University

Perkins Library, December 12, 2003

I thank you all for this exceptionally warm welcome. When you know me you won't often find me at a loss for words, but you'll pardon me if I'm a little overwhelmed. This is one of the great moments of my life.

Let me tell you a true story. I had been brought down to Durham, in thick disguise, for a final stealth interview last Friday, and since there was a blizzard going on where I come from, my trip home was complex. I could only fly as far as Washington, and in my circuitous journey from that point forward, I had a long cab ride. The cabbie, an Afghan immigrant, was very affable and interesting, and we fell to talking. After a while, he said, "If you don't mind my asking, what do you do?" "I'm a college professor," I told him, in my usual discreet and unrevealing way. Without losing a beat he replied, "Oh! It's the dream of my life that my daughters will go to Duke."

Hearing this was like getting an electric shock. This man, a total stranger and random specimen of humanity, could have had no idea where I was coming from or what I had on my mind. But Duke was in *his* mind, though he had absolutely no connection to it, and on his mind as what? A name for something excellent, a name for something to aspire to, a name for a place that would open the door to knowledge and all the life opportunities that education can provide. I hope that man's daughters do come here. But you know what? By the time I was in that cab, it had also become my dream to attach myself to this university and

all its meanings and promise. Lucky me! It came to pass. I've been admitted to Duke, and I'm coming.

This has been a big decision for me, as big as any in my life. Let me say a word about how I came to it. I was not restless. I was not looking for a job. I've had a wonderful life at a great institution. I may be America's least disaffected employee. Yale has been a great place to teach, my first and most abiding passion; also a great place to do my scholarly work and pursue my intellectual life; and my current job has given me a thousand challenges and opportunities for what I care for most: strengthening the work of education. When I was first contacted by your committee, however, my curiosity was piqued. Duke is one of the handful of top universities in the world, after all, and if I went anywhere, it would only be to somewhere like that. So I entered into discussions, and under your committee's skillful tutelage, I came to have a clearer and clearer sense of this place. You already know it, but let me try to tell you what this stranger and outsider saw.

First, Duke is a university with the feel and human scale of a small school but the intellectual resources of a big school, with a college anchoring a full array of outstanding professional schools. Second, and this is rarer than you may recognize, Duke is a university whose different schools and centers and departments not only coexist but actually interact, and even like to interact. I've been to a lot of universities in my day, but I've never been to one where there was such a powerful sense of interschool and interdisciplinary collaboration and of the special dynamism such interactions can breed.

Third, and I felt this very powerfully, Duke is a young school that has managed to raise itself into the top ranks in a fairly short time but that manifestly continues to rise and to want to rise. When I took my stealth tour, I loved your campus, which is so beautiful in a traditional way, but what I really loved was the coexistence of tradition and heady forward progress: all those cranes towering over the Gothic buildings, saying that the building phase at Duke is something of the present and future, not just the past. I was particularly floored by those great modern research facilities hidden just behind the West Campus quad. They show that this is a school capable of having major aspirations and seeing them through—plus, at Duke all that scientific and medical research activity

is right next door, where undergraduates can feel its energy and get in on its excitement, not miles away in a separate kingdom.

In the same vein, I found Duke a school with a strong sense of priorities for future improvement, priorities to my mind quite brilliantly articulated that are proof of your faculty and administration's ability to think and work together on important challenges. I've also felt no defensiveness here about improvement, no desire to treat the status quo as the pinnacle of progress. So it's a school that has come a long way, wants to go further, and is unusually well positioned to succeed in doing so.

But then, over against all this dynamism and drive, or accompanying it with no sense of contradiction, I also learned that Duke is just an overwhelmingly friendly place, a place full of people who are both very smart and very nice, a place where people appreciate each other, are relaxed around each other, care about and enjoy each other, and have a healthy sense of the good things of life. In addition to the sense of community on campus, it's also a place that takes seriously its role in the community—the community of Durham, the Research Triangle, and North Carolina more generally. If it's true that we live in a knowledge economy, then universities have special things to contribute to the surrounding world and a special obligation to make those contributions. In Duke I saw a school that wants to be a good citizen in the strong sense of that word, and I believe in that.

Put it all together—what you are and what you want to be—and I must say, it made an impression. A growing impression: I moved, over the course of the last weeks, from being intrigued to deeply interested to quite excited by what I saw here, and I had a stronger and stronger sense of the work to be done here and the fun there might be in doing it. And then came the day when, as Huck Finn said, I had to choose, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it: my wonderful life in a known world or the adventure of Duke. Well, you know my choice. I'm a person of strong attachments and powerful devotions who has a lot of energy and wants nothing more than to use that energy on behalf of the deep goals of universities: education, the creation and transmission of knowledge, and the training of the young for constructive lives in the world. It has been my pride to do that work at Yale. Today I transfer my loyalty to this place: from here forward, it will be my honor to do it at Duke. The switch

should not be hard. Everything I own is blue, and I am used to four-letter names.

Let me say a few words of thanks. The first is to the search committee and its extraordinary chair, Bob Steel. During the time when I scarcely knew Duke, these folks embodied Duke for me, and they could not have shown it in a more appealing light. They were by turns smart, serious, committed, and fun. What struck me the most was how much they loved Duke and appreciated and admired each other. I could like a place like that, I thought—and here I am. Second, in addition to being wonderfully helpful to me as I tried to get a sense of Duke, Nan Keohane has been a most remarkable president. This is bad for me in one way but good in another. On the one hand, she sets terribly high standards for her successor, and I'm sure I will live to regret the many days when people say "When Nan was here" or "If only Nan were here." Thanks, Nan. But far more than that, Nan has helped shape a university where the faculty trusts the administration (and even likes the president) and feels that we are all working toward common goals. I am lucky to inherit that achievement. This time I mean it: Thanks, Nan. Third, and here I will not say by any means all that's in my heart, I thank my family—my mother and father, who nourished my education in every way, and my wife and son, who give me strength and joy every step of the way. I'm a person who has had many blessings. My new life at Duke is among the chief of them. But my family is at the heart of them.

Last, to every member of the Duke community, let me say thank you in advance for the work we will do together. People speak of educational leaders, but the main truth about universities is that absolutely nothing happens in them through the strength of one. I bring high hopes to this job, but whatever I accomplish will be accomplished through our common labor and with your constant help. Together, you have made this a great school. Together, let's keep it great and make it better yet. I pledge you my full commitment to Duke and to what we will make Duke through our work together.

Authoring a Community

Duke Chapel, August 19, 2004

Parents and friends of the Class of 2008, since Duke Chapel has just enough room for the winners of the 2004 admissions sweepstakes, I must greet you at a distance in the simulcast mode. But though my greeting is virtual, I welcome you to this happy event and your new bond with Duke. After this ceremony I will be outside to meet you in person, but truth to tell, your location this hour makes a kind of sense. One of the kindest humans I ever met said this to parents on the opening day of college: "You've done so much for your sons and daughters, supported them in so many ways, now there's one more thing you must do for them. Go home." You know what he meant. Your goal when your children were younger was to help them grow into splendid independent people who could carry on on their own. Well, the day has come to make the test, and your hour in Page Auditorium could be thought of as a trial separation. Will your daughter wake herself up in time for class without you there to help? If you don't call every ten minutes, will your son eat regularly and go to bed at a sensible hour? I trust the answer is yes, but the honest answer is, we shall now see! In fact your children will thrive here, but for them to get the good of their new life, you need to back off. Parents, I join you in this day's sorrow but still more in its excitement and pride.

Well, I got rid of them! Now for you, my Dukies! As I'm sure you have already felt, you and I have everything in common. I too spent last year deciding where to go to college; I too weighed alternatives while

others were weighing alternatives to me; I too was lucky enough to have the choice of Duke; I too was clever enough to take it. And since the orientation for presidents starts a bit earlier than yours, I've already scouted the territory and can report on what's ahead. Your faithful scout brings you this news: you'll love it here. Duke is very beautiful, very stimulating, very challenging, but very friendly and fun. It may take a week or two to settle in, but you have this on high presidential authority: you stand on the verge of a great new life.

When I asked myself what I could say to you on this occasion, I could only think to begin with this overwhelming fact of newness. This is, for you, like the earliest days of creation. Everything stands before you in its primal freshness and strangeness; you have not yet marred a single hour or messed up in a single way. As I reflected further, my mind gravitated to a feature of this convocation that's completely new to my experience and that helped symbolize the larger fact of newness: the chance you will have, after this ceremony, to sign the Duke Community Standard.

I won't comment here on the content of the Standard, which is printed in your program and straightforward enough. (If you plan to have trouble being honest and behaving honorably while you're at Duke, please raise your hand now so the ushers can eject you.) What I found myself puzzling at was the idea of a public signing. My response to this had a certain complexity. On the one hand, I said to myself, What's the point of requiring a visible, physical affixing of the name? These are minimal moral expectations and, to my mind, just as binding whether you sign them or not. (Plus if the legalistic among you should someday say "But I never signed them," we will reply, "Oh yes you did!" You agreed to these conditions when you signed your acceptance of Duke.)

But as I continued my reflections, I came to think that there was something interesting, possibly even something quite wonderful, about the idea of this ceremony. If the physical act of signing doesn't make these norms more obligatory, it does give your embrace of them the quality of a deliberate, conscious, voluntary act. Further, it enacts the thought that you become a member of this community by embracing certain values—an idea I much admire.

From there I found myself thinking of the larger historical and philosophical resonances of a ceremony of this sort. As you'll have the chance to learn, early modern philosophy is full of the thought that human socie-

ties are not something established by nature or divine law but something humans themselves make through some primal founding act. Thomas Hobbes, who did the thinking for his great *Leviathan* (1651) during the English Civil War, posits that in the state of nature, no man was enough stronger than any other to be able to protect himself to an absolute extent. The state of nature was a state of endless competition and self-assertion in which men were independent and, for that reason, radically and incurably insecure. According to Hobbes, civil society began when, in face of this intolerable condition, men formed a contract: covenanted with each other to each give up a measure of freedom in order to create a collectivity, the commonwealth, that could supply the security no individual could win on his own.

There are many variants on this theory of the social contract, and as you may know, contemporaries of these thinkers put such theories into practice in real historical events. In the first document printed in English in America, an oath devised by the Puritan leader John Winthrop, men and women were asked to make a community, literally to call one into existence, by affirming their acceptance of certain values and obligations. One hundred thirty years after the Freeman's Oath, the United States came into being through conscious founding acts of public profession and agreement: the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the ratification of the Constitution.

From here my train of thought led back to you. For what all this served to remind me is that each of you, this day, has the signer's power, the power to author a community through your agreements. The reality of your life at Duke has as yet no determinate character or shape. It's you who will create that reality, through the habits you lay down. What will be the nature of that way of life? That's not resolved yet. It is you who will settle it, through the choices that you make. I could imagine some relatively thoughtless choices that would result in a relatively uninteresting (though still perfectly pleasant) Duke experience; I could also imagine a far more fulfilling version that you could build from the same set of opportunities. But in the hubbub and stress of arrival you may be scarcely aware that you have such choices, let alone recognize their fateful nature.

In this state, this morning's signing ceremony could have a special value. My bright idea is that this signing could be your chance to envision and affirm all the good intentions you could live by at Duke: all the

intentions that, individually and collectively embraced, would construct the best commonwealth for your new life.

I have the microphone, so I get to propose some terms for your compact. For starters: Four or five years back, Duke adopted a set of curricular requirements (recently simplified) that mandate that you take courses in certain competences, areas of knowledge, modes of inquiry—you know the rest. How are you going to deal with this somewhat complicated beast? One choice would be to approach these as a set of troublesome requirements handed down by some obscure and ill-natured bureaucrat to no end except to complicate your life, which you could nevertheless manage to outwit without too serious discomfort, checking off all the boxes, by appealing to the great “they say”—the news you heard fifth-hand that Course X is a painless way to fulfill Requirement Y.

Even loading your matrix in this relatively low-minded way (yes, I have heard of curricular bingo) would yield some educational profit. But do you know what? There would be another way to cover the same ground that would yield more pleasure and more profit. You could construe those same requirements as your own intellectual goals, guides to mental muscle groups an educated person would want to develop, knowledges and competences that would help you build a capable, powerful mind. (If you really can’t think what good being competent at writing or a foreign language or quantitative skills could ever do you, you’d better come see me.) Having turned bureaucratic hurdles into instruments of aspiration, you would then set out to find the classes that would give you the most interesting and engaging way to advance toward these goals—making your academic life an act of curiosity and exploration, not a mere exercise in compliance.

Since curiosity is a prime educational value, I’d ask you to have some curiosity too about those around you. Since Duke looks for students with the intellect and character to make a contribution to the world, and since such people are found in every human setting, you’ll have classmates from every state and global region, every ethnic origin, every income level, every religion, every political persuasion. Let me take this occasion to say to each of you, wherever you come from and whatever you believe: This is your place. You are all equally welcome to Duke and equally entitled to all its benefits.

But you, far more than I, will be determining what kind of community grows up among you in practice, and since it's still the very first day—since you're literally still deciding whose music will be played and who gets which bed—nothing has been fixed yet about the world you'll build. More correctly, everything is being settled by your first acts, by the forms of interaction you initiate—and it's still in your power to reflect and choose. Though we all hate prejudice, we are all deeply skilled in the mental sorting devices by which humans parse a world of strangers and identify, on the basis of superficial external signs, whether they are “my kind” or not. With the guidance of this social positioning system, you don't even need to talk to a person—don't need to engage in conscious labor of any sort—to know that he's too northern, she's too southern; one person is too jocky, the next too wimpy; one acts as if he owns the place (the jerk!), the other is way too retiring. And this inventory has just begun.

If you take seriously the notion that you are making the commonwealth you'll inhabit, then you have your choice here, and it matters. Proceeding on autopilot, you could locate the universe of those “like” you on such initial measures and silently erase the rest of your classmates; or, a little more adventurously, you could open yourself to other types and take a deeper measure of what you might share. Which do you suppose you will learn more in: a world of mutually repelling comfort zones or a world of free, spirited interaction across all real or imagined social lines?

Might there be friction in this sort of interaction? We would be absurd to doubt it, but even there you have a choice. Will you take those who annoy you and cast them out as hopeless, irremediable Losers? Or might you find a way candidly to identify differences, learn to see them from different sides, and work out a way to accommodate the rights and needs of all? In the larger world we see both courses at work, and you know which comes to a better ending, but it's not settled yet which will prevail on your version of Planet Duke. It will be settled by your own conduct: by the way you handle a new life's strains.

But being respectful and open wouldn't be the highest you could aim. One of the problems of modern pluralism is that to the extent that heterogeneous populations have embraced the idea of getting along together, an amazing feat given the world's history of prejudice and strife,

a new reality has sometimes emerged. Where the lion lies down with the lamb to the tune of “It’s a Small World After All,” peace and pleasantness can be purchased at an unspoken price, namely the suggestion that no one should feel or assert anything very passionately lest someone else should find it offensive.

We have to hope that the world of equal rights and mutual respect will not be a world of self-neutralized convictions and watered-down consensus. Imperfect though it may still be, the new world the civil rights movement created would not have come into existence without hot convictions and sharp elbows. But it requires work to get this balance right. Something I would love to see Duke pioneer—and for this to happen it will have to be our common creation—is a culture of positive intellectual difference, or what the poet Blake called mental strife. American universities have taken far more trouble to host athletic contests than most sorts of intellectual contention. But since powerful differences shape the force field of our lives, the sides had better learn something about each other and, dare one hope it, learn something from each other.

In this election year, there are questions more interesting than which will be a red and which a blue state, questions it’s hard to be certain of the answer to unless a partisan position short-circuits the inquiry. What rights should we give up as the price of collective security (Hobbes’s questions have not gone away), and at what point does security ask too high a price at the level of individual freedom? To what extent is it better to go it alone in international affairs, and to what extent will any international effort fail without some larger consensus behind it? To what extent is the globalized economy a system for draining away jobs that should stay at home, and to what extent do its dynamisms increase economic vitality in all regions, even at the cost of local dislocation? How can radical inequalities of health be kept from tracking other forms of inequality in America and the world, and how is the better care that is now scientifically available to be paid for and made economically available?

If you think these are trivially easy questions, then you need some education. Coming to college was a good start, but then you have a choice: whether to evade such challenges as best you can or learn to engage them with knowledge, subtlety, and creativity. To do the latter, you’ll need to be surrounded by people trying to answer hard questions and tune in to what they say. But you need to be more than a good audience: you’ll

need yourselves to become skilled arguers. By skilled arguer I do not mean a person who can achieve a technical knockout in the early rounds by goosing up the level of rhetorical force. I mean a person who can put forward what she understands with all the intelligence and sincerity she can muster while still staying open to the truth that lies on the other side, and who, while not eager to give (or quick to take) offense, is willing to engage in that struggle with contrary minds that produces deeper understanding for all.

The man whose statue stands in front of this chapel sent this message to the assembled student body when the old Duke library was opened: “Tell them every man to think for himself.” I’d have you add this to the pact you make here today: an agreement that you would actively think here rather than lounging in passive acceptances, that you would protect the space in which others are also free to think, and that you would so engage and contend with each other within that space as to stretch and deepen one another’s minds. Is this enough to sign your name to? Of course not, but you can write the remaining terms, and I count on you to do so. And lest you forget the pact we made this day, download these words in your iPod and let me croon them to you each night as you go to sleep. Men and women of the Class of 2008, my first four-year class at Duke, you will love this place—but you’ll love it more if you help make it the place that you believe it should be.

The Virtues and Limits of Specialization

Duke Chapel, August 19, 2004

This morning I had the pleasure of making my first address to an incoming class of Duke undergraduates. This afternoon I return to greet students equally central to this university's mission: the new entrants to Duke's graduate and professional schools. When you were freshmen, and I'm sure that day seems almost inconceivably remote from the maturity you have attained to now, you were probably looking to four years of college as the end of school—but in a troubling recidivism, here you are back again. In truth you've come here for the next chapter of your education, training, and personal growth, and I hope it will be a splendid one. On behalf of Duke University, I welcome you most warmly.

Though this is, as the program notes, the 167th year of Duke's institutional life, Duke did not always have the schools you've enrolled in. What was founded 167 years ago was a one-room elementary school called Brown's Schoolhouse. But as I have come to know the history, what I have found striking is that this first creation had the gene of self-advancement built into it from the start. Unlike the hundred other backwoods academies created at about the same time, the school that became Duke always had a special drive to extend itself toward the highest known levels of education and, by offering training in the higher learning, to put advanced knowledge to a larger social use.

While this school was still in its infancy, its leaders got wind of the ideas of the common school movement emanating from states like Massachusetts, ideas since codified in this country's public school system—a familiar feature in our time but a radical novelty in the 1830s. Inspired by this notion, these educators in the hinterlands of one of the South's then-poorest states remade their little institution into a normal school, a place for preparing trained teachers: one of the common school movement's principal innovations. Having barely survived the devastations of the American Civil War and Reconstruction, this school had the presumptuousness to hire as its leader a trainee from the brave new world of graduate education, an outsider with the newfangled degree called the Ph.D. This person brought Trinity College ambition for the activities that marked the new advanced university of the 1880s: intercollegiate varsity athletics and systematically organized graduate and professional study. (Not everyone knows that these two American staples were contemporaneous developments.)

President John Franklin Crowell succeeded in introducing football to Trinity College and moving the school to the more metropolitan Durham, but he did not realize the rest of his dream. It would not be long, however, before that ambition would reassert itself. As the relocated undergraduate school grew in strength, another of my predecessors, William Preston Few, proposed a vision of a college with a full array of graduate and professional schools constellated around it, and a great industrialist-philanthropist from the school's principal family of backers, James Buchanan Duke, put up the money to make the vision real. In the late 1920s and early 1930s a gothic campus was thrown up in thick woods; bright young faculty were raided from the Johns Hopkins Medical School and elsewhere; and the Duke we know was born.

The founders of this university had two dreams in mind. One was to make this a place of outstanding intellectual eminence, “a place of real leadership,” as Mr. Duke called it. But in Duke's idea such leadership also involved harnessing the power of higher learning for the larger social good. The schools you are about to enter were formed to the end of training men and women who, by virtue of their special knowledge and depth of reflection, would be equipped to staff and lead the world's great institutions—its hospitals, churches, corporations, universities,