

PRESIDENT'S CONVOCATION

Tougaloo College

September 3, 2003

Good Morning. It is so good to see all of you here this morning. Thank you for joining us for this special convocation as we usher in a new academic year here at Tougaloo College. Queen McFarland, what a gracious and generous introduction. I am extremely proud of you and President Franklin. And you both have done outstanding jobs this morning in your greetings and introduction. To the students, Chairman Walker, trustees, administration, faculty, staff, alumni and supportive friends, including the media, let me say thank you for traveling this extraordinary journey with me at such a time as this – and we together will move this remarkable institution to its rightful place on the mountaintop of excellence. I want to recognize my husband, Marvin, and son who are here. Marvin has been a part of this journey from the beginning because I married him when I was a student here.

The fall President's convocation is always a significant occasion for our College Community as we assess our continuing development and envision important possibilities for the new academic year. This is a time to affirm the present and future as we set forth our plans and strategies to ensure that Tougaloo College will stand and prosper for at least another 100 years.

Some 66 years from now, Tougaloo College will celebrate its 200th year. And I am confident that someone among the ranks of this student body will have taken up the gauntlet years before to set in motion, the plans for the grand celebration. Unlike the great pyramids, the monuments of the Spirit will not stand untended. They must be nurtured by each succeeding generation. It is my generation's time now; it will be yours tomorrow.

Tougaloo College must stand for all time. For it is indeed a testament of the vision, dreams, hopes, determination, perseverance of our faithful ancestors, not only our original founders, but all those who have kept it standing for 134 years. Tougaloo College is a living spirit that has with stood the tests of time, challenge and change.

So yes, the beginning of another academic year – this convocation is a time to celebrate the spirit and collegiality of this very special learning community we call Tougaloo College.

I completed my first year as your President in May. This is my second President's Convocation. It has been a long – interesting – challenging – exciting year. And yes, you know what I am going to say -

there's no place I'd rather be – no struggle more worthy of my efforts – no calling more noble than serving Tougaloo College. There is a saying 'that Home is where the Heart is.' Well, Tougaloo College is 'Home'. Welcome to my home and thank you for deciding to stay a while.

Our challenge is to do our part in protecting and nourishing the core values chosen by our founding constituency some 134 years ago, just as they are still cherished by us today: high academic achievement, personal freedom and integrity, the dignity and respect of the individual, a legacy of inclusiveness, tolerance, service and social commitment.

We begin this new academic year aware of and grateful for our accomplishments and with our eyes on what remains to be done. We have addressed many challenges and are laying the foundation for our growth and prosperity.

Last year, we identified a number of areas we wanted to improve and heading the list was putting in place an organizational infrastructure to support a high quality academic environment. We have that now and are simply working daily to get the kinks out. We have systems of accountability, internal controls, checks and balances and an experienced, competent staff to manage these processes. We are upgrading our technology and moving rapidly toward an integrated information management system. We will, within the next few weeks, release the RFP for our campus connectivity.

Another priority was stabilizing and increasing our enrollment. That continues – because Tougaloo College is enrollment driven. We have stabilized enrollment and are witnessing a steady increase. Our enrollment for this fall is over 900 students. Our budgetary forecast was 791. Our optimal number still remains at 1,000. Let me say, we had a significant increase in freshmen applications and primarily due to the financial resources, many students had to choose another path. Some students could not return because they still have outstanding balances. We do intend to instill within our students a sense of personal responsibility as well.

This leads to the need for more scholarships funds, not just merit-based but need based. The PELL grants, SEOG funds and even loans do not address the financial needs of our students.

Tougaloo College still serves a large percentage of young people who are first generation college entrants. Many still come from challenging socioeconomic environments. More than 90% of our students need financial assistance.

Many of you have heard me say this before. Tougaloo College is still a place of opportunity. Though we accept students at varying levels of college preparedness, we will always maintain our high expectations for their performance. Our standards are here and the students might be at a lower level.

We will never lower our standards to meet the student; we bring the student up to our standard for academic excellence. Tougaloo is a transforming experience. By the time students reach the third year, they are achieving at our level of expectation - and when they graduate, they are prepared to soar and compete in any world's arena. A Tougaloo education is the value added. We don't want to only prepare our students to excel academically but we want to develop within them the moral and social responsibility that will guide them to be citizens of the world with a conscience and a will to help make society better.

Our student retention continues to be excellent at about 89%. We understand that many students choose colleges based on their program offerings but they stay based on how they are treated. We are student centered here. Students, we really like you!

We experienced our best year ever for alumni participation in the annual fund and support given to the College.

Our visibility and image are at an all time high. We had a number of high profile events, the Two Rivers Gala, Commencement 2003 with President Clinton as our Speaker, and being selected as the HBCU of the Month in July for the Tom Joyner Show.

Our challenge is to keep the momentum going.

We made enhancements to our teaching and learning environment through the renovation and upgrading of classrooms, labs and improvements in technology across the campus.

We enhanced our physical environment with the pavement of streets and parking lots and restored historic Woodworth Chapel. We established the Center for Undergraduate Research and have already witnessed the talents of many students who with the support of faculty developed some very impressive research projects.

We received funding for new programs and continued many others through the diligent work of our faculty and staff.

We also said we would strengthened and broadened our academic initiatives. The Undergraduate Research Center is one such initiative. We added the Pre-Nursing Program, Religious Studies and Hotel & Hospitality Management Programs. We also relaunched the Center for Adult Learning.

We have operationalized the Medical Clinic within the Health and Wellness Center. Dr. Arwhin is the physician on board. We are indeed on an upward path toward prominence in American private higher

education. You and I are part of a College on the move. But, I do recognize our remaining challenges. We cannot afford complacency, mediocrity or anything less than a quest for excellence. We have so much more to accomplish if we are to fulfill the promise and potential of this remarkable academic community.

And that is what frames our agenda for this new academic year. What do we need to do to sustain the momentum underway? What do we need to do to strengthen further our academic quality and reputation? What do we need to do to ensure that we deliver on our promise to provide a high quality education to the approximately 900 students enrolled this fall and those who will enroll in the spring?

First, I believe that we have a need and opportunity to sharpen our shared vision of Tougaloo College, in line with our mission statement. For example, what does it mean to be a liberal arts institution in this 21st century learning environment? What do we mean when we say academic excellence or a nurturing living and learning environment? What is our mark of distinction? What separates us from other like-minded institutions? What is our signature, if you will? A clear and compelling vision statement will make informed judgments about choices we must make and help us to develop a multi-year budgeting plan that will keep us on track toward that vision.

As we continue to fine-tune our five-year Strategic Plan, the vision statement will be a guiding principle.

Second, it is critical that we develop a detailed enrollment plan for the next five to ten years. We have said, given our current living and learning constructs, our optimal level is about 1,000. That's the baseline from which we want to strategically grow this institution. But, what of the next five to ten years? What facilities and faculty resources will be needed and how will the growth of distance education impact our learning environment? And what are our plans to keep pace or remain viable within the changing landscape of higher education?

Third, during the past year, we have had limited discussion on the need to review and revise our core curriculum. The redesign and implementation of an exciting curriculum can contribute to an even stronger educational experience for our students. I am challenging the Provost and Deans to seriously look at this and organize a task force or committee to review and revise our core curriculum in view of our mission and the future of Tougaloo College. We must continuously focus on how to enrich the quality of our education at Tougaloo.

Fourth, I believe it is important for us to select a limited number of key academic and facility priorities for the near future and develop a rigorous plan for securing the resources to fund them...compensation enhancements, increased scholarships and financial aid and new academic initiatives. We need to be

careful not to spread our limited resources among our many needs and priorities that we jeopardize the adequacy of support for any of them.

We also need to evaluate carefully our needs for facility improvements, for such initiatives add appreciably to our operating costs. It is my hope that we can give the highest priority to the renovation and modest expansion of current facilities, and prioritize new construction to that which is central to our mission and vision. I will be working with the Board of Trustees and the Vice Presidents on this topic, with the goal of developing a short-term facility improvement plan that is consistent with our current and projected financial resources, and campus master plan.

Fifth, we must continue to strengthen our efforts to vigorously promote to the nation and world, the enormous strengths and record of achievement for our faculty, staff & students. We will increase our marketing efforts. We have been looking at market branding. We have selected a logo with the Eagle in ascension. This will be on all our letterhead, envelopes and publications about the College. We want people to easily recognize the mark of Tougaloo College. We will be developing new brochures and information literature on all of our programs.

Sixth, we have developed and will continue to tweak our fiscal enhancement plan. The economic malaise and bear market continued longer than most predicted and the fact that virtually everyone is facing similar challenges is of little consolation. We can, however, take consolation in the knowledge that we are not sitting idly by and wringing our hands. Yes, the challenges are serious and demand our attention and your cooperation. A few days ago an article appeared in the Clarion Ledger that Tougaloo is debt free. Oh God, to be so blessed! There is a difference between deficit and debt. When our pledges are fulfilled, then we can begin with a clean fiscal picture. If the pledges had been paid, we would have closed this fiscal year without a deficit. We have for many years, began the fiscal year with prior year obligations. I really don't mind carrying over prior year income – in fact, I believe I'd really like that. Once we dissolve our past obligations, we will focus on the debt reduction plan.

This is not a crisis. A crisis can only come from our inaction. This is our opportunity to lay the foundation for Tougaloo of the next decades. Everyone can play a part, think creatively, work collaboratively and look for ways to make new ideas succeed rather than reasons why they cannot. Challenging times represent more than a threat – they are an opportunity to exercise discipline, vision and creativity. There is a role for everyone in this fiscal restructuring. I ask your cooperation and collaboration in this important undertaking. We all will have to live within our means.

We will conduct a job functional assessment and analysis of our workplace to determine the right size for Tougaloo.

Finally, this new academic year will be crucial for us to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive fund raising effort that will be focused heavily on priorities and needs for enhanced academic strength and capacity. A sharpened vision for Tougaloo College, increased support for student and faculty development, facility improvements and endowment growth will generate the major themes for our comprehensive fundraising campaign. It is important that all these efforts come together this year in a meaningful way to set the stage for securing a bright future for Tougaloo College.

I am aware that I have sounded an ambitious agenda in presenting our initiatives in such challenging times; perhaps it is prudent to circle the wagons rather than head off across the prairie, but those of you who know me well, know that I am a pioneer, not a settler. I view the integration of strategic, fiscal and campus planning as a genuine invitation to institutional synergy – to growing together. Planning leads to accomplishments, accomplishments lead to success and success yields opportunities.

I have reviewed some accomplishments that but touch the surface of the positive activities and success that constitute our Tougaloo story. The glass is most certainly half full and more than that!

These are surely interesting and challenging times for higher education and Tougaloo College. John Quincy Adams once said, “great necessities call out great virtues” and that can be said sometime for those of us in the academy today. The needs of society and world community are great. We have a special opportunity, a special obligation to seize this time to build a distinguished college that can enrich human knowledge and understanding and enhance the quality of life for our students, our community and the world for generations yet to be. It is a noble and difficult undertaking but I doubt any of us would want it any other way.

The future is hopeful. The challenges before us are real. But a new horizon opens before us. And we are a hope filled people. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, “I have a plan for you,” says the Lord, a plan of freedom and of hope.”

Let the word go forth that our future prosperity begins today. Let it also be understood that we are determined – absolutely determined – to be successful. Failure is not an option here!

We are confident because we still stand on the rock of God's grace. He who causes our better angels to be released within us each day, giving us the grace to achieve excellence - He who led our founders to this place to establish this special institution with little to no resources for sustainability, yet this institution stands 134 years later, still a beacon of hope and opportunity- the same HE will see us through. God's amazing grace will indeed take us to the mountaintop of excellence. Yes – we will succeed!

God bless you and let's have the greatest year in the history of this great institution!