

Ohio
Wesleyan
University

OWU PRESIDENT ROCK JONES CONVOCATION REMARKS

Thursday, August 21, 2014

2014 CONVOCATION REMARKS

**Rock Jones, President of Ohio Wesleyan University
August 21, 2014**

Members of the faculty and staff, family and friends, and most importantly, members of the Ohio Wesleyan class of 2018, it is a great honor to welcome you to this convocation marking the opening of the 172nd year of academic life on this campus. We gather in a grove of trees surrounded by historic buildings that remind us of the enduring legacy of OWU as a community of scholarship and learning. This community will touch every aspect of your being and will shape you for a life you have not yet fully imagined. Today you join the tens of thousands of individuals who have embraced the ideals and values of an Ohio Wesleyan education, and four years from now you will be prepared, as they were prepared, to take your place in the larger world.

Ohio Wesleyan was founded in 1842 with the support of the local Methodist church and the citizens of Delaware. Our founding charter, written more than 170 years ago, states “the University is forever to be conducted on the most liberal principles, accessible to all religious denominations, and designed for the benefit of our citizens in general.” These founding principles have informed our history and shape our destiny to this day.

The pledge to forever conduct the University on the most liberal principles reflects our commitment to the values of liberal education, sometimes known as the liberal arts. At Ohio Wesleyan, we believe in the power of ideas. Our society has experienced innovation and enhancement of the quality of life when minds have been set free to imagine new ways of being. Innovations in science that cure disease, that leverage technology to improve the quality of life, and that enhance food production to solve world hunger emerge in an environment where minds are liberated from old ways of thinking and new ideas are embraced. Only by liberating our minds from old ways of thinking can we uncover new understandings of the structures of society that eliminate patterns of institutional racism, that question assumptions that are oppressive, and that ensure the dignity and worth of every human being.

The liberation of the mind rests at the heart of a liberal arts education. In this context, Ohio Wesleyan will challenge you to question assumptions and imagine a better future. You will study across the disciplines, and you will learn the content and methods of a particular discipline, your major. But more importantly, you will be challenged to think critically and analytically, to ask new questions, to explore complex issues from multiple perspectives, and to learn the value of working in teams to solve complex problems. In the process, you will be challenged to acknowledge the importance of connections – connections of ideas explored in the classroom with engagement in the real world (we call it the OWU Connection), connections of knowledge across the disciplines (we call it course connections), connections of theoretical understanding with practical application (we call it theory to practice), and connections between a campus in Delaware, Ohio and a host of places across the country and around the world (we call it travel learning). In the end, we want you to embrace this world of ideas and connections, theory and practice, in ways that uniquely prepare you for a life of impact that makes the world a better place, wherever you choose to live, and whatever work you choose to pursue.

When in the early 19th century our founders spoke of being accessible to all religious denominations, they put a stake in the ground for an enduring commitment to diversity. This is an institution that welcomes students from an extraordinary range of backgrounds, family structures, national origin, and religious expression. We value the diversity of our campus, and we learn much from living in close proximity with individuals whose life experiences and world views vary widely. Too often in our society, people live in enclaves (neighborhoods) that are exceedingly homogenous. It is difficult to imagine a more just society or to solve the conflicts that are ripping our society apart when we have not had the opportunity to interact with and understand those who are different from us. Just look at the conflicts raging in Iraq and Syria, Israel and Palestine, and Ferguson, Missouri.

Here at OWU you live in residence halls in close proximity with individuals with an extraordinary range of life experiences. Your course work will challenge you to expand your understanding of peoples and cultures quite different from your own. Travel learning, semesters abroad, mission trips, and volunteer service in and around Delaware will enrich your understanding of the diverse needs of our world and will prepare you to make an impact on our world. I challenge you to embrace the opportunity presented by the historic commitment to diversity on this campus.

Finally, our founders spoke of an education designed for the benefit of our citizens in general. This is the so what of an OWU education. What are the outcomes of four years on this campus? We are committed to preparing you well for life beyond OWU. If you are among the quarter of our graduates who move directly to graduate or professional school, you will have the opportunity to prepare here for the best schools in the world. If you are among those who seek employment when you graduate, you will be job ready, as is reflected in our placement rates. But there is a higher calling to an OWU education. You will be challenged here to think about the nature of your life work and the purpose of your life journey. You take your place today in a university where for more than 17 decades students have taken on the mantle of making the world a better place.

In 1917, Ben Arneson began his 36-year tenure as a member of this faculty and in 1947 he established the Institute for Practical Politics and Public Affairs, which now bears his name. Each year, Professor Arneson challenged his students to sign the following pledge: "With a view to serving the public interest and regardless of the nature of my future vocations I pledge that, upon leaving college, I will devote a portion of my time to active and definite participation in public affairs." This education is not just about you. With the advantage of an OWU education, you will be ready to devote your life to serving the public good, whether as a research scientist, a performing artist, a school teacher, an entrepreneur in business, or a leader in social service. You will be prepared to exercise creative and innovative leadership that leads to a more just world, a more sustainable planet, and a more meaningful and fulfilling life for all people. You will make a difference.

Now, I realize this all is heady stuff – liberating the mind, embracing diversity, serving the world. College also provides opportunities to expand your horizons in so many other ways, and to have some fun along the way. Athletics, Greek life, student government, volunteer service, study travel, and a host of other opportunities will come your way. You can't do it all, but you can select opportunities that are familiar as well as those that are new. Along the way, I challenge you to be responsible in the decisions you make. As a community, we hold ourselves accountable to the standards and values we embrace, and we hold one another accountable to those values.

There is a clock tower at the foot of the historic walk that passes three of our nineteenth century buildings, University, Slocum, and Sturges Halls. The tower was installed in 2005 by the class of 1955 on the occasion of their 50 year reunion. They inscribed these words: "May your time in this place open your mind to a lifetime of learning, your heart to creating memories and enduring friendships, your life to infinite opportunities." Today, you begin your Ohio Wesleyan experience. Here you will lay the foundation for lifelong learning, you will form friendships that are enduring, and you will discover infinite opportunity. This is your moment. Embrace the challenge, and seize the opportunity.

Welcome, and best wishes in all that is ahead.