

THE COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY
INAUGURAL ADDRESS
“FOR TRADITION, FOR TOMORROW, FOR TCNJ”
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FRIDAY, MAY 3, 2019

Thank you, all. I am deeply honored to be before you as the 16th president of The College of New Jersey.

I am particularly privileged to be joined on this joyous occasion by three beloved presidents of this institution: Dr. Clayton Brower, who is with us virtually from Phoenix, and Dr. Harold Eickhoff and Dr. R. Barbara Gitenstein, who are, to our delight, here in person. When the story is written about TCNJ—and I know Dr. Eickhoff is working on his memoir—it will show that over the past 48 years these three presidents led this magnificent college to ever higher levels of academic excellence, innovative teaching and learning, and national prominence. I take inspiration and courage from you, and extend heartfelt thanks as I assume the mantle of leadership.

Indulge me now as I offer personal thanks to several groups already recognized by our host.

Thank you to the presidential search committee, which gave me my first in-person experience of the authenticity and intelligence of the college, saw beyond the sweatshirt in which I interviewed (long story; lost luggage, happy ending), and recommended me for the position.

Thank you, too, forevermore, to the TCNJ Board of Trustees, then under the leadership of Jorge Caballero and now chaired by Susanne Svizeny, who accepted that recommendation and offered me my dream job, luring me home to New Jersey after many, many years away.

Thank you further to the gifted and openhearted students, faculty, staff, and administrators who gave me thousands of reasons to accept the board's offer. It was you with whom I wanted to work, your values that I wanted to uphold, your quality that drew me closer, and your ambition and enthusiasm that blew my mind. I am, in a word, exhilarated to be among you.

Thank you, too, delegates and community partners, many of whom I know and many of whom traveled from long distances at a tremendously busy time of the academic calendar. I am a sucker for ceremony and I dig the opportunity to wear regalia—especially when it is a flattering blue—but you may not and still you are here. Your friendship is not lost on me nor on TCNJ.

Special thanks and affection to family and friends, including the entourage of people who knew me long before I was a college president. There is nothing more comfortable and liberating and humbling than people who get the jokes, know the warts, bring you down a few pegs when you need it, and love you no matter what.

There is a reason that we scheduled inauguration on this day, for it marks the start of Alumni Weekend. Our college community includes thousands of loyal and accomplished alumni from Trenton State Teachers College [slash] Trenton State College [slash] The College of New Jersey. It has been a highlight of my first year to meet so many of you at alumni board meetings,

on-campus events, and at the eleven across-the-nation alumni receptions I have attended so far this year. I look forward to meeting more of you in the days ahead, hearing your stories, and being reminded by your presence and achievement of the difference a college can make.

Last but not least, let me thank the intrepid presidential inauguration committee, led by Rebecca Ostrov, Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees, and Heather Fehn, secretary to the board and chief of staff for now three presidents. Big events like this do not simply happen – they need a crack operations team, and we had one. As you read the program, admire the arrangements, eat something delectable at the reception, listen to the music—shout out to the wind ensemble and to producers of the New Jersey Artists mixtape—and as you experience other niceties of the day, join me in appreciating the committee’s stellar handiwork.

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The tag line for these festivities, “For Tradition. For Tomorrow. For TCNJ,” offers not only an elegant expression of the occasion, but also the inspiration for my remarks today.

When I was in graduate school – the first time, at Berkeley, not the second time up the road – I studied city planning, a practical field redolent with grand themes and utopian ideals.

For an intellectual dilettante – one who did not declare a major until her junior year and ultimately settled on geography for its breadth -- city planning is a generalist’s dream. Everything we learned about – land use, housing, transportation, economic development, environmental sustainability, law, urban design, public finance, politics and policy, community organizing and more – all of it mattered and connected to everything else. Planning was a versatile practice, applicable in every place at every scale from the parcel to the globe – applicable, too, for individuals and all of humanity. As a field of study and a vocation, planning offered to me the opportunity to do some good by thinking ahead, clearly and creatively. I was wired for it, and I loved it.

The conceit of planning is that the choices we make and the actions we take today will bring about a better tomorrow. Planners draw from the past to comprehend the present, fold in information and add imagination to shape the future. That’s it.

I practiced planning for eight years following graduate school, two of them overseas in the Peace Corps. My life as a professional planner was grand, and I have little doubt it would have remained so had I kept at it.

But, well, you know what they say about the best laid plans. About two years into my career, while I was living in California, I got an opportunity to teach one course, Intro to City Planning, as an adjunct at Cal Poly nearby. The full story has detail, but the upshot is that about 30 seconds into my first-ever teaching experience, I had an epiphany—the only one of my life—which illuminated the academic life and the clear and creative good you could do as a teacher and scholar. I reset my career goals, went to graduate school the second time, broadened my intellectual skills and horizons, thought deeply about governance, regions, and metropolitan decision-making, and earned the credential I needed to become a professor.

Even on my worst days, the academy was the right choice. I remain today as I have since graduate school, intensely motivated and inspired by the nobility, virtuosity, and passion of the academic mission and the people who follow its call.

Still, the lessons and rhythms of planning never left me, not only because I taught in an urban planning department, but also because planning is a cognitive companion through which I frame thought and action in all realms. I subscribe to the planner's optimistic conceit: the decisions we make and the actions we take today will bring about a better tomorrow.

Sometime early in my career, I found at a used book sale a 1972 volume by the late Kevin Lynch, a widely regarded urban design scholar at MIT renowned for his classic works on mental mapping of cities, and good city form.

The Lynch book that I picked up was less heralded but equally worthy. Irresistibly titled, *What Time is this Place?*, the work draws on history, literature, philosophy, environmental studies and planning to explore the interrelation between time and place. Of special interest to Lynch was what we keep (or do not keep) from our past, how we use the past to enrich our present environments, and how we ultimately administer the present to “preserve the future.” Examples from historic preservation, environmental metamorphosis, and disaster recovery figure prominently, but the work is at heart about the psychology of change, what we choose to remember and preserve, and how we manage our traditions, practices, and artifacts to enrich, rather than restrict, the future.

It should not surprise you that a new college president cum planner charged with taking an already exceptional college to “the next level” would find this thinking valuable and compelling.

What time is this place? What time is TCNJ? What habits, attitudes and artifacts do we preserve from our past? What from our present do we or ought we to preserve for the future? How do we hold onto the best of what we have built together and manage it wisely? For that matter, how do we “divide our time,” that is, how much attention do we pay to our past versus our present versus our future?

Those of you on campus know that in my first ten months here I have, judiciously I think, tried to ask more questions than I attempt to answer. But in the spirit of the moment, let me wax about our past to present, our present to future, and our welcome opportunity to plan together. If that sounds like For Tradition, For Tomorrow, For TCNJ, then I got it just about right.

We all carry memories from the past and some of us preserve things. You can imagine your own collections. Me? Among mine are my lucky hat from fourth and fifth grade, the Orioles seat cushion I have had since the days of Memorial Stadium, computer printouts supporting my dissertation research, and, thanks to my mother, two large-format volumes containing every letter—each one detailed, lengthy, handwritten—that I sent home from Baltimore over my four formative college years. (To satisfy your pregnant curiosity, there were 191, not counting postcards and other ephemera.)

Colleges and universities likewise preserve elements of the past, including buildings, archives, knowledge, traditions, habits, and values.

Consider The College of New Jersey. From our founding 164 years ago, in 1855 as the New Jersey State Normal School, we have preserved our status as public and residential, albeit students in the early decades had to find their own lodging in the homes of nearby Trentonians.

Our Trenton location on North Clinton Avenue, where we were located for our first 75 years, is long gone. As alumni can attest, our Ewing campus, where we have been since around 1930, is a continual work in progress, but we have preserved many of the earliest buildings, including the iconic Green Hall.

We are no longer a non-degree-granting two-year normal school nor are we a four-year teachers college, but we have preserved since the late 1950s our third mission as a comprehensive state college with graduate programs.

The college has famously had six names, and a few of you are lobbying me to change to a seventh (which, for the record, is *not* near the top of my priority list). We preserve all the names in memory, though I believe the latest tchotchkes and outerwear in the bookstore feature only the last two, Trenton State College and TCNJ.

The fact and name of our student newspaper, *The Signal*, have been around since the 1800s, making it one of the longest-standing continually produced student papers in the country.

Academically, some topics studied from the outset, including English, math, natural science, ethics, and vocal music, are still in the curriculum. Others, including penmanship, home economics, and geography, the latter surely an oversight, were not preserved. Whatever the academic menu, we have preserved teaching excellence as an emphatic commitment and point of pride.

We have also not preserved certain practices or attributes from our early days. Faculty members used to live in the dorms, playing the role held today by Residence Hall Directors and Community Advisors. The heating plant used coal. For much of our history, the student body and faculty had little racial or ethnic diversity. Until the 1950s, students had to pass six entrance exams to matriculate.

But where TCNJ history gets truly interesting, in my view, is when considering our most recent decades. The framework, philosophy and consequences of these years—even how we tell this story—are largely intact today.

Starting in the 1970s under the leadership of President Brower, TCNJ, then Trenton State College, pivoted toward smaller size, greater selectivity, and near-exclusive focus on full-time, traditional-age undergraduates in a residential setting. The 37 percent decline in undergraduate enrollment—from 9,200 students in 1976 to 5,800 in 1999—was deliberate and stunning.

Transformation is an overused word, but in this case it fits. Once a mix of part-time, full-time, commuters and residential students, by 1999 nearly all undergraduates were full-time, high academic achievers living on or near campus. Acceptance rates fell to under 50 percent. To reflect the transformation and ambition, in 1996, the College changed its name, not without controversy, from Trenton State College to The College of New Jersey. Academic reforms through the mid-2000s codified the teacher-scholar model, four-credit courses, and liberal learning program we have today.

In 2005, the *New York Times* ran a profile titled, “The Hot College in New Jersey These Days,” which lauded hard-won accomplishments—small classes, rigorous academics, great value, and highly regarded reputation—and proclaimed, “The College of New Jersey has arrived.”

Add to these broad outlines the stories, efforts, achievements, mindsets, missteps, and other ongoing dynamics of any complex institution and you will arrive at the present with the memory- and experience-driven amalgam of TCNJ.

If I have been hearing you correctly over the past ten months, then we hold multitudes in our present, a fascinating intermingling of pride, restlessness, confidence, optimism, worry, disappointment, excitement, enthusiasm, nostalgia, anxiety, anticipation, and readiness for action.

From the perspective of this new president, that sounds about right. Perfect, actually. We are in just the place and just the time we need. We are here, now.

Which brings us to the bridge between present and future.

As with the tendency to preserve elements from the past, most of us hold dreams for the future. Again, imagine your own. For a long while my dreams included growing taller—I wasn't picky on specific height, but enough to not need a riser everywhere I go—and my dreams still include finishing my second book (four chapters in and stalled), consistently breaking 95 in golf (not there yet), learning to fluency a second language (despite my unimpressive history), and, honestly, being the good college president that this place deserves.

Here, too, there is a parallel for colleges and universities. They may hold dreams of, for example, national rankings, a new med school, modern housing, an NCAA title, a successful capital campaign.

At TCNJ, we have a clearly stated and inspiring vision for our future. As summarized from the current strategic plan, “Bolder, Better, Brighter”:

“TCNJ will offer an unparalleled education in a vibrant, collaborative, and inclusive community of learners who will make a distinct mark on the world. We will serve as a national exemplar of public higher education.”

Of course, our design of this future is affected by our past and present. Given that we have different memories, experiences and beliefs about that past and present, we should expect variation in our outlook on the future. As Lynch put it,

“People look out on the future with very different eyes: some consider tomorrow or just the next hour; others are preoccupied with events a generation away. The future may seem something that lies ahead of us, something to be explored with hope and effort, or it may seem to be rushing toward us, beyond our control. It may be a realistic expectation tied to present and past experience, or it may be a disconnected fantasy of wish and fear. It may be something to avert or it may be a promised land.”

This line between present and future is the trickiest line in planning. We must navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of two challenging temporal traps. On one shore is preoccupation with the present that inhibits creating an image of the future. On the other shore is preoccupation with the future that prevents us from fully experiencing the present.

Add to this that preserving the future is harder than preserving the past. We know from brain science and the humanities that when asked to complete a story that is set in the past, people tend to offer richly drawn and interesting endings. But when asked to complete the same story as something that will happen in the future, the endings tend to be vague, sketchy, unreal.

Compounding the challenge is an inescapable truism about the future: it is vast, complex, and undefined. There is no record of the future.

Or, as the great New Jersey philosopher, Bruce Springsteen, put it in the refrain of “Livin’ in the Future,”

“Don't worry, darlin'
No baby, don't you fret
We're livin' in the future
And none of this has happened yet”

(Ability to sing in public without embarrassment is also one of my elusive dreams.)

I propose to the broader community of TCNJ, campus and beyond, that we turn this challenge into an abundant opportunity to plan together. We have started already with tentative steps in the Cabinet and on campus, and we will intensify and accelerate this work in the months and academic year to come.

Again, we are in a perfect place and perfect time to do so. We are entering the fourth year of a five-year strategic plan. Since we last intentionally contemplated our future, demographic, financial, social, political, technological, and market circumstances have changed, in some ways profoundly. So, too, have our students, their attributes, interests, and expectations. It has been at least fifteen years since the last of the transformation.

Planning is hard, but exciting and significant work. It demands that we ask foundational questions: Who are we? What do we stand for? What are we assuming about the future? What is a quality education today? What is a public exemplar? What distinguishes us? What will be our size, our scope, our curriculum, our menu of services, our level of selectivity? What does it mean to be a good neighbor or a true partner? What does authentic diversity, equity, and inclusion look like—not superficial, not for effort only, but truly in outcome—and what will it take to make it real? What is our commitment to each other, to community, sustainability, social justice, wellbeing, and other values? How will we demonstrate that commitment and how will we know if we have succeeded? And, procedurally, how we will design together, decide together, act together?

This may sound lofty, and almost surely daunting. And it may be harder and more uncomfortable than it sounds. We should expect to live in uncertainty and ambiguity, to grapple with values and visions, and to disagree, perhaps vehemently. That's what it looks like when we chart our future together.

But it is worth it. In the sage advice of another great New Jersey philosopher, the late Lawrence “Yogi” Berra: “if you don't know where you're going, you'll end up someplace else.”

TCNJ, if the occasionally rocky road of my first ten months here has revealed anything, it is that we are ready and capable to do this work together. We bring personal connections and shared experiences, a tenacity to take on big projects that make a difference, an ethos that values engagement, ideas, and one another, and a character that is honest, motivated, considerate, and ambitious.

I cannot wait to plan with you, to explore where we have been, where we are, and where we are going. Here's to three tenses at once, in our time, in this place, for tradition, for tomorrow, for TCNJ.

Thank you.