Faculty and Staff Convocation address by Diane E. Melby, Ed.D. (edited for print)

Presented Aug. 11, 2020

Celebrating 125 Years:
Honoring Our Heritage, Creating Our Future

Faculty, Staff, Trustees, and of course, beloved Sisters of Divine Providence:

Thank you for coming together today as one community to celebrate the beginning of our 125th fall semester.

This past winter, I read a novel following the story of three siblings whose lives were disrupted by tragedy. The siblings lost their father at a young age and this loss sent their mother into a deep, prolonged depression. The children were abandoned to their own care over the course of a year, often not interacting with any adult for weeks at a time. Throughout the rest of their lives, they referred to this period of time as “The Pause.”

Because I was reading this book at the start of the pandemic, I began to think of the shutdown as “the Great Pause”; focusing more on what could not happen, lamenting restrictions, mourning the loss of personal interactions. However, as I reflect upon all that has been accomplished over the last seven months my thinking has shifted. I now think of this time as the time of “the Great Surge.”

Your response to the unprecedented challenge presented by the pandemic has been nothing short of phenomenal. You did not just react to a bad situation with temporary fixes, band aids and patches; you led OLLU into a new era; one that offers greater access and support for students while advancing the quality of the educational experience through innovative uses of technology.

I have been so incredibly impressed by your creativity. Not only did our faculty seamlessly move their classes online, they invented new models to offer our students the greatest level of flexibility, finding ways to let students this semester choose the best environments for their success in advancing their education. Kudos to all faculty, especially to those of you who teach experiential courses, for finding ways to help students develop their practical skills in a virtual world.
Equally impressive is the rapid evolution of how we deliver student services. Our staff in Student Affairs, Enrollment Management, Mission and Ministry and Institutional Advancement have found new ways to reach out, engage, and support all students. We have taken giant steps forward in providing support to students who are remote from our campuses, and also in how we support graduate students. I am particularly proud of our new-found ability to provide emergency funding, technological support and health care to students regardless of their geographic location or degree status.

Of course, none of this happened without the adaptive ingenuity of our staff who provide administrative services. From coordinating the pandemic response, to keeping finances and paychecks rolling, to keeping the campuses safe and clean, and in every way supporting the work of the entire university, our staff did a yeoman’s job of preparing us for this new semester.

We give a special shout out to our ITS and Communications staff. They worked diligently to keep communications flowing, using every media to keep us engaged and informed. In just a few short weeks they taught us how to use technology at unprecedented levels and I dare say that today, our communication is more efficient, inclusive and transparent than ever before.

These advances have created a new era in education at OLLU. This new era is characterized by greater access, improved instructional modalities, and 360-support for student success. And for our employees, the new era promises greater flexibility without the loss of commitment to the community that we value.

It is providential that this Great Surge coincides with the 125th anniversary of the founding of our university. When we see the resilience, creativity, and commitment that I am calling witness to today, we must be grateful to our founders, the Sisters of Divine Providence, who diligently worked to pass to us that very legacy. This is OLLU’s super power. Time after time throughout our history, we have confronted adversity and responded innovatively to become stronger.

The coming year will present many challenges. The effects of the pandemic will be felt for years to come. We have not yet developed clarity on what the future holds. Of somethings however, I am certain. The strides we have made in instruction and student support have already moved us to a position of strength that will continue to be an asset in the post-pandemic world. The flexibility we garnered to continue to work in a topsy-turvy world will serve us well when the universe throws down its next hurdle. And our DNA is marked by trust in providence passed to us by our Sisters, and will carry us through what is yet to come.

I know that many of you are concerned about enrollment and whether OLLU will need to take actions similar to those taken by other institutions. What I can say today is that we will likely be a bit smaller but because of your hard work the picture today is brighter than what was projected in June. We are carefully watching enrollment and whether students return to classes over the next two weeks. If steps need to be taken to adjust
the budget, those decisions will be guided by our core values. Whatever the outcome, I want you to know that I have spoken with many students and parents who thanked you for all that you did to keep OLLU -- OLLU. I join them in extending my appreciation.

You have dealt with an inordinate amount of stress. You have been the instrument of rapid change, you have juggled your own concerns and that of your family, you have reigned in your fears while dealing with anxiety in the world around you. You have done all of this so you can help students continue to achieve the dream of an OLLU education. Today, we start it all again. Today we prepare to welcome some 2,900 students, coming to us with aspirations and prayers for a greater future for themselves and their families.

To succeed, we need only to ride this Great Surge to its limit. Trust that you are the instrument of providence. Unleash your creativity, utilize the gifts that the Sisters have passed to you, live the dreams of your students: this is the wind beneath your wings, this is how we soar through the new era.

Thank you, thank you, thank you for bringing us to this day. May God bless us as we remember the words from Paul's letter to the Philippians: Whatever is true; whatever is honorable; whatever is just; whatever is pure; whatever is lovely; whatever is gracious; if there is any excellence; and if there is anything worthy of praise; think about these things.

Wings Up!