It is my honor to welcome you to this, the Academic Convocation of 2015, the 28th since the tradition started in 1987. It’s my first, making this a special pleasure for me. I’ve been at DePaul just over eight weeks and I’m still very happy.

It has been a joy to learn about the many programs DePaul offers its students and to get to know the dedicated and resourceful people, first of all this illustrious audience, who make it all possible. There’s so much here, so much capacity for and commitment to doing good in the world.

It is a noble calling that we undertake in higher education. Many students come here seeking a pathway to a job, but we give them much more than that. We have the privilege of introducing students to the intellectual life, the life of the mind, and that is a far greater gift.

As some of you know, I’m kind of a numbers guy, driven by data. So here are a few numbers I find disturbing:

This is the first generation in US history that will be less educated than its parents. Yet it is knowledge and education that drive our economy. We are failing to invest in our own future

The earnings gap between non-college and college has never been higher. In the 1980’s college grads earned 50 percent more than those without college; now, it’s twice as much. There’s an even greater gap in net worth, which is so vital to economic stability.

That is why society invests in education – or used to.

That financial security is also why the Vincentians established universities, including DePaul, to help the poor and disadvantaged, for whom education is a pathway to a better, more secure life. A lack of education goes hand in hand with poverty.

That’s my own story too. My parents were immigrants. They came here from a Holland still devastated by war, by way of France, where I was born. They arrived here on a boat; they were poor; they got our furniture and clothes from the local St. Vincent de Paul thrift store.

But they had faith, and they believed in the value of education. They sacrificed to make college possible for me. And it worked; I graduated, got a job as a professor, and achieved the economic security they hoped for me.

But the numbers show that pathway up the income ladder is no longer working. Nationally, those in the lowest income quartile are only one seventh as likely to earn a college degree as those in the highest quartile. There's a huge achievement gap between the rich and the poor. That gap has grown in the last generation; we're increasingly less a society of opportunity for all.

Where is the social justice in that? More specifically for us, how Vincentian is that?

We have a responsibility to provide education for all, not only the rich. That's a big challenge.

Societal investment in education is declining. How can we still provide access, not close out those who need education the most? I don't have the answer, but a focus of our work at DePaul, with our Vincentian values, must be to keep the doors as open as possible and to ensure that our students graduate successfully.

Providing that upward pathway is part of what we do, but as we noted, we do much more. Employers are looking for college grads who have the skills we impart through the liberal arts: communication, critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, comfort with ambiguity, openness to new ideas. In short, we inspire our students, enrich their minds.
That’s my own history too. Education did give me a career, but more importantly, it transformed me as a person, gave me understanding, values, appreciation for the arts, insights into history and society, world views I could not have dreamed of growing up in rural Ontario.

And that’s what drew me to DePaul. When I met students and heard them talk about what DePaul meant to them, what they had learned, I knew DePaul was the place for me.

That enrichment of the mind is the wonderful, unasked gift we give our students.

“We” is you – all our faculty, tenure, term, part-time, visiting, and our staff. Your work as faculty is central to what DePaul does. Thanks to your high quality teaching and scholarship, our reputation continues to grow.

Do you know from which state, after Illinois, most of our students come? California! If we can attract students from sunny, warm, California to Illinois, you must be doing something right.

Our reputation drew me here from Los Angeles too. But ask me again how I feel about that on a cold, miserable day in February.

There are many ways the university supports faculty, but certainly one of them is compensation. To ensure that our compensation continues to be both fair and competitive, we’ll be conducting a study of faculty salary and benefits during the coming year. I’ll have more to say on this in the next few months.

Our patron, St. Vincent, urged us to have the courage to do good, saying, “Do not be afraid to undertake too much in doing good...” However, he was also practical. The next part of that same sentence is a caution for us. He added, “but fear the desire to do more than God gives you the means to do.” We must be mindful that our ambitions do not exceed our means. As our decades of rapid growth are over, I believe it is time to examine what we are doing and what we may not have the means to continue doing. We’ll be discussing that in the coming months.

In my eight weeks here, I’ve only been able to get to know a few of you. I’m eager to meet more of our great faculty and staff. I’ll be making visits to departments and schools, to hear from you about your hopes and dreams, and your concerns, for the future of DePaul. I’ll be learning about you, and I hope you’ll learn more about my values and goals.

Last week, for example, I met with the general education task force. They’re doing great work. Last year Faculty Council approved learning goals for general education. I look forward to progress on determining how well those learning goals are being met and what we may need to change.

I’m excited about the future of DePaul. Yes, we’re in a period of change, but we have great strengths:

- Our finances are increasingly stable, nothing like the finances of the California university I came from. Father Holtschneider will have more to say on our financial picture in a moment.
- We have great locations, here and in the Loop, with outstanding facilities, in a dynamic international city.
- We have a strong reputation and our graduates are sought out by employers.
- We have a wide range of attractive programs and a culture of curricular innovation.
- Most of all, we have the quality, creativity, engagement of our faculty and staff.

Blessed with all those resources and assets, I’m confident that we – you – will succeed and continue to prepare generations of students for lives that are, yes, financially secure, but, more important, intellectually fulfilling and socially engaged.

In these times our task in higher education is difficult, but it’s tremendously rewarding and fulfilling. We are privileged to be on this marvelous project of transforming lives. I look forward to participating in this project with all of you. Thank you very much.