

Convocation 2021
Remarks Delivered by Provost Salma Ghanem
September 2, 2021

Good morning!

It is a pleasure to welcome you to DePaul's 124th Academic Year. It is truly wonderful to see all of you in person. I know we continue to face hurdles due to the pandemic, but let us savor this moment that we are back together. We will continue with health and safety measures, so that we can help keep it this way.

I'm happy to report as of yesterday, more than 21,000 of our students and nearly 2,200 of our faculty and staff have submitted their vaccination documentation so far. That's how we Take Care, DePaul – and it's one of many reasons why I am honored to be part of this university community.

To borrow the words of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, I would like to “return you an eternity of gratitude and praise.”

Or in my own words - a BIG, LOUD thank you to each and every single one of you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you to our faculty who taught more than 15,000 classes last year, as well as ALL the staff who provided academic support. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

I also would like to take this opportunity to extend a warm welcome to the new faculty and staff who are joining our university community this year. We are delighted you chose DePaul. Welcome to the family! And to all of you who are returning, welcome back!

I don't think it will surprise anyone when I say higher education is going through a transformation. We saw this happening well before the pandemic. Universities across the country, including DePaul, have been under financial stress for some time now. From increased competition to changing demographics, higher education is facing real challenges.

We all know this, and that's why DePaul started introducing new programs and modes of learning to meet student demands well before the pandemic. COVID-19 only accelerated that process.

While we can't say that we're in a post-pandemic world yet – which I know is disappointing and frustrating - I do ask you to keep looking forward. We have

learned a lot over the last year and a half. How can we keep growing academically from those lessons? What must we do to ensure we continue to overcome the challenges that existed before COVID-19 and remain with us today?

I have three calls to action for you to consider:

First, we must continue with what DePaul is known for and that is being student centric.

Students come to DePaul with different goals in mind. Some come to explore and others want a particular program of study. Some follow a traditional educational path while others have taken a more circuitous path. Some want a degree and others want to build on what they have already learned and studied. For each student, we must do everything possible to make sure that every student who comes to DePaul is successful.

We have to be diligent in helping our students persist and graduate. We have to be there for them from the minute they are admitted to when they cross the stage. This is not a one-person job, but it is responsibility for each and every one of us.

We have to make sure they not only succeed at DePaul but succeed in their respective careers.

While most students desire a return to in-person learning, we know they also want flexibility in terms of modality. With more than 150 Zoom enabled and trimodal classrooms, we can meet those demands.

For example, Flex is a new modality that allows students to be on campus or on Zoom, according to their needs and preference. A Flex class ALSO gives students the possibility of floating between the two options at any time during the quarter.

DePaul made a significant investment in new classroom technology in order to make Flex classes possible. And we did it to provide our students with an increased level of flexibility and agency for their learning.

I believe a number of faculty have chosen to try the Flex modality in their classes this fall. I look forward to hearing your feedback, and please know Academic Affairs is here to support you.

My second call to action is a continued focus on strengthening our diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

We have made progress, but I know there is much more to be done.

We have to do better in closing the success gap of our students. We are providing more individualized support to help our students succeed including advising and peer mentorship.

We also have to do better in the recruitment and retention of our faculty and staff.

Last academic year, we initiated one-on-one faculty exit interviews to gain a deeper understanding of how DePaul can better support and retain its faculty.

More than 300 faculty have participated in the Faculty Search and Implicit Bias Workshop since it was revised in fall 2019.

In 2020-21, Academic Affairs awarded 11 new Diversity and Inclusion Initiative Grants to help with activities within the units, which brings the total number of awards to 26 since the program's inception in 2019.

And, moments ago, we presented the inaugural Provost's Award for Excellence in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion to Dr. Valerie Johnson and Dr. Annie Saw.

We created this new award to increase the visibility of DEI work on campus, as well as to emphasize its importance and value. Moving forward, this award will be conferred annually to recognize faculty members who are making significant contributions to ensure DePaul is a diverse, welcoming and inclusive campus.

I want to thank all of you for all that you do for social justice and for the DePaul community. Together, we can make a difference.

My final call to action: keep up your innovation and creativity.

Now, I've always known that DePaul faculty are highly creative. But over the past year and a half, I have witnessed a tremendous amount of innovation. Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, you found ways to enhance the curriculum, develop new programs, and to teach and pursue research in meaningful ways:

- The College of Education launched the Open Windows project. This program matched education majors with the children of faculty and staff in a remote learning setting, allowing DePaul students to earn their required teacher training credits.
- Faculty in the College of Communication used the latest virtual reality technology to teach freshmen in a Discover Chicago class. Students used headsets to gather in a virtual reality classroom where they created their own avatars, viewed PowerPoints and other media, and interacted with each other.
- Even though live, in-person productions could not take place in The Theatre School, faculty helped expand students' thinking about how to creatively produce work that engages audiences in new ways and through varied communication platforms. The Theatre School supported more than 25 independent projects during the 2020-21 academic year, including a digital comedy festival.
- Faculty across the university published roughly 40 new books. School of Music faculty premiered 9 original compositions and recorded 8 albums.

Again, despite the chaos and uncertainty created by the pandemic, it was a remarkable year for research. Faculty received more than \$12 million dollars in new and continuing external grants, and DePaul awarded roughly \$1.3 million dollars in internal grants. The university hosted 141 Undergraduate Research Assistant program experiences, providing our students with approximately \$148,000 dollars in employment earnings.

In fact, one of our environmental science students, Libby Shafer, earned local media attention when she launched the Evanston Host Plant Project, a scientific, community-based effort to save the Rusty Patched Bumblebee.

There are many, many examples of what makes DePaul an amazing institution. I highlighted only a tiny fraction of the great work that takes place.

Making this world a better place is something each one of you believes in, and we pass that on to our students. I'm so very proud to work alongside you.

As we move into a new academic year, please continue to keep our Catholic, Vincentian mission close to your heart.

Have an excellent year, and once again, thank you for all that you do for DePaul.