

Convocation 2024

Remarks by Rob Manuel

Good morning. It's great to see you all. I look forward to catching up at this afternoon's celebration.

It is always energizing to start the school year. As I speak with our new families and returning students, I feel inspired by their aspirations and the way that they look at the opportunities ahead of them.

I second Provost Ghanem's warm welcome to all our new faculty and staff. We are very happy that you are a part of the DePaul family. I also would like to congratulate all of today's award recipients. Thank you for everything you do for our students and our entire university community.

For the past two years, I used this moment to talk about the financial state of the university, our enrollments and other accomplishments. I don't want you to think that my lack of attention to those subjects during my time with you this morning suggests anything other than the fact that I feel a greater need to talk about our community and to offer some thoughts about the state we find ourselves in at this moment.

To be sure we are doing fine financially, and even with the FAFSA debacle you've no doubt heard about, we were able to enroll a healthy population of new, qualified, students. We are seeing good progress in our retention efforts, and I am proud of the way you have all come together to focus on the student experience at DePaul.

But this morning, I want to take most of our time together to talk about what is happening in this moment – a unique and troublesome set of realities that needs our attention so that we can intentionally design who we are – and what we expect from each other.

Last year was incredibly difficult for us. There was intense pain felt by many – pain from feeling un-heard and experiencing the devastating loss of innocent life in the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. Many of us felt real fear because we did

not believe we were safe on our campus. During our most inflamed moments, we did not trust the purity of the motivations of each other's actions, and individuals who were trying to help were vilified and doxed. Jewish and Muslim, Israeli and Palestinian, Black, brown, White, Indigenous, straight, gay, people with disabilities and others. Members from ALL groups are affected.

While the summer break offered a short reprieve from these tensions, our world leaders have not solved the issues that affect us all. From the uncertainty and fear that is being stoked by the most contentious election in my lifetime to the severe humanitarian concerns and desolation created by the Israel Hamas War in Gaza, I imagine we will have more tensions as we move through the academic year.

All of this means that we will be required to recommit ourselves to each other and to ensuring that our community can recognize the different lived realities created for the many affinity groups that are part of our university.

As an institution of higher education, we are being asked to do something that no other organization in our society has been able to do. Namely, construct a community that recognizes and understands the pain, fear, and desolation that each of our affinity groups will have and craft ways for dissent to become a functional part of what holds us together, all while honoring our policies to ensure that each member of our community can be safe and productive.

We need to find a way to design our community so that we find comfort in dissent and security in each other. As the devastation from the war and the election cycle proceed, we will live with the concerns that our traditional structures of stability – including our own government – may not provide the comfort that they used to. DePaul has to stand in that void of uncertainty for everyone.

As an example, each of our affinity groups on campus will have different lived experiences as the elections play out, to the developments in the Israel Hamas War, and the challenges to personal freedoms that we are all experiencing. We have to find a way to meet each group's concerns with a powerful, and individualized set of supports to ensure they are comfortable and secure in our community.

We must move forward our understanding of how our university can create solutions to these unique realities, giving us an immediate and real opportunity to increase our commitment to equity in our very diverse community. This is what Vincentian personalism and radical hospitality mean. As the world denigrates the tenets of DEI work, we must help everyone know that DEI is a requirement of our community because of our Vincentian heritage.

This is where you come in.

Now is our moment to ask the most fundamental of questions: what kind of community do we want to be?

I argue that these opportunities are the most pressing issues we have in front of us. As we do this, I charge you all with:

1. Finding ways to have a dialogue with each other. Respect difference, create a common understanding about the boundaries that need to be created to protect us all, and understand that we need to figure out how to be a community even when we strongly disagree with each other.
2. Realizing that academic freedom is the glue that holds us together and that academic freedom requires us to explore topics that may create discomfort and concern. But by protecting it for everyone we ensure that we see the real value of higher education as a necessary societal good in America.
3. Balancing the support of those voices that call for action in this world with the need to ensure that our community can continue to be open and accessible to everyone – safe for all our members – and maintain the principles of inclusion that St. Vincent de Paul modeled for us.
4. Using this moment to create ways to educate our students about how to be productive and engaged people in the world they are going to inherit when they leave DePaul.
5. Realizing that we are all responsible for generating the programming and changes inside of our community to create the environment we want to live within. And, specifically, we must be willing to recognize when behaviors and actions fall outside of our community standards, jeopardizing our commitment to base tenets of our community.

The question is how will we do this.

I suggest we start by connecting to the things that we may have in common – the things that we may agree on. I suggest we remember that the vast majority in our community are engaging in these conversations with good intent. Specifically, I suggest:

We focus on our collective understanding that there is no place for hate, bias or violence in our community towards any person or group at DePaul.

We should remember that we support a mutually agreed upon cease fire in the war between Israel and Hamas. We, like Pope Francis and other leaders from our faith tradition, believe that creating a lasting peace is the highest humanitarian priority.

We uphold our Vincentian heritage by focusing on how we can support the call for humanitarian aid to the innocent people who live in Gaza.

We continue to urge our elected officials to work towards finding a way to return the hostages that were taken from Israel on October 7.

We focus our energies on understanding that the upcoming election will create new and different concerns for various members in our community, and that because our Vincentian tradition compels us, we should believe these concerns and craft unique solutions for those who are affected.

We tap into our own people because we have the expertise and empathy in our members to create meaningful engagement plans for faculty, staff, and students.

We agree that we are honor-bound to use the teachings of St. Vincent de Paul to create the environment we want to live in.

This summer, our academic and administrative leaders met to talk about our path forward. As we did that, certain hopes for every member of our university community emerged:

We hope you will seek to understand and remain grounded in our Catholic, Vincentian mission, respecting the dignity of all members of our community.

We hope you will actively work to continue the cultivation of a culture of shared governance. This will ensure that the main tenets of academic freedom as well as collaboration, transparency, and trust are staples of our work.

We hope you will uphold academic freedom and free expression, while also treating one another with respect and decency, especially when we disagree with each other.

We hope you will promote and support diverse voices, while also protecting everyone's ability to fully experience and enjoy our university.

We hope you will find ways to voice your opinions, shout your objections, and engage the areas of social unrest that matter to you, while at the same time respecting DePaul's policies and procedures that enable everyone to feel safe, and enjoy all that DePaul has to offer.

If we are successful here, understand that we will create tension. We will create actions and behaviors that may not be valued by the entire community.

But I want to make it clear that tensions, when functional, are a critical part of the model of quality education in America that we are trying to build here.

We are not looking for a singularity of beliefs. We are looking for a mutual respect for the humanity in the people who express them.

We are not trying to stop arguments. We are trying to create better ones.

This afternoon, I will share these hopes and expectations for our community in [a message to all faculty, staff, and students](#). Please take time to read them and encourage those who are not here today to do the same.

In an effort to begin this work at DePaul, I am pleased to announce the formation of the Dialogue Collaborative. This interdisciplinary initiative aims to create a place to model this work and to extend the culture of our university to everyone.

Deans Lexa Murphy and Guillermo Vasquez de Válasco are leading this effort. They have called on Dusty Goltz, a Vincent de Paul professor of communication, and David Wellman, associate professor and director of the Grace School of Applied Diplomacy, to help with initial planning. They will work with Faculty Council and, among other things, do a call for a larger steering committee in the fall quarter. This work will be expanded over time to involve all faculty, staff, students, and alumni. For now, they invite you to participate in two ways:

Faculty and staff are invited to the first open-door discussion on “Building a Culture of Dialogue” in September. More details on that will follow.

Full-time faculty and staff may apply to participate in the Dialogue in Action certification workshops, which is a new proprietary certification program housed in the College of Communication.

I also encourage you to talk with Lexa and Guillermo about how you can become involved and be an active member of this effort.

Lexa, Guillermo, Dusty, and David, thank you for dedicating your time, expertise and passion to this important initiative for our community. I am extremely grateful to you both and look forward to seeing your progress.

Speaking of progress, one year ago, we launched Designing DePaul, a framework to drive our university forward to become a national leader in quality higher education. From early success in student retention to taking significant steps forward toward our next comprehensive campaign, we accomplished a tremendous amount to date.

In order to get you to the Faculty and Staff Picnic faster, I will not take the time to go through the lengthy list of Designing DePaul accomplishments now. Instead, you can look for an email from me soon. Please know we achieved a lot and I am proud of all of you for working to implement these initiatives, and I am excited for our future.

Remember, Designing DePaul is a framework. Now it's time to turn the vision into reality.

In early September, you will receive a link to the Designing DePaul Strategic Plan. It's a draft, and I would like your feedback on all the items inside it. The document includes strategic plans for each college and school, as well as major institution-wide projects and programs.

As you review the draft, keep the following in mind: the strategic plans are meant to be living documents. We will use them to chart our priorities, our connections, and our path forward. Look at them as dynamic blueprints that we will adapt as the needs of our university evolve.

The open comment period and our work to connect the prioritized initiatives from our schools, colleges and units will run through the fall quarter. We will incorporate your feedback and present a draft to the Board of Trustees at the end of October. We will then continue to finalize the draft and publish the final version in January.

I want to emphasize how grateful I am for all the work the colleges, schools, and units dedicated to creating their strategic plans. When I look at this plan, I feel energized about DePaul's future. I feel joy. I feel hope.

We have all the elements – coding, strategy, narrative, philosophy, reasoning, lessons, values, rhythm and stage presence – to make a truly spectacular masterpiece.

Our progress will continue as we transform into a national leader in quality higher education.

Thank you for your continuing support and all you do to drive DePaul forward.