

Convocation 2024

Remarks by Salma Ghanem

Good morning, and welcome to a new academic year. We are fortunate that in higher ed we not only celebrate calendar years, but also new academic years.

Convocation provides a welcome opportunity for us to reflect on the past year and to usher in the new year. But really one of the best things about convocation is the chance to connect with friends and colleagues from across the university. It is truly wonderful to see so many of you today, and I want to wish you all a Happy New Year.

I would like to begin by extending a special welcome to the new faculty who have joined us. Over 50 full time faculty, across eight of our colleges are joining us.

Many of the colleagues joining us are new to DePaul. Some have taught at DePaul before and are now stepping into new full-time tenure-line and non-tenure-line faculty roles. They attended a full-day orientation in the University Library yesterday, and as I mentioned when I met with them, I hope our new colleagues see what I meant about how important community is for all of us! And yes, that we also know how to have fun.

I would also like to welcome Julie Lawton as Interim Dean of the College of Law. Thank you, Julie, for stepping in. And a special thank you to Jennifer Rosato who served as Dean of the College of Law for almost 9 years. We miss Jennifer and wish her great success in her new role as managing director of the American Bar Association Accreditation and Legal Education. I also want to thank Lucia Dettori for her willingness to continue serving as Interim Dean of the Jarvis College of Computing and Digital Media.

As some of you might have heard, Caryn Chaden, Associate Provost for Student Success and Accreditation, will be retiring at the end of this academic year. While we still have a full academic year to work with Caryn, I wanted to mention her upcoming retirement at Convocation for two reasons.

The first is to announce that we will be launching an internal search for her replacement soon, so that we have enough time to ensure a smooth transition.

But the main reason I wanted to announce it today is to seize the opportunity to publicly thank Caryn for her dedicated service to DePaul over the last 38 years.

[PAUSE FOR APPLAUSE]

I would also like to take a moment to thank and congratulate Kate Barrett, the founding director of the Masters in Occupational Therapy, and the faculty and staff of the OT program. I am delighted to announce that the Occupational Therapy program recently received word that the program is now accredited!!!!

At DePaul there is much to celebrate. We celebrate our academic excellence, our community partnerships, student success, and our diversity. We celebrate diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, religious affiliation, and ability and we proudly uphold the Vincentian value of respecting the dignity of every individual.

Last year, we welcomed 21,348 students. 44% are students of color—and the undergraduate population is closer to 49%. We also welcomed 1,377 international students last year from 113 different countries.

We are richer because of our diversity. We are stronger because of our diversity.

We are DePaul because of our diversity.

We are all committed to our students' success each step of the way until they walk across the stage at Commencement—and after, as alums. To help our students succeed, we take a two-pronged approach: the personalized experience and leveraging technology.

Last year, we launched OneDePaul, a system that enables students to connect with advisors, instructors, and support offices across the university. We have had over 33,000 cases go through this system and 4300 views of 140 different articles addressing common questions. Kudos to IS, University Registrar, Financial Aid, Student Accounts, DePaul Central, the Dean of Students Office, ACE and the College Offices for collaborating on this important venture to help with student

success. (I'll take this opportunity to ask you all to mark your calendars for the Student Success Summit planned for December 3.)

For our international students, Global Engagement provides support for our students before they arrive on campus, once they are here, and after they graduate.

Global Engagement goes beyond supporting international students at DePaul and provides our domestic students with international opportunities. We celebrated the 10-year anniversary of GLE, and I am happy to report we have had close to 250 collaborative teaching opportunities involving close to 5000 DePaul students across 40 nations and territories. In addition, Study Abroad participation is back to pre-pandemic levels.

Since the pandemic and probably as a result of the pandemic, students are opting for more flexibility in terms of class modality. Over 60% of DePaul students take at least one online class. To provide students with the flexibility which they have come to expect, starting this fall the School of Computing is moving its graduate programs to Flex modality, combining face to face, synchronous online, and asynchronous online modes of delivery.

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A university's education goes beyond the classroom and extends to helping our students navigate difficult social issues and international conflicts. The events taking place in the Middle East have highlighted the varying opinions of our community members about the boundaries of free speech and academic freedom.

We have many questions that we need to grapple with: How do we maintain inclusivity while adhering to the tenets of academic freedom? How do we show support for a cause that others might oppose? How do we reconcile the nuanced contradictions in our principles and the shortfalls in our processes?

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There are no simple answers to these questions. We must rely on our roles as educators as we engage with these issues. We need to model how dialogue and discernment can be used to address the most controversial of topics. We have an obligation as an institution of higher education to create an environment where academic freedom and inclusivity complement one another, and DePaul is THE PLACE where that can be done.

The Academic Freedom Task force is developing recommendations on how we can change some of our policies and processes to provide clearer guidance for our actions and decisions. The Speech and Expression Committee is educating our university community on the guidelines for demonstrations and free expression. We have a responsibility to model civil discourse.

As educators, we must hold our speech to a higher standard than the rhetoric of politicians. At DePaul we ask ourselves what must be done and then we do it. So while I know the road won't be easy, I also remind myself that St. Vincent de Paul didn't shy away from the difficult and complex issues of his day and neither will we.

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Speaking of complex issues, another issue that we need to address is the role of artificial intelligence. AI is changing the way we teach, the way we conduct research, and the way we run the business of the university. We need to be ready for these changes—and alert to the ethical challenges they will present.

The AI Institute is up and running, and summits have already been held on teaching with more to come on research and engaging with community partners. I am happy to announce that a group of DePaul faculty just received a \$1.5 million NSF planning grant, which links AI to the DePaul Migration Collaborative. The grant brings together the expertise of our faculty in computing, the humanities, the sciences, business, and law, exemplifying rich and robust interdisciplinary research.

This grant was one of the 218 proposals submitted last year for external funding, requesting over \$53M; our faculty and staff received awards totaling over \$12M.

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There is a reason why DePaul is considered an innovative institution. Each year, existing curricula are reviewed and revised to ensure currency and support student success; new programs (like the new B.S. degree in Robotics) are developed, approved, and launched; fruitful collaborations with community partners are forged.

This innovation is built on a strong, solid liberal arts foundation. This foundation is even more important in the world of AI, where a broad-based education that helps students cultivate a strong sense of social responsibility, better understand context, strengthen their analytical skills, and develop their powers of expression and argument. The Liberal Arts will experience a renaissance as the world grapples with the impacts of AI.

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As you are highly aware, higher ed is facing many changes, challenges and opportunities. I encourage you to look at the world through a kaleidoscope.

Kaleidoscopes are animated by change. That change can produce delight and anxiety at the same time. The patterns we admire today may rearrange themselves in unexpected ways tomorrow. And while the patterns may change, the core of who we are doesn't. We are an institution committed to the success of our students. Let us delight in the new patterns as we embark on a new year.

Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do.