

THE PATHS TO GREATNESS

**UNIVERSITY OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
CONVOCAATION
FRIDAY, AUGUST 14, 2009**

DR. DAVID HALL, PRESIDENT

It is an honor to welcome you to this university convocation. I want to recognize the presence of members of the Board of Trustees, the faculty, administrators, students and staff. I am delighted that my wife Marilyn and my daughters Kiamsha and Sakile are also present.

Historically, an academic convocation was a sacred moment in the life of a college or university. It was the time where the leaders of the Academy were called together to reflect on their noble purpose and to chart the future of their sacred craft. Today it is a time for this community to collectively launch a new academic year. We come to this place today to recognize our common purpose. The pursuit of knowledge, the transmission of ideas, the cultivation of values, and service to others, are the foundations upon which a university must always stand. Therefore we convene this gathering to remind ourselves of these treasured ideals.

This is an especially moving convocation for me, because it is my first as President of the University of the Virgin Islands. Though I have spoken to many university groups this week, today we invite the broader community to hear our dreams and touch our aspirations.

Whenever a new president arrives at a university it is expected that he or she will develop a new vision for the institution. This new president believes that the vision and mission for the University of the Virgin Islands are already in place and should remain. The goals and values contained in VISION 2012 provide a workable framework for our future endeavors. My charge, as I see it, is to develop a method and process that will ensure that we reach those goals and even

exceed them. My charge, as I see it, is to give this community the license to dream again, to believe in each other again, and to reach for the stars of greatness. Therefore, I want to talk to you today about “Pathways to Greatness.”

Even when an institution has a clear strategic plan on paper, there can be a gulf between what we claim and what really exists. Like a majestic mountain that attracts our attention and reverence, we still have the challenge to figure out what paths will lead us to its summit. Like a beautiful dream that stirs our soul we still have the responsibility to determine how to turn that dream into reality. The campuses of UVI sit in the shadows of majestic mountains, and in the middle of fields of dreams. Our task in the coming years is to discern how to climb the mountains of our dreams.

The dream that I have for UVI, and the one that I believe many of you have, is that we will become a great university. Greatness, not in the sense of size, but in regards to the quality, distinctiveness and character of the ideas and people we produce. Greatness is a value that encompasses our hearts as well as our heads. Greatness suggests that we are larger than the sum of our parts, because we have harnessed those intangible ingredients that compel us to inspire our students, so that they can transform their lives and the world. This is a mountain that I believe we can climb if we work together and stay on the path. My pathway to greatness is paved with seven values and expectations that I am asking this community to embrace, and hold us accountable to instill.

To become a great university, we must first become a high performance organization where quality is always our primary focus. We must be able to reduce the time it takes to complete and accomplish our primary tasks and obligations. We must also ensure that what we

produce is always of the highest quality. We cannot demand from our students, things which we do not consistently achieve.

Second, to be a great university we must be a service oriented institution that never forgets or neglect our primary customers. Our students are our primary customers and we are here to serve them with the utmost respect, openness and tough love. Because part of our service is to challenge our students to reach their full potential and to not accept less than what they are capable of producing, the quality and care with which we teach and treat our students will ultimately determine whether we become a great university.

Third, we must be a fiscally responsible institution. Our resources are limited; therefore, we must make sure that we are always using them wisely and for the best benefit of the university's needs. Our budgeting process must be open, clear and collaborative.

Fourth, we must be an institution where our individual and collective integrity is always present and never compromised by the forces of temptation or expediency. Greatness has a moral lining that must be preserved. If we sell our souls to the highest bidders, if we manipulate our rules to serve our selfish ends, then we will never be a great university.

Fifth, we must be an institution where decisions are made in a collaborative and transparent manner based on a thoughtful and reflective analysis of data, trends, institutional policies and values. We may not agree with the decisions that others will make, but we should demand that those decisions are made in a manner that meets our highest standards of rigor and thoughtfulness.

Sixth, we must be a place where individual and unit performances are regularly evaluated and assessed based on pre-determined institutional and individual goals and objectives. If we are

not accountable for the work we are charged to do, then not only will we never be great, but we will soon destroy the very fabric of this institution.

Last, but not least, we must be a place where the intellectual, emotional and spiritual well being of each person is valued, nurtured and respected. To be a great university we must be a compassionate and caring university. We must make sure that we celebrate our oneness, applaud our diversity, and give reverence to both the mundane and sacred aspects of our humanness.

These are my seven stepping stones to greatness. I have made my Cabinet aware that these are the principles upon which they must stand, and imbed within their units. I believe that if we follow this pathway then we can climb the mountain of our dreams. So I pledge to you that these are the ideals that my administration will pursue. We will not always get it right, but we must have an unyielding dedication to getting it right.

Educational institutions play such a critical role in the development of any society. We are the guardians of a society's most treasured ideals; we are the keepers of the torch of curiosity and exploration. We are the custodians of dreams yet realized. As educators we are warriors who fight against ignorance, bigotry, complacency and mediocrity. We carry out this task, not from a place of arrogance or conceit, but from a place of humble reverence for the special privilege that has been bestowed upon us.

The greatness of UVI will not just emerge from the beauty of our location. It must emanate from the depths of our pursuit of knowledge, from the quality and respect of our relationships with each other, from the pureness of our values and the depth of our commitment to service. How we design, conduct and pursue the educational process on a daily basis will determine if we are developing a new type of leader, who will not only lead this Territory in the future, but will be compassionate global leaders.

Statisticians of the future may not be able to measure or verify the compassion and integrity of our students. Geospatial designs may not be able to locate on the map of life where our students' creativity was first born. However, if we consistently nurture and inspire our students' compassion, integrity and creativity, then the world will know that these qualities exist, and the world will be a better place because of our unique educational enterprise.

If we are to be great, then we must work wisely to enhance our students' success. One of the best measures of an institution's greatness is not just how it attracts students but how it helps students to obtain their primary objective. I plan to convene a task force in the weeks to come that will be charged with developing a systematic and comprehensive analysis and strategy for improving our retention and graduation rates. The solutions to this challenging problem will not be easy, but we must be willing to first figure out in a systematic manner the major impediments to our students' success, and then strive to remove or address them.

But a great university is not just concerned with what happens within its campus boundaries, but cares deeply about the conditions of life all around it. This university has a special mandate to serve this Territory and to enhance the quality of life for the people of these islands. I believe that we must begin to systematically partner with educators and educational administrators and leaders throughout the territory so that we can work collectively to enhance the quality of education throughout the Territory. One of the ways a city, state or territory is measured is by the quality of its primary and secondary educational system. UVI has a responsibility to work collaboratively with the primary and secondary educational system to make sure that we are doing all we can to develop our students full potential. I will also convene a presidential educational summit that will bring the key educational leaders to the table so that we can decide how we can work together to address this challenge. I am especially concerned

with the growing disparity between male and female achievement at the primary and secondary levels. We must develop answers to this growing crisis, or else we will wake up one day to a very dangerous reality. Issues of crime and violence often have their roots in the economic conditions of a society, but they are also a product of the failure of the educational process. If we can keep our children, especially our male children engaged educationally, and excited about the possibility of discovery, then we decrease the possibility that negative forces will capture their attention. This effort is not charity. It is in our best interest as a university and as individuals that we address this challenge.

The pathways to greatness are not always clearly lit. Sometimes we stumble in the dark as we search for the path. But what I hope to remind us of when this occurs is that each of us has a light within us that can illuminate the paths to greatness. We can choose to curse the darkness, but I ask us to choose to light a candle that gets us back on track. As we start this new academic year, may each of us reflect deeply upon what greatness means to us. Then may we take steps that will lead us there.

I want to close this convocation address with a few lines from one of my favorite poems. The poem is entitled *The Invitation*, written by the Oriah Mountain Dreamer. It is a poem about greatness, but more significantly, about the internal dimensions of greatness. I share it with you because it captures a part of what I need from each of you, and what I hope you will demand of me as your President. I have changed one line to fit this audience.

“It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have. I want to know if you can get up, after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done to (teach and inspire our students).

It doesn't interest me if the story you are telling me is true. I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself; if you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not betray your own soul.

It doesn't interest me who you know or how you came to be here. I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied. I want to know what sustains you, from the inside, when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone with yourself and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments.”

If you and I can respond positively to the demands of this poem then we are destined to create a great university. The world will know that our work was not in vain, because the people who crossed our path changed the direction of history through their brilliance, creativity and compassion. This is our destiny UVI; this is our calling, and our ultimate invitation to greatness.