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Chancellor's Remarks to Prospective Students and Parents at the 2014 Spring Reception

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Recommended Citation

Syverud, Kent, "Chancellor's Remarks to Prospective Students and Parents at the 2014 Spring Reception" (2014). *Chancellor's Office (2004 - 2013)*. 65.

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SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on April 21, 2014

Location: Schine Student Center

Remarks: Chancellor's Remarks to Prospective Students and Parents at the 2014 Spring Reception

*The Chancellor was introduced by Maurice Harris,
Dean of Admissions.*

I hope you are as excited to be here as I am to welcome you to Syracuse University. You were invited from more than 28,000 applicants to join Syracuse University's Class of 2018. Our accepted students represent all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and 85 countries. In this auditorium today are students from 30 states and territories representing every geographical region, from Connecticut to California and Wisconsin to Texas, as well as Puerto Rico; and students from Canada, Mexico, India, and Spain.

I just became Chancellor here in January. In my first months on campus I have been observing students and professors busy learning in our classrooms. (I always warn the professors first before I stop in, because I hated when visitors would catch me by surprise in my own classrooms). I also have been visiting students in dorms, dining halls, student groups and on the Quad. I made these visits because teaching and learning are what universities are all about, and it is exciting to watch and to make better. It is what attracted me to higher

education and what gets me excited about coming to work every day. In fact, I have a confession to make:

I am a compulsive teacher. I teach a lot. I have taught more than 6,000 students. I like teaching. When I became a University administrator I did not transition out of teaching. I just added administrator to my job description.

When I say I am a compulsive teacher I really mean it. We are talking twelve step programs here. Before I was a Dean or a Chancellor, I used to teach seven days a week – five at the university in programs in law, engineering, medicine, and undergraduate schools, then coaching kids' soccer on Saturdays, then Sunday school to third-graders every week. When I taught Sunday school to 8-year-old kids, I was determined that those kids would learn the history, structure, and geography of the entire Bible as well as memorize the names of all the books and major prophets, apostles and other people. Four weeks into my Sunday school year I had a parent politely suggest to me that it would be OK to take a three-minute break for some juice each week.

I am a slightly reformed compulsive teacher by virtue of having children myself. My reformation started 15 years ago, when I was standing in a long ticket line in an airport with my son, who was then 13 years old, after a flight had been cancelled. I was surrounded by angry passengers and people losing their patience. I turned over the plane ticket – hopefully the parents here at least remember when we had paper plane tickets – I turned over the paper ticket, and there on the back was the text of the Warsaw Convention. Fifteen paragraphs of fine print explaining the limits of airline liability for baggage and personal injury on international flights. I started to explain to my son how interesting this was, and what we could learn from the way the Warsaw Convention language worked. He said, “Dad. This is NOT another learning opportunity.”

I say I am a teacher because I want you to know we truly understand here that the students, including those you will meet today, are the heart of the school. Every one of us who works here is privileged to be able to teach and work with students. They, together with our dedicated faculty, are why this is such a great private university. Not a perfect university, not a university without foibles and occasional flaws, but a great university.

You are beginning your college career at an extraordinary time. A time when technology is changing the way we learn and do just about everything; access and affordability are growing concerns; and debates simmer over whether colleges and universities are professional training schools or broad liberal arts schools or both or something more.

In some ways it is an unsettling time, an uncertain one. Parents and students: That you will succeed here at Syracuse is something I have no doubt about. You will succeed because you will learn and be mentored by extraordinary faculty. You will succeed because you will be supported by caring staff who understand what a momentous milestone college represents, not just for students themselves but as much or more for their families. You will succeed because of those who succeeded before you, 250,000 dedicated alumni who serve as mentors and provide unique learning experiences to give current students a leg up on the competition after graduation. You will succeed in such a short time that it will be breathtaking to you, as it is every year to me at commencement. Four packed years go fast here. But I have no doubt you will be ready for the task, and you will excel at it.

There are lots of things I could talk about with you today. It is a time of great progress at Syracuse University, and there is a lot going on here besides classes. We have hired 118 new full-time faculty in the past few years in every exciting field of endeavor. We have faculty in every field publishing books and articles, and pursuing research locally and around the world. Faculty like chemistry professor Robert Doyle, who is researching an oral system of insulin delivery to treat diabetes and civil engineering professor Charles Driscoll whose research probes the effects of acid rain and mercury on the Adirondacks. Our faculty collaborate across disciplines, like sculpture professor Bob Wysocki and earth sciences professor Jeff Karson, who conduct controlled “lava pours” to produce path-breaking geologic research opportunities. That’s right—lava like volcanoes. It is an event unique to Syracuse University and one I had the pleasure of witnessing myself a few months ago, in the middle of a January snow flurry.

Our students perform great operatic classics in the acoustic wonder that is Setnor Auditorium in Crouse College. And they work alongside professional actors at Syracuse Stage, an equity theater affiliated with Syracuse University’s Department of Drama. They learn in incredible facilities, like the Newhouse

Communications Complex, the Life Sciences Complex, and the College of Engineering and Computer Science with its flight simulator and three-story high bay-lab for building and testing.

But I would like to talk with you today not about the detail or any of that, but instead about teaching. If this is a great private University, it is in large part because we have held onto good teaching here at the same time we have embraced the drive to be a national and visible educational institution that is prominent in research and public services. There are great teachers here, and you will have those great teachers, and you will be transformed by them. That is one of the most important things about this University, and I try every day not to lose sight of teaching as what matters here. One way not to lose sight of teaching is to make sure we pay attention to it: that we write and talk about it, that we constantly try to improve it, and that we pay attention to what is working and what is not.

One thing I do to get my colleagues to focus on teaching is an exercise I can also do with you, right now. I recently did this exercise with every new faculty member at Syracuse. Here goes.

Think about your best teacher. Think over your years of formal education and visualize the person who was your best classroom teacher or best teacher outside of class. Think of the person in elementary school, grade school, high school, college, or graduate school whose teaching inside and outside the classroom made the biggest differences to you. Think about how that person dressed and spoke, what subjects that person taught and how that person taught them. Remember what that person's classroom or office or laboratory looked like. I want you to be concrete here – have a name and a face in mind.

So think about that individual who was your best teacher. Let me make some observations to you about that persona, and you tell me whether I am right or not.

First, he or she is not the person you see in teacher fantasy films—movies about a teacher's lifelong triumphant career. For example, *Mr. Holland's Opus*, a movie released the year many of you were born. I hope that many of you parents here (and others of a certain demographic) have seen *Mr. Holland's Opus*, the unexpectedly popular 1995 movie about a high school music

teacher's lifelong career. It is a real moving tearjerker of a film, culminating with generations of former students, including the governor of the state, performing Mr. Holland's symphony, his "Opus," on the occasion of his involuntary retirement. It is a teacher fantasy film, and only one in a series that stretches from *Good Morning Mrs. Dove* through *Goodbye Mr. Chips*, *October Skies*, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, *Dead Poet's Society*, and on. We teachers rent them when we are discouraged – everybody needs a fantasy now and then.

But your best teacher isn't Mr. Holland in several respects: First, he or she was not beloved by everybody except for one or two mindless bureaucrats. In fact, some students – maybe a lot of them – didn't click at all with this teacher. Second, there wasn't a stunning celebration of this teacher's work, a tear-jerking finale – or at least you weren't there if it occurred. In fact, it was probably like any retirement event already in most workplaces – some speeches, some cake, maybe a dinner, but surely nothing that captured for the world the essence of what made that teacher so special to you.

I have a pet theory that the reason movies like *Mr. Holland's Opus* have such an unexpected appeal to the older people is precisely this: Each of us has benefited so much from particular teachers, but by the time we are mature enough to understand how we have benefited, the teacher is gone – separated by time and distance, and often by death. We older people desperately want to believe that somewhere, somehow, justice was or will be done to that teacher – that the whole world will cheer and celebrate what a great job that teacher did. I can assure you that justice has already been done to that teacher you are thinking about, and it didn't take a celebration or a commendation from the governor. That teacher got his or her reward each and every day of his or her career, because of his or her attitude toward the job. It is the attitude that is the common attribute of all great teachers. Heaven knows there isn't very much else they have in common. Each one is a real character, with idiosyncrasies and expressions and methods that are unique and defining. My great teacher in fifth grade used to clear her throat in an appalling tone that communicated more to us than the most eloquent speech; my great teacher in college used to wear the most bizarre combinations of plaid and striped clothing; my great teacher in law school used to dangle his legs over his desk like a giant spider about to seize a fly. I love to imagine them in a room together, arguing about clothing or teaching methods or race or religion or politics, and I know they wouldn't agree – I doubt they would even be friends.

It is their attitude that they had in common; it is their attitude that assures they are rewarded in their jobs.

What is that attitude? They loved their jobs. They loved teaching, being in the classroom. They couldn't help teaching well because they enjoyed it so much that they were always looking for ways to keep doing it. They put up with annoyances – unruly or spoiled students, inadequate facilities, deans, and chancellors – although they may have complained about them – but their attitude in class was joy and determination to be the best for their students – and it showed. It showed in the classroom when they spoke, and it showed in their interactions with students outside the classroom. (They wanted their students to learn and love their subject, and they cared about their students as people). Why do I tell you this? Why do I ask our teachers to remember this?

Because we should take three lessons in humility from this exercise:

First, that transforming teachers do not achieve their influence only by what they do in the classroom (attitude of cheerful passion for their subject). They know their students outside class. They care about them, they worry about them, and they demand more from them. We have to do that too. I want you to know that we do that here at Syracuse University. That's why I came here. And yet we still have to get better at it.

Second, for most of us, the transforming teachers came long before college. They came in high school, in grade school, in elementary school, in church or synagogue or mosque or at home. As college teachers, we stand on the shoulders of those teachers, with their lower pay and sometimes lower status and hard work, who somehow made those they taught into the incredibly smart, and curious, and questioning, and argumentative, and interesting adults that I have the privilege every day to learn from.

Some of the people I have to thank most for teaching the wonderful students who come here – their most influential teacher – are their parents. I have three kids, and it was scary sometimes seeing how quickly or slowly they learned, how challenging it is to raise them in this place and time, and how much good and bad they could pick up from what I would say and do. For all you parents out there today, I want you to know that you have done well. You should be extraordinarily proud of the job you have done.

Third, when you have a truly great teacher, you need to celebrate him or her before it is too late. The impact of that teacher will be with you for a lifetime, and you shouldn't wait until it is too late in your own lifetime to acknowledge that teacher. When you go home today from here, call that teacher and tell them they made a difference.

You have a wonderful day ahead of you with much more exciting activities than listening to a speech by the Chancellor. Enjoy your classroom visits and campus tours, and don't forget the lunch at the Carrier Dome. It is not often that we get the chance to stroll the same turf where our Division I athletes play, so please do take advantage of that. I can't wait to have you at Syracuse and to teach you here.

Congratulations—and Go Orange!

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