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### 2019 New Student Convocation

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*Syracuse University*

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# Syracuse University

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on August 22, 2019

Location: The Dome

Remarks: 2019 New Student Convocation

*The Chancellor was introduced by Student Association President  
Mackenzie Mertikas '20*

Good evening. On behalf of my colleagues on the faculty and staff, and the more than one million Orange friends who have graduated from our programs, I welcome you to Syracuse University.

I am going to be followed in this welcome by Professor Jamie Winders of Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. Professor Winders is a decorated teacher and a scholar who is an expert on urban, cultural and social geography, particularly international migration. Her research studies the intersection of these fields with new media and social dynamics. She's director of Syracuse University's Autonomous Systems Policy Institute and a leader in interdisciplinary study and research.

I would also like to joint Provost Wheatly to acknowledge and thank the many faculty, staff and students who this fall will be facilitating the shared readings of Hope Jahren's book, Lab Girl. More than 400 students, faculty and staff have volunteered to lead discussions of the book for you. All of you here who are volunteers who are facilitators: please call attention to yourself now in your own way—by waving, shouting or whatever works for you. We all thank you.

Incoming 2019 students: There are at least three different audiences present in this Dome right now. They are first you, the new students at Syracuse University; and second the faculty and the staff, and the upper level student leaders of the University who are interspersed all around you; and third, of course your parents, families and loved ones who are seated in the very hot upper deck.

I am going to speak to each of these audiences.

First, to you our incoming 2019 students: you have come here from almost every conceivable background and place.

You 5,884 new students come from all over this nation and the world. From every state, Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands, from the District of Columbia, and more than 80 nations on six continents, including a dozen Native American nations. Every single one of you equally belongs here. As far as all of us are concerned, you are each now forever Orange.

New Orange students, you are now part of a great, engaged, thriving, and diverse international research university. We have brought you here, first and foremost, to seek knowledge. This is your University's 150<sup>th</sup> birthday year, and we are going to be marking it all year in ways appropriate to this sprawling and complex place with its glorious and dynamic history. So much of what has happened here first is because our students and faculty helped lead the way - in the sciences, in the arts and humanities, in the professions, in sports, in public affairs, in communications, in architecture, in education, in engineering and computer science, in law, in information studies, in management, and in serving humanity. You can do this too at Syracuse, and we want to help.

This year, in particular, we are helping your through extraordinary efforts to enhance your student experience. That is why there are very large cranes like the one that towers over you as you are in this building. That is why there are

new faculty and new programs all over campus and all over Syracuse University. We believe that, to seek knowledge, we need to pay attention to enabling each of you to be healthy in mind, body and soul. That is why, on Monday, we are opening our new air conditioned integrated health and wellness facility, the Barnes Center at the Arch. Please tour it and use it if you want to excel at Syracuse. It is an incredible central hub for mental and physical health and wellness services. It is there because the students who preceded you asked for it, helped design it, and inspired our alumni to help fund it for you.

Entering students, this university is not, and never has been, a place where people are expected to stand alone, isolated from others “on their own two feet.” This is a university where people gain access to excellence by rising with a network of friends and colleagues—friends and colleagues who often look very different from each other, friends and colleagues who indeed may not have two feet but who rise very well just the same. There is a network here to help you and for you to build, including at the Barnes Center. Entering class of 2019: Please start building that network now.

Next, addressing your Faculty, your Staff, and your returning student leaders: I wear a tie whenever I am with students. Communications experts and consultants have occasionally urged me to lose the tie. They want me to look more approachable and in tune with our students. They tell me people will be less afraid to talk to me if I look exactly like them.

I was actually once given this advice at a convocation like this one by a person wearing weird Hogwarts robes and academic regalia that have changed only slightly since medieval times. I found this ironic. I still wear the tie, and I still honor the Syracuse tradition of robes and regalia that go back 150 years.

The robes, the regalia have a purpose—they remind me, and all of us, that a university education is a unique and a serious business. They remind us, as we

start at University and when we finish, that we have crossed an amazing milestone.

I still wear a tie to remind me of something very different. 32 years ago, at the beginning of my career as a professor, I had a colleague—another older professor—who dressed very casually—exactly like his students. He looked like them. He approached his students and socialized with his students as if they were just his friends. Then one day, a student in his first semester of school came to my office in tears. The student had told my colleague—the friend in casual clothes—that the student, too, hoped to be a professor someday.

And my colleague said to that student, who was the first in his family to go to college, that as a “friend” he just needed to know that professors had to be intellectuals, and this student was just not intellectual material.

That day, in the presence of that student in tears, I made two resolutions. First, I resolved I was going to help that student become a professor with every ounce of my being or die trying. And second, I resolved that for the rest of my life for a reminder, I was always going to wear an uncomfortable tie when I was on duty with students. The tie always reminds me that I have moral responsibilities to my students beyond friendship—that I have a responsibility to believe in my students even when they may not believe in themselves.

By the way—that student, the one who was not “intellectual material”—today holds an endowed chair as a full professor at a great private university—a great private university that Syracuse is once again going to beat in basketball this season.

Now let me turn to the hot upper decks to address parents, family and loved ones: Congratulations on getting to this day. I remember vividly what this day feels like as a parent. My wife, who is an engineering and computer science

professor here, and I have—many times—dropped one of our kids off at college.

Parents and loved ones, I had mixed feelings each time I delivered a kid to college.

I was happy that my student was starting at a great University. I was proud. I was checking out the residence hall and the roommate and the food and the course schedule. I was smiling on the outside listening to too many of speeches and advice—I think I even managed to laugh in the right places.

But inside, I had a knot deep in my stomach. I wondered how I was going to adjust to having a piece of my soul, my kid, walking around a campus far away, beyond my ability to control or influence. My wife, my mother-in-law, my family and I had poured so much into each of my children—so much time and love and energy and worry and inspiration. It was a labor of love, but it was labor, and we got very used to it. And indeed, it defined the best part of our lives.

And then suddenly there I was in a vast auditorium, and some president in a strange robe and a tie, was telling me it was time to go home. In that moment, I hated that president. Where did he get off? He had no clue how much love and work and joy our whole family had poured into that kid to make attendance at University possible. That president had not seen all the times my kid had triumphed, let alone the many times my kid had struggled, had been sick, had been in trouble, or had been just plain infuriating.

That president did not seem to understand that our family was not just dropping off our kid and cheerfully waving goodbye. Instead, we were embracing a transition, while our uniquely constituted family remained very much intact, including with our kid in college.

Well. Parents, family, loved ones: Please relax. At Syracuse University, we actually do understand these things. We do know that you want to continue to be there for your kid who is now an adult. We know that you want to be there in different ways that respect and support the tremendous achievement of your student's first weeks at a great university. We know that because so many of us have been right there ourselves. And if that reassurance is not enough, please remember: Family Weekend is only eight weeks away—on October 18-20. We hope to see you then.

Now turning back to you, the incoming students of 2019.

For the last 150 years—and we hope for the next 150—people at Syracuse University have come from all over the world. Each of us dresses and looks and communicates differently. We do so for our own unique reasons, and some of those reasons are not obvious at a glance. Yet at Syracuse, all of us have the potential for incredible things. Everyone you meet here, including those who look or speak or learn differently than you, has their own story. And no matter how different they are, they are bound by a similar desire to make the world a better place. And almost everyone here wants to know and help you. Please start out with that assumption. You will be amazed how often it is true.

New students: when I was talking to your parents and loved ones, maybe you heard me suggesting that your parents should stop worrying about you now that you are at this wonderful place, Syracuse University. Our data analytics specialists at Syracuse tell me there is a zero percent chance this will happen. They will still worry.

What I was trying to achieve when I was speaking to your families was different: I was trying to remind you how much they have done to get you here. That sacrifice is worth something. It is worth taking this opportunity you have at a great university seriously. And it is worth a phone call or text message occasionally to tell them how you are doing.

To everyone here today—those of us who are newly Orange and those of us who have experienced what it means to be Orange—I conclude with this:

These incoming students recite the charge that Chancellor Erastus Haven gave to our University almost 150 years ago. It is a charge that helps define what it means to be Orange, today as much as in 1871.

As these students participate in that charge, as that charge is accepted today, I want everyone to know that this University now belongs to these incoming students as much as to anyone else who is Orange. These students are going to ask things here, build things here, prove things here, leave things behind here, —that are really unique and enduring. To help this happen is our greatest responsibility. Welcome to Syracuse. And Go Orange.

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