

MONTGOMERY COLLEGE CLOSING MEETING
MAY 16, 2012

Where We Are, Where We're Going

A Speech by
Montgomery College President
Dr. DeRionne Pollard

Good morning! And welcome to the close of yet another successful year at Montgomery College. I know that by this point in the year, you all are feeling exhausted and in need of some much-deserved R&R. But, I also hope you feel optimistic and hopeful about the work you have accomplished, and the foundation you have helped put in place to benefit our collective future.

I feel grateful.

Grateful for the Journey.

From time to time, the English professor in me likes to take a look at the etymology of words that are important to my life.

The word journey has the same roots as words like diary, deity, and divinization.¹ Clearly, there is something precious and sacred about a journey.

And that is the way I look at the journey we have taken together this past year: it is precious and sacred. And I am grateful that we took the journey together.

I want to take my time this morning to celebrate some of our highlights from our journey, but also some of the bumpier parts along the road and what I have learned from those challenges. I am grateful for both the ups and downs.

The past year has been about articulating who we want to be—the ultimate destination in our journey—and putting the architecture in place to get us there.

¹ <http://www.edulang.com/blog/journee-journey/>

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I see myself as the travel agent. I am here to set the itinerary, to provide advice and expertise, but ultimately what makes the journey successful is the travelers. I believe a successful leader provides direction, guidance and resources, and then empowers others to produce the magic. I truly am grateful to see that so much of your hard work has been realized.

Let me highlight just three of the successes:

One: Common Student Experience

One year ago, at our closing meeting, I introduced to you an idea called the Common Student Experience. I spent last summer formulating what that meant for me...but ultimately, I left it up to our College community to breathe life into the concept.

Flash forward to this year, and our task group has established seven truths that I shared in last month's State of the College. These truths are commitments to our students, and expectations to which students can hold us accountable.

I applaud the task group, and the entire College community for having the courage to examine our current practices and keep the great, improve the good, and change the mediocre.

Our board of trustees is moving toward approval of our strategic plan, which will include action steps and plans to actualize these truths. Starting next year, we still start devoting resources to getting started. We are turning the corner and starting a new phase of the Common Student Experience journey.

Two: Governance

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One year ago at this time, we had but a set of recommendations from a Blue Ribbon Task Force about how to develop a truly representative governance system.

Today, 16 months after a highly collaborative process, we have a robust governance system in place where there is a seat for every constituent group at *one* governing table.

We have held collegewide elections, and all of the constituent and campus councils have already met to elect officers, make appointments, and set up regular meeting times. Tomorrow, I look forward to attending the first meeting of the College Council. I cannot think of a better way to place the exclamation point at the end of a monumental task. Thank you to everything involved, and especially the leadership team of Ms. Amy Crowley, Professor Jenny Polm, and Dr. Brad Stewart for their exceptional work. I have full confidence that the yet-to-be-hired governance coordinator will keep all of the moving parts functioning in this highly complex and representative system.

Three: Curriculum Redesign

Last year this time, we had piloted our developmental math initiative, and were just about to embark on collegewide implementation.

This year, the campuses now serve more than 5,000 students in the redesigned developmental math courses! These students move at their own pace but must have mastered a concept before moving on to the next. This design has allowed more than 100 of our students to accelerate their math sequence by completing more than one math course in a semester. By moving to a mastery-based curricula, all students will gain the necessary knowledge and confidence to succeed in their subsequent coursework.

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And that is but one area of the College community taking a hard look at the classroom and how we want to best reach our students.

The English discipline is in the midst of a yearlong accelerated college English pilot. English faculty members from across the College are meeting to design a collegewide curricula for 14 designated freshman English sections.

Our biology departments on all three campuses have formed a task force to ensure that our course content and pedagogy are up to the date and align with the recommendations of the National Academy of Sciences and the National Science Foundation.

All these disciplines are coming together to erase campus borders and create a new direction together, which helps provide some discipline-driven consistency that our students come to expect from our courses, regardless of which classroom, which campus, and which professor.

Challenges

I am grateful for these successes.

I am grateful for the bold work we have achieved.

But, I also am grateful for the challenges— because every journey comes with lessons learned along the way.

So just as I mentioned three successes, let me mention three *personal* lessons learned.

One: Classification

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The first centers on our classification study. Let me start by saying I am proud of our renewed classification effort and the hard work of our steering committee, led by Jason Rivera and Donna Schena. I am proud of the progress, the transparency, and the dedication exhibited as we embark on a sensitive, and personal, undertaking.

The classification journey has indeed been a personal one for me, too. When I started here, I too quickly assumed that our original classification study was progressing on course, and that we would have it wrapped up by the end of my first year. Sure, I knew there were bumps and bruises, but I thought they were normal byproducts of such an undertaking. I admit, I misjudged. So, we took a hard look at our process and made changes, resulting in a renewed approach to better serve staff.

Two: Becoming More Involved

The second lesson learned is similar to the first in that it required me to ask the tough questions and take a hard look at the process.

The move to change the titles of the leadership within administrative and fiscal services to vice presidents upset many of you in this room, and I acknowledge your concern.

I still believe there is validity in better aligning administrators' titles with their work and with their placement within the institution. But I recognize we moved too fast, and we did not think broadly before taking action. We did not look at how the change would affect other offices and positions. It was a misstep on my part, which is why our classification committee is looking at the issue of staff and administrator titles across the College to identify what fits best for us.

Three: Being Everywhere

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And finally, my third lesson learned: I cannot be everywhere.

As you all know, I am a true extrovert. I become energized by being around other people—our faculty, staff, students, and community members. I want to be everywhere.

But at the end of some weeks, I realize that I stretched myself too thin. I read your e-mails every chance I get, but I need to take more time in connecting with you, to study and delve into issues of importance to the College, and to plan for the College's future. It is difficult to tackle these tasks with so many demands of leading critical meetings or attending important events. So I have learned that I need to build in more time into my schedule to accommodate these quieter, but just as important presidential duties.

Conclusion

Therefore, I plan to spend some time this summer reflecting on the journey we have made, and the journey yet to come.

I ask you to do the same. I ask you especially to think about how you personally, as well as in your professional role, can help promote unity here at the College. We need every department to come together, from every campus, as one college, to live up to the expectations of our students, and our accreditors. I would urge you all to reflect on the root, the core, of your program as you begin to tackle the challenges ahead. I love that idea of going back to our roots. Put on my English professor hat again...do you know that the word radical comes from the Latin word "radix" meaning root. Radical is, in fact, "of or going to the root or origin."

Going to the root.

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It is with this definition in mind that I ask you to think radically. Think about the root of who we are as an institution – and who we want to be. We have accomplished so much this year along those lines, and next year we will continue on the journey of making those ideals a reality.

I want to leave you with one other notion of the word radical...and as it ties back to the theme of these remarks: Grateful for the Journey.

Sister Teresita Weind, Congregational Leader of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, recently spoke to the Trinity Washington University community. Her speech title: Radical Gratitude.

What is radical gratitude?

She says:

“Radical gratitude is this emptying out of ourselves for the good of the village, of the people, of a nation, of our own family. The key to existence is self gift. When we give ourselves away, we truly exist.”

I love that thought... only by giving of ourselves do we ever truly exist!

Let me conclude with a truly appropriate quote from Sister Weind as we move forward as one college:

“Awakening from a sense of separateness is what we all are called to do. With our vehicles of degrees and diplomas, we have the means to grow in a sense of unity and to strengthen the oneness with other human beings in the universe.”

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I believe she is so right. Together, we are stretching and growing and learning from challenge. I look forward to continuing to develop into one College and to truly embracing our unity.

As you leave for the summer, please know I have radical gratitude for the journey we already have walked together.

I. AM. GRATEFUL.