

## Convocation Address – August 2017

Thank you.

What an honor it is to speak to you today at the beginning of a new school year.

We gather in this beautiful place after a summer that has taken us in many directions.

All of our diverse experiences over the last few months **bring new dimensions** of insight, wisdom and possibility to our community.

We should share the fruits of these experiences with one another – for even if two people have had the same experience – each might see it differently.

For example --

I spent my summer in Jerusalem with my husband, Shawn, and our two daughters who are 9 and 11. One evening we went to Bethlehem to visit the church where Christians have marked the site of Jesus' birth since the year 327. We got there just as this ancient church was closing and when we went in, we found that the four of us were standing alone at Jesus' birthplace. I was savoring this special moment when my daughter leaned over to me and whispered:

“Mom, someday I hope that I get to see the Indianapolis 500.”

So - whatever experiences you've had this summer –even if you viewed them differently than someone else-- I hope that you're glad to be back and excited about what lies ahead. In the few minutes that I have this morning, I want to offer something that I hope will be useful to you as you embark on this new school year.

There's been a lot of research in recent years about what helps college students and graduate students succeed. Multiple studies confirm that one of the best indicators of success **after** graduation is

whether or not the student made a meaningful connection with a faculty member, coach, staff person or administrator during his/her years on campus.

The National Survey of Student Engagement reports that students who connect with a mentor do **better** after graduation – they indicate higher job satisfaction, greater advancement in their profession, and show higher rates of civic engagement.

In fact, research shows that even smaller interactions with faculty such as talking about career plans, discussing readings outside of class and seeking guidance on research projects – all contribute to the long-term success of students.

This connection between achieving goals and developing meaningful relationships is incredibly fortunate for each of you because Saint John's is dedicated to helping you build exactly these types of connections.

The faculty, staff and administration are here because we want to support you – not just in your academic work, but in your flourishing as a whole person. We don't just aim to prepare you to do a job, but to be engaged citizens, community leaders, and to live lives of meaning and purpose. We **want** you to connect with us -- its why we choose to be here.

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To be honest --when I first heard about these statistics connecting success after college and meaningful relationships, I found them quite striking and I was surprised that one factor could be such a clear indicator of student achievement.

But, the more that I thought about it – the more that I realized that, its actually not some genius discovery – in fact, it shouldn't be surprising at all.

What these statistics reveal is THE IMPORTANCE OF MAKING REAL HUMAN CONNECTIONS –

THIS INSIGHT is not new // it lies at the heart of the liberal arts tradition & the Catholic Benedictine tradition.

THESE STATISTICS ABOUT STUDENT SUCCESS ARE EVIDENCE OF THE  
FUNDAMENTAL TRUTH THAT HUMAN BEINGS ARE INHERENTLY RELATIONAL  
CREATURES.

**AND** THAT BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS IS ESSENTIAL TO OUR  
HUMAN FLOURISHING.

Not to get too theological here, but I am a theology professor, we see an understanding of this  
reality throughout the Christian tradition – in God’s nature as a Trinity of persons, in the beauty and unity  
of creation, and in the message of the gospels.

For all human beings, achieving our goals and becoming our best selves is **TIED TO OUR  
ABILITY TO CONNECT WITH OTHERS.**

What I’m talking about here is a real connection with another human being - knowing their story,  
understanding what matters to them and where they are coming from.

I’m also talking about real connections with lots of human beings, with a community—becoming  
part of something larger than yourself – seeing the interest of the whole – the common good – not just your  
own interests.

I’m also talking about connections with human beings who are not exactly like you – people who  
have had different experiences and have different perspectives on the world – people who can stretch you  
to see and think in new ways.

The Benedictine Tradition has always realized the importance of making human connections and  
witnessing to the interconnection of all reality.

We have a great visual of this– right here in the church.

I want you to turn around and look at the stained glass **wall** behind you –

THAT WALL IS AMAZING! -- TAKE IT IN FOR A MOMENT.

Look at all those hexagons – Bees make hexagons in their hives because they figured out a long time ago that hexagons are one of the strongest and most efficient structures in nature.

Hexagons, honeycombs and bees are widely associated with the Benedictine tradition because they are symbols of cooperation, strength and interdependence.

If you look at that wall its something of an architectural wonder– it's a free-standing wall – it does not touch the side walls or the ceiling of the church. IT'S FLEXIBLE SO THAT IT CAN CONTRACT AND EXPAND with the heat and the cold.

If you've swam in Lake Sag in July and walked across the tundra in January – then you know that there is a wide spectrum of temperatures here in Collegeville. (If you haven't been here in January yet – get ready.)

**The wall works together.** The wall is a constant reminder at the center of our campus of our need for human connection AND THE FACT THAT OUR FATES AND OUR SUCCESS ARE BOUND UP WITH ONE ANOTHER.

Making connections often involves risk because it can pull us out of our comfort zone and give us a feeling of instability. But connections – *especially* the ones that involve risk – make us more flexible and therefore stronger – like the wall. If the wall were unable to move and flex – if it was bound by the concrete of the rest of the building or was made of one solid piece of glass instead of many interconnected units, it would crack and become unstable and ultimately unsustainable.

So, my message to you today as we start a new school year is this – MAKE MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS. I invite you, and even challenge you to

Try stuff, not just the stuff that you already know you like.

Meet people, new people – go to new events, join new clubs, try new activities.

Go to the dining hall by yourself once a week and sit with someone you haven't met yet.

Reach out to your advisor – even when its not registration time.

Go talk to that professor whose class you love or who's class you're struggling in

Research shows that college students who make these kinds of connections succeed – the Catholic Benedictine tradition shows that **THESE CONNECTIONS ARE FUNDAMENTAL TO WHO WE ARE.**

ALSO -- Make these connections not just because they're proven to contribute to your success, but because our world today is in desperate need of human connection. We need more understanding and solidarity. The real experience of connecting with another person can teach us, shape us and challenge our assumptions in ways that reading books or scrolling through the internet never can. Real human connections have the power to pierce through preconceptions and prejudices. Many of the tragic events in our world today result from a lack of human connection – from the myth that we can know things about people in the abstract or become our best selves in isolation from one another. We face challenges in our world that have no easy solutions – but at the root of **all** possible solutions is the need to cultivate **real** connections between **real** people.

In conclusion, its not an exaggeration to say that the relationships you make here at St. John's will transform who you are.

Its also true that the connections you make here will ripple out beyond you and transform the world you go out into.

We need Johnnies to help transform the world. We need the SJU community to be a place that witnesses to the power of human connection – to the interconnectedness of all reality and the strength found in interdependence that we see represented in the wall behind you.

What you do this school year matters -- IT MATTERS TO YOUR SUCCESS, TO THE PERSON YOU BECOME, AND TO THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD AROUND US. So, take time to enjoy the semester and to make your decisions count.

And if you get good at making connections – come back to me and let me know how Jesus' birthplace and the Indianapolis 500 fit together.