

Inauguration of Dr. Kwang-Wu Kim, 10th President of Columbia College Chicago
The Field Museum, November 1, 2013

Inaugural Address

Distinguished colleagues and fellow presidents; trustees of Columbia College Chicago; elected state and city officials; faculty; alumni; students; family; friends; and guests: I thank you for being here to bear witness today. You honor me with your presence and I am deeply humbled.

I thank my colleagues, whose greetings have brought so much to this ceremony and whose presence means so much to me personally. I thank those of you who have offered me charges, all of which I accept with gratitude. I would like to thank my family for a lifetime of support and encouragement, even when the likelihood of success seemed remote, which was often. And I offer my thanks to the many teachers and mentors I have been privileged to learn from throughout my life. I feel that all are with me on this stage today, sustaining me while reminding me that an individual's achievements always rest on the work and support of many.

It was less than one year ago that I first received a call about the presidency of Columbia College Chicago. At the time, I was a dean at Arizona State University, where I had gone because of the university's powerful tripartite mission of Excellence, Access, and Impact, words which continue to resonate with me and still reflect my belief about the purpose of higher education. I recall being a bit surprised by the call; having grown up in Chicago, my memory of Columbia was of a very small and, if I may say so, not terribly significant institution in the Loop.

But when the call came, I had been reflecting on possible next steps. While I still believed deeply in my university's mission, I found it challenging to operate in an environment in which overtly political agendas seemed at times to determine educational priorities. In my work as dean, too, I was struggling to establish the legitimate necessity of the creative disciplines within a paradigm for inquiry, discovery, and value defined by the sciences and engineering disciplines. In the academy in general, there is a deep distrust of makers and performers because of an unwillingness to accept that these are different and yet very real modes of learning, understanding, and creating knowledge. I was finding it increasingly frustrating to have to work within the cliché of the arts and design disciplines as soft, non-scholarly, and, ultimately, non-essential.

But back to Columbia College Chicago and that initial telephone call. Out of a sense of curiosity, I went online to do my homework. I was impressed by the growth of the school into a major presence in the city and by the breadth and quality of its offerings. But the negative press I encountered was daunting. In addition to a most unfortunate video clip that seemed to be everywhere, the local press was slamming the college left and right for among other things, a divisive prioritization process conducted in public view and a protracted, increasingly hostile

contract dispute with the part-time faculty union. The picture painted was of a place lacking a framework of civil discourse, and I remember thinking, “No, I don’t think so.”

But then I read the mission statement and saw the words, “[E]ducate students who will author the culture of their time.” That was the first ‘wow’. Not the typical “preparing the next generation of top performers and artists” or whatever version of that phrase everyone seems to use. “Author the culture of their time.” An understanding that young creatives have a purpose and an active role to play in the world other than to simply fit into existing careers. An understanding that an education must equip them with the sense of agency that they require to fulfill their purpose. Interesting.

So I came to Chicago to take a look. And I have to say that in spite of the freezing weather, it felt like a ‘wow’. My interactions with the community were stimulating and engaging, and I found people to be high-minded, idealistic, and focused on the big picture. The gripe sessions, the litany of slights and oversights long stewed over never came. Wow.

In the end, it was all about my meeting with students. I remember sitting with a group of young people who clearly would not have fit in easily in your average American high school. They would not have been the rich kids or the popular kids or the jocks or the teacher’s pets. No, they were probably perceived as the weirdos and the freaks and oddballs on the fringe. But here they were at Columbia College Chicago, together, open, idealistic, articulate, caring for one another, part of a large community of young people just like them. They were home. As I have said numerous times, I realized I was experiencing the ultimate revenge of the fringe. And it felt great and powerful and right. At that moment, my heart took over and I knew with certainty that this was where I was meant to be. Wow.

So today I am celebrating my four-month anniversary, and one of the daily ‘wows’ is that I am leading an institution comprised of makers and doers and performers and teachers and thinkers and scholars, all of whom start from the premise that creative practice is of inherent value – indeed, that in the twenty-first century fluency with creative practice is an essential skill. No more squeezing into someone else’s agenda or struggling to articulate what we do in language that inherently disadvantages us. Wow.

Now if we are going to undertake something as big as redefining greatness for Columbia College Chicago, we need to examine our foundations, so allow me to tell you what I see when I look at our college.

I see a distinctive mission and academic focus that differentiates us from other institutions. That in and of itself is a huge advantage in the crowded and often redundant sector of higher education. In a world plagued by a lack of creative thought and an apparent, widespread inability to see things other than how they seem, our focus on the creative disciplines and the teaching of creative practice makes us an institution to be reckoned with.

I see the power of our core values of access to excellence, diversity and inclusion, and community engagement, values which connect us intimately to key national conversations about the future and purpose of higher education in our changed and changing world.

I see the rightness of our institutional motto "*Esse quam videri*" ("To be rather than to seem to be"), a clarion call for the authenticity which underlies all great human expression and endeavor.

And I see the endless possibilities predicated on our place here in Chicago, one of America's great cities and one of the major cultural and educational centers of the world.

Our foundations are strong, which suggests that much is possible.

So let's start with a definition for greatness.

Thinking I'd be a little different - this is Columbia College Chicago, after all - I went online and looked up the word in the Urban Dictionary, which offered a number of definitions. My favorite was, "Greatness is the act of being great," followed by the usage, "Wow, man, that's like total greatness."

Actually, I think we know what we generally mean by greatness. Certainly it has something to do with quality and meaningfulness and impact and purpose.

I believe the seeds of greatness are scattered liberally throughout our institution.

I see them in the courage and passion and endless creativity of our students. In the powerful work of our alumni. In the deep expertise and real enthusiasm of our faculty. In the unwavering dedication of our staff. In the commitment and generosity of our trustees. I see it in the apparently limitless idealism of our community; in this regard, we are second to none, and thank goodness for that.

But the discussion of greatness in the world of higher education is replete with specific cultural connotations which must be examined. Surely not for Columbia College Chicago the conditions which define the elite institutions of higher education, whose basic mode is to exclude as many as possible and to maintain a protected distance from the less privileged world.

No, we choose to keep our doors open because we are committed to offering what we have and what we are to the broadest range of qualified students, and because we believe that we derive meaning and purpose from our engagement with our city.

Traditionally, the great institutions have focused on educating those whom they deem the best and the brightest. But in a school committed to teaching emerging cultural forms and preparing students to author the culture of their time, who are the best and the brightest? Quite possibly not the usual suspects.

No, in our quest for greatness we must not set out on the path trodden by the traditionally great institutions. For Columbia College Chicago, that is a road which leads to a dead end, and one, I imagine, which increasingly will be littered with the remains of institutions that sought to be something they were not.

We need a model for greatness which is not about exclusivity or perceived stature or guardianship of sacred tradition. I believe our greatness will be defined by our value.

By the value we bring to our students' lives. By what and how much they learn. By the quality and extent of their transformative journey while they are with us. By the degree to which their minds are opened, their skills developed, their awareness broadened, their sense of self made strong, their purpose clear.

By the value we bring to our city. Through the work of our faculty and our students as animating forces in the life and development of Chicago.

By the value we bring to the world through the work of our alumni, and also by how successfully we model twenty-first-century creative education.

Ultimately, greatness in the world of the elite institutions is based on input. It is hard to get it wrong if your students are already groomed for success. But it is commensurately hard to make a difference in their lives.

To be great at Columbia College Chicago, we must relentlessly focus on output – on the transformative outcomes that we generate.

Now, if you will allow me, I have some thoughts about what I believe we must do, and I would like to begin with our core purpose.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Given our promise to both prepare students for a career and educate them for life, our curricula must be characterized by an active and continually evolving engagement with current creative and artistic practice and with industry partners. The question is not how to prepare students for today's careers, but rather for careers which do not yet exist. Thinking about their long-term futures, we must craft a set of twenty-first-century learning outcomes for all students, a common set of skills and proficiencies that our faculty believe young people must acquire to succeed in the world today and into the future.

In a world in which traditional disciplinary boundaries in creative practice and scholarship continue to blur, we must become a hotbed of curricular innovation and flexibility. We must offer our students multiple opportunities to explore, allowing them to take fullest advantage of the richness of our offerings. If we are to live up to our mission, we must not lock our students into overly rigid sequences of courses, nor can we penalize them for experimenting, crossing

boundaries, and occasionally failing as they figure out who they are and who they want to be. After all, we are obligated to help them find their authentic voice. And as we experiment and dream and play, let us ensure that the rigor of our assessment of learning outcomes equals our creativity in designing new curricula.

We must not shy away from a practical focus in our curricula. Business skills, creative entrepreneurship, the ability to translate creative passion into real-world action and success must be something all Columbia College Chicago students learn.

In a similar vein, while not making empty promises, we must declare employment a desired outcome of a Columbia College Chicago education, and then guarantee that we have the infrastructure to maximize the likelihood of that outcome.

And while I am on the topic of learning, let me say that we must move beyond a model in which only our students are engaged in learning. We must create learning opportunities for our faculty to develop new expertise and expand their skills so that they become even more expert at teaching to the diversity which characterizes the student body at Columbia College Chicago. Our staff, too, must be given opportunities for growth and professional development so that they find new creative ways to help advance our mission.

TECHNOLOGY

We live in a time when our experience, our creative practices and scholarly endeavors, and our relationships to one another have all been transformed by our interactions with technology and new media. We must embrace technology as the basis for new educational delivery models which enhance the learning experience of our students and which extend the reach of our educational enterprise, as the basis for building a more coherent and cohesive community and, most importantly, as a platform for new content creation. Our students are waiting for us.

We must invest in our teaching and learning spaces and commit to building new state-of-the-art learning and discovery environments which give rise to a culture and practice of complex collaboration and which help erase boundaries between disciplines and connect the world inside our walls with the world outside. The common link between future capital projects, whether they create new environments for teaching, learning, and interacting or for performing and making, must be technology. What we build must connect our students to the future, not objectify our memories.

RESOURCES

The bottom line is that our push for greatness will cost, and we will need ample new resources. First, we must put our financial house in order. We must assess and guarantee that we are using our existing resources wisely and responsibly. There is no value in administrative structure for

its own sake; we must create new efficiencies in our operations. We cannot continue to operate beyond our means.

We must creatively expand our business model and seek out new sources of tuition revenue. We must build robust programs for non-traditional students, for adult learners, and for children. We must develop alternate degree and certification models. Our summers should be vibrant with educational activity, not just for our own students but also for students from abroad, for Chicago public school students, for members of our community. And we must engage with new teaching technologies to explore how we can provide students who never set foot on our campus with access to the Columbia College Chicago experience.

We must aggressively raise the bar of expectation on our advancement efforts, doubling our annual giving, doubling our endowment over time, and significantly increasing scholarship dollars and discretionary funds.

We must reconnect to our alumni, not only to ask for their financial support but also to capitalize on their expertise and experience, building an extensive network of informal mentors for our students and numerous points of connection into the professional world.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The successful community engagement work already being done at Columbia College Chicago could serve as the basis for creating a college-wide model which gets us beyond the colonial mindset that characterizes much community-based work in American higher education. For Columbia College Chicago, service learning and outreach activities are not good enough. True engagement work is messy and challenging, as it requires us to step off our pedestal and acknowledge the expertise, practice, history, and experience in our communities, and acknowledge also that we have as much to learn from our partners as any of our community partners have to learn from us. But as we build this web of relationships and reciprocal learning, we will become inextricably tied to the life of our city and make true our promise to animate Chicago. Furthermore, we will create opportunities for our students to be out in the world, exploring who they are, testing their beliefs and interrogating their work, not only in the safe protected spaces we provide but in communities where they may encounter vastly different perspectives and points of view, and where they will likely be called upon to defend their beliefs. I know of no better way for young people to have the sorts of ‘a-ha’ moments that are transformative and life-changing. Indeed, one of my cherished dreams is that this sort of experiential education will become a defining characteristic of a Columbia College Chicago education.

DIVERSITY

Discovery in the twenty-first century is increasingly based on models of complex collaboration as the challenges we face grow in dimension and complexity. Increasingly, individuals fluent in

creative practice and adept at working with unlike partners are playing a key role on problem-solving teams.

In this context, our commitment to building a diverse and inclusive community is one of our greatest strengths. A truly diverse community will maximize the likelihood that the next best idea or the next most compelling creative practice may arise in our midst. But let us not pretend that our work is finished. We must continue to develop as a community characterized not just by how different we look from one another but by how much we learn from one another because of our different ways of being in the world. Our commitment to diversity must infiltrate our curricula and permeate all levels of our institution, and it must be embedded in institutional priority and narrative, administrative structure, and appropriate processes.

STRUCTURE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

A word about infrastructure. Our quest for greatness will require expert leadership in all areas of our institution, operations that are maximally effective, and an ability to move quickly, and always in the direction of our goals. We need to take a hard look at how we are structured and how we do things, and must not be bound by institutional history as we redesign ourselves.

Within our evolving model of shared governance, we must build a model of faculty governance that supports the oneness of our faculty, both full-time and part-time. I salute our faculty leaders who have already taken courageous steps forward in this direction.

Clearly, we have a lot of work to do, and it will not be for the faint of heart or for the lazy of mind. We must be clear-sighted, courageous, strategic, honest, tough-minded, ruthless in principle, and compassionate in practice.

You have charged me to lead, and I accept that charge gladly and with humility. But we all know that it is impossible to lead alone; we are surrounded by examples of the paralysis that results when individuals refuse to work together for the good of the many. I will always try to take the high road and I will always expect others to do the same.

I have long been inspired by the words of a senior colleague who once advised me to “find a place where you can surface your courage.” I know that I have found that place in Columbia College Chicago. Now is the time for us all to surface our courage. We have much to do, and future generations of creative young people, struggling on the fringe and looking for an educational home and a launching pad for their futures, are counting on us to get it right. Let us always keep them in mind as we take up the challenge of redefining our greatness. Let us be bold. Let us be relentless. Onwards.

Kwang-Wu Kim