

PRESIDENT DANKO ADDRESS

August 21, 2016

Thank you, Dr. Flaherty.

Good afternoon. I am extremely pleased to welcome all of you—parents, families, friends, and especially our new students. Every one of you is joining the Butler University community today.

I want to thank the Butler faculty and staff members who are participating in this ceremony. You are the foundation of everything that makes Butler a special place to learn, and I am honored to be working with you.

Every student here has worked hard to arrive at this moment. I congratulate you on your achievements, which have earned you a place within this outstanding Butler University class. I hope you are extremely proud of yourselves, because we are proud to have you. I know that everyone here at Butler will do his or her utmost to help you succeed: academically, professionally, and personally.

Parents, this is also an important milestone in your lives. As the father of two daughters who have graduated from college in recent years, I have some sense of what you are experiencing. You are taking a major step in that very natural progression, when you drive away from campus and your student stays here. I want you to know that I—and all of Butler’s faculty and staff—take our commitment to help our students succeed very seriously. We wouldn’t be in this profession, or at this particular university, if we didn’t feel that way.

Many of us are parents. All of us think as parents do, in our desire to create a nurturing environment here at Butler, where young people can grow as critical thinkers and as well-rounded human beings who make a positive impact in the world.

The name of today’s ceremony is *convocation* because its purpose is to convoke, or call together, our incoming class in a formal assembly. But I would like this ceremony to represent a calling-together in a deeper sense.

Your Butler years will change your lives forever. Your intellectual growth will transform you. Your accomplishments will enrich you. Your service projects will humble you. But look around at your new classmates. Above all, *they* will change you. Your *togetherness* with this diverse group of people, most of whom you don’t yet know, will teach you more about yourself than you ever dreamed possible.

You are beginning your college careers during a rather turbulent period in our nation's history. In my own lifetime, I have not seen this level of social, environmental, and political turmoil since the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In particular, today's Convocation has me reflecting my own first day of college at John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio back in 1971. There was great civil unrest in this country, much of which resulted from the Vietnam War, dissatisfaction with the country's political leadership, and a younger generation who were challenging the system through social activism on college campuses.

Frankly, a common expression among my generation during that period was, "don't trust anyone over 30." I've now moved well beyond *that* point in life!

Another interesting historical event at the time—one which is now particularly relevant to you—was the passage of the 26th Amendment to the Constitution in July 1971, establishing 18 as the minimum voting age. And so I cast my first presidential vote during my college years.

So, let me ask a couple questions of you (and don't worry—I'm not going to ask anyone to reveal their political leanings).

- **How many of you plan to vote in the upcoming presidential election?**
- **How many of you have a strong opinion about who you want to see elected as president?**

Well, here's what I know: while you feel strongly about who you believe should be elected, there are others within this community whose opinions are diametrically opposed to yours. That's an absolute fact.

In addition to the differing *political views* you'll experience on campus, there is another matter that has become increasingly complex on nearly every American college campus, including Butler's, and that is how we hold up, protect, and defend the principles *freedom of speech* and *academic freedom*.

Your college education will essentially take place in the center of this constellation: political and social turbulence; freedom of speech, and academic freedom.

If we are doing our jobs correctly, you might experience some degree of discomfort on occasion in the course of your education. For example, in the classroom, professors or peers may expose you to ideas, beliefs, and experiences that are unfamiliar or that conflict with your own.

A college education *should* provoke and challenge you in this manner. This is part of your developing critical thinking and discernment skills—which will serve you well throughout your lives in a world *filled* with conflicting perspectives and strong opinions.

Your stay at Butler is an ideal time, in a relatively safe environment prior to being in the workplace, to develop your ability to adapt to, accept, reject, or experience a diverse set of ideas.

Because we value such growth, we hold to the principle of Free Speech on our campus. Each person has a right to express their opinions in a civil manner. Even if you disagree, or find that person’s beliefs unpalatable, it is important to acknowledge their right to express them.

Likewise, we hold to the principle of Academic Freedom. This tenet of higher education is centuries old in our nation, and one that we deeply respect. We are committed to seeing that our faculty have the protection they *need* and *deserve* to deliver an effective education.

All this being said, I want to assure you that we also understand there is a line between the discomfort you may feel on occasion as a part of your education, and our responsibility—as administrators and faculty—to ensure that you are protected against feeling unsafe or unwelcome due to micro-aggressions, subtle or not-so-subtle forms of bias, other unacceptable behaviors based on race, religion, gender identity, or any other form of discrimination.

And so, along with the amazing education, friendships, and fun that you are about to experience, you have a challenge before you: to *define your adult self within the context of living and growing and communicating with people who are different from you.*

This is where The Butler Way—the essence of our Community of Care—becomes even more important. I cannot emphasize enough how crucial it is for all of us to interact with each other *respectfully*. To discuss our differences in a manner that is civil, honest, and open-minded. At the end of the day, your ability to engage in healthy debate is fundamental to your intellectual, personal, and professional growth—and to becoming a well-rounded person who makes a positive impact in the world.

Informal Convocation Remarks

I'd like to break from the formality of my prepared remarks for a moment to talk to you in a more personal way, away from this podium. After all, this is a historic class in the history of Butler and I'd like to take a closer look.

This is really one of the only chances I have to speak to the entire class during your time at Butler, at least until you graduate.

I am guessing, as was also the case when I first went away to college, that you don't really have a strong sense, or perhaps even concern, about what it is a university president does and how that may affect your lives.

Well, as I begin my 6th year as Butler's president, I have learned it is a rather multi-faceted job, one that has many responsibilities. Sometimes that includes being a "surrogate parent" on campus. My wife, Bethanie, and I live on campus.

An interesting aspect of living right here on campus is that each year at this time we start to hear the voices – the voices of students outside our window at night. We hear laughter and friends talking to one another...and some occasional shouting. Despite the occasional disruption to our sleep, it's actually quite a nice sound.

But there is also another voice I start to hear at this time of year and it is a more troubling voice. That is the voice in my head that says, "God, please keep them safe."

I suspect that many of your parents hear that same voice in their head: "God, please keep them safe." I am also guessing that some of your parents may have been like me in that they were afraid to let that voice in their head, pass through their lips, and to your ears.

I am sure part of the reason is that sometimes us parents become "afraid" of our children. I know I did not do a good job of sharing my concerns and cautions as fully as I could have with my own daughters when they went away to college. Do some of you parents relate to what I am saying??

However, it is probably more so the fear of telling our children our worst nightmare. Having done this job for a few years, I now realize it is my job as president to speak to you about my fears for your safety as you now have independence from home and your parents.

Perhaps to give you a sense of a parent's worst nightmare, I'd like to share one example with you.

I cannot forget where I was 3 years ago during move-in weekend on campus. I was standing in front of Schwitzer Hall and during a break from greeting new students, I saw a news report via Twitter about a young woman from Zionsville named Rachael Fiege (FEEJ). At the time, she was in the same situation as you are: her parents had just dropped her off at IU, and she was enjoying her first weekend at college. Her first couple days on campus were probably quite similar to your own. Moving, some shopping, eating out with parents.

Once she was settled and her parents had left for home, her second night on campus, after texting her parents that she loved them, she went to her first off-campus party. It was what you'd expect for a campus party, perhaps nothing unusual or necessarily wrong. After some period of time celebrating, she fell down the stairs. Her friends thought she had passed out or fallen asleep. But in reality, she had suffered a severe head injury. By the next morning, Rachael was dead. That was three years ago today.

So what do we make of this tragedy? How can it affect us? Believe me; as administrators and as parents, we do everything in our power to protect you and to keep you safe. We stay up at night and work each day to think of *new ways* to keep you safe. But at that off-campus party, at 2:00 in the morning, there will be no Butler professors or staff members—or even your University president—there to make decisions for you. It will be up to you, as independent young adults, to make the right decisions for yourselves and those around you. To stay safe.

Rachael's mother, Angi, has encouraged me to share with you the anguish and pain that her family has been through, because she is committed to making sure that Rachael did not die in vain. She wants their family tragedy to be used as a lesson for others.

Whenever I speak with Angi, I can't help but think about what an awful phone call that would be to make, as a president—to tell a parent that their child had died. An even worse nightmare would be for your parents to receive such a call.

So, as for the "lesson" that Angi Fiege would hope is gained from Rachael's death, I would ask that in the next 24 hours go to: www.rachaelsfirstweek.com and read her story. And you're all going to see Angi in a video that you'll watch next week. Reflect upon what happened to Rachael and how something like that would affect

your family. And think about ways this event could have been avoided.

I would also like to ask if at least once a month during this academic year, you would be willing to go out of your way to help another student stay safe. To *proactively* intervene to help someone else. If you agree to do so, would you please raise your hand? Would you also stand up as a sign of your promise to do this? Wave to your parents to let them know you've made a pledge to help someone else in our community, or, if your parents are not here, wave to one of us up here. Just let us know that you're willing to do this. Thank you.

Students, the years that you are about to spend here at Butler will be some of the most wonderful and memorable years of your lives. And I look forward to shaking your hand on the day that you receive your Butler degree. Until then, I look forward to visiting with you often on campus, to hearing about your experiences, and to watching you grow and learn. Thank you.