

PRESIDENT'S WELCOME

WHITMAN CONVOCATION FOR THE CLASS OF 2018

AUGUST 29, 2014

GEORGE BRIDGES

PRESIDENT

WHITMAN COLLEGE

FRIDAY, AUGUST 29, 2014

WHITMAN COLLEGE

WALLA WALLA, WASHINGTON

Opening remarks

Good afternoon. Please be seated. For those of you who haven't yet met me, I'm George Bridges. I have the honor of serving as the 13th president of Whitman College.

On behalf of our faculty, staff, and governing boards, I welcome you to the 132nd opening of the academic year at Whitman College. Today's ceremony celebrates our incoming students – those of you who will comprise the graduating class of 2018 – and also, this convocation marks the beginning of this academic year.

We are honored to have you, the class of 2018, here. Each of you has traveled unique territory in your life journey to arrive at this place, in this moment. The experiences, perspectives, struggles, triumphs, and talents you have accrued along the way will become an integral part of our campus community.

We – the faculty and staff – have been anticipating your arrival for months, and we are thrilled that you are finally here.

Convocation and commencement are the two ceremonies that will bookend your time at Whitman. In just four short years, you will be celebrating graduation. The time will go by more quickly than you imagine.

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Whitman is an institution wherein the relationship between faculty members and students is of primary importance. We are deeply proud of our dedicated, innovative, and accomplished faculty members. They are teachers and scholars who work with and continually challenge our students, guiding them through our curriculum of study.

Our college is known for the quality of its teaching and mentoring – these are the people who have established and now sustain that reputation.

Class of 2018, I encourage you to get to know our faculty: take advantage of the many opportunities you will have to learn from them. Ask them about their scholarly interests and if the possibility arises find a way to work alongside them, to join them in investigating and interrogating new ideas and questions.

Our faculty devote themselves to educating you. *They* are the primary reason you are here.

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Let me now tell you about the culture of our campus, your new home away from home. At Whitman, we accord high priority to respect for, and affirmation of, others: their ideas, their backgrounds, and their identities.

We are a community that does not abide or tolerate ethnic, racial or religious insults, stereotyping, or offensive, mean-spirited behavior.

Consistent with this ethical foundation, we are a community that values and reinforces behavior that respects the rights of others. We do not tolerate violence, harassment, sexual misconduct, or the abuse of alcohol or drugs. Indeed, we affirm each student and Whitman community member's right to learn, develop and prosper here in a safe, intellectually-centered, and socially constructive environment.

In joining this academic community, you are not only entering into the experiences and traditions of this college. You are at once entering a continuous stream of accumulated learning that connects us today with the greatest accomplishments of the past--the greatest writing, the greatest music, the greatest art and science, and philosophy, and so much more -- for all times and all cultures.

It is the nature of a liberal arts college to gather and preserve the most important ideas of humankind --not to present them as sterile exhibits in a museum of lofty thoughts, but rather to make these ideas a solid foundation from which new ideas can spring.

Above all, Whitman is a place where free and orderly thinking is cultivated, where we strive to set aside ossified preconceptions and question all ideas by testing them in a crucible of analysis and critical

reflection. This is a place which encourages and affirms reasoned debate, thoughtful examination of difficult and contentious issues, and unflinching inquiry into the most challenging problems facing human individuals, the natural environment, and global economic & political systems today.

While perspectives and approaches to problem solving clearly vary among expert scholars on our faculty, we encourage each other, and our students, to examine ideas and with genuine curiosity and a rigorous determination to learn.

The process I'm describing will occur throughout your time at Whitman -- in interactions with your professors and staff members, in dialogue with your peers, and in silent conversations with yourself.

And yet, as dedicated as we faculty and staff may be at engaging each of you in the learning process, only you can ultimately ensure that your experience will be transformative. Transformation of the intellect occurs when you push yourself to ask the next question, when you refuse the simple solution and instead take your thinking to another level, stretching beyond prior comfort zones and interrogating the assumptions that previously defined your limits of understanding.

If you do this throughout your time at Whitman, you will ensure that this odyssey - your odyssey - will lead to immense personal and intellectual

growth and, ultimately, a lifetime passion for learning. We aspire to this for each and every one of you.

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Closing remarks

Let me now open the academic year by offering a very brief description of what you should expect over the next four years and then a summary of your first homework assignments.

In her welcoming remarks, professor Elyse Semerdjian asks all of us to “consider the position of others by listening to their voices ... an overture of voices “ as we endeavor to understand the roots of human conflict, the origins of injustice and solutions to local and global problems.

Your summer reading, *Reservation Blues*, was written by Sherman Alexie, a member of the Spokane tribe who was raised on a reservation three hours north of the campus where we now convene together. Reading his work, we listened to his voice: his portrayal of the harsh realities of reservation life, as well as the joys, hopes, and dreams of young Spokane Indians portrayed in the text. Many of us cannot fathom the historic plight of Native Americans; yet reading and re-reading Alexie’s accounts of the characters’ journey in forming and performing in an Indian rock band

enables us to imaginatively experience some aspects of their lives. We connect with them through his stories.

The capacity to embrace the lives, experiences, and ideas of others – even, perhaps especially when – they are unfamiliar, challenging, or uncomfortable – is central to a liberal arts education. Before you leave Whitman, we expect that each of you will recognize the tremendous value in this approach to learning and the methods of understanding espoused by professor Semerdjian.

We urge you to seek not only answers to problems, but more importantly, to learn how to ask and pursue critically astute questions. Your degree from Whitman college will represent the habits of mind you will have developed – the honing of your ability to ask difficult, probing questions, your capacity to discover tension and ambiguity in topics you previously considered “settled,” and also, your agility in proposing innovative solutions. Your degree will also acknowledge your strengths in communication, both written and oral, and your facility in presenting complex ideas and problem-solving strategies. Finally, a Whitman degree evidences your capacity to work collaboratively with others – even, and in many cases, to have taken responsibility for leading collaborative teams.

In that spirit, we hope and expect that you will become leaders in your careers, professions and communities, following in the tradition of those who have gone before you.

Finally, we look forward to the time when, as an alumnus or alumna of Whitman, you will return to our campus, rekindle relationships you are now poised to begin developing, and encourage and support those who will come after you.

You are embarking on a uniquely transformative educational experience, and I welcome you to the important and exciting work ahead.

Now, as is our tradition at Whitman, my final message is to give you your first homework assignments for the year: there are four:

- 1) Tomorrow morning, come prepared to register for classes at your appointed time.
- 2) Sunday afternoon, you will attend a gathering led by three of our faculty as they discuss the summer reading, *Reservation Blues*. Afterward, you will discuss this text in groups with your resident advisers and student academic advisers.
- 3) When classes begin next week, you should come to your Encounters section on Wednesday having read the preface and chapters 1-4 of volume I of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

- 4) And on October 1st you are expected to attend the public lecture Sherman Alexie when he speaks about his life's work.

And now, with great pleasure, on this 29th day of August, 2014, I declare Whitman College officially open for the 132nd academic year!

Thank you. And before I bid you bon voyage, I wish to invite you to a reception outside on the Cordiner lawn for parents and students and as part of the reception we have a very short and quite special presentation I invite all to observe. Please join me there.