

Address by Gallaudet President Robert Davila Gallaudet University Commencement, May 15, 2009

Since my graduation from Gallaudet 56 years ago--Yes, I said "56 years ago," I'm a proud member of the Class of 1953--I've given many, many speeches before diverse groups all over the world and in our country. I have addressed politicians, educators, business leaders and community leaders, deaf audiences, hearing audiences, young people and not-so-young people. I can say that truly, this presentation on this day before this audience is more important to me than any speech I have ever given in my professional career. Why do I believe that this message that I have for you today is of such great consequence to me and I hope to you as well? Because of one very powerful word: "transformation."

Even transformations of a personal nature can be exceptionally demanding, but also exceptionally rewarding. You graduates know that your four years here at Gallaudet have been transformative--life-changing in many ways. How do you know this? Because my life, like yours, was also transformed by Gallaudet. The truth is, I would not be standing before you today if it were not for the outstanding, well rounded education I received at this remarkable university. From time to time, institutions, including colleges and universities also, undergo transformations. They must if they hope to survive and remain relevant in today's extremely fast-paced global economic environment. So it should come as no surprise that Gallaudet, too, is also going through a transformation, although one not like any in the past history of the University.

Gallaudet's transformation is happening as I stand before you now. As many of you know, it began about three years ago as the university community was facing a number of very serious problems identified by our regional accreditation agency, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the MSCHE. When I began my duties as the University's Ninth President in January 2007, I realized that we had to act with speed to solve problems on several fronts. At a town-hall-style meeting, I invited faculty, staff and students to join as members of "Team Gallaudet," the name I came up with to refer to that group of people on campus who were willing to come together to work to transform the University.

Many of you here were members of Team Gallaudet and know that membership in that special group was based on five agreed-upon priorities: First, a respect and value for a diversity of people and ideas. Second, a sense of ownership in Gallaudet's mission. Third, a strong culture of excellence throughout our entire community. Fourth, the importance of recruitment, enrollment and retention. And fifth, improved shared governance. The next step was to organize members of Team Gallaudet into working groups, each of which was given special duties. The MSCHE told us to review our overall mission and vision to ensure that they state exactly, clearly, and without error what Gallaudet stands for now. We worked long and hard to develop our revised statement. Please read it with me now, the mission statement, up on the screen.

[On screen:]

Gallaudet University, federally chartered in 1864, is a bilingual, diverse, multicultural institution of higher education that ensures the intellectual and professional advancement of deaf and hard of hearing individuals through American Sign Language and English. Gallaudet maintains a proud tradition of research and scholarly activity and prepares its graduates for career opportunities in a highly competitive, technological, and rapidly changing world.

[Continuing:]

Just two sentences, but each word in those two sentences is loaded with significance and promise. These are not merely lofty ideals. In the two years since the University adopted this mission statement, we've worked very hard at converting words into actions. First, we have raised admission standards for undergraduate programs. Second, we have radically changed the undergraduate curriculum to ensure that it truly meets students' academic needs and career goals. Third, we have revolutionized the overall experience of our first-year students. [Fourth,] we have begun the difficult but necessary process of institutionalizing diversity at Gallaudet. [Fifth,] we have reaffirmed to all that Gallaudet is a bilingual institution, a place where American Sign Language and English are adamantly embraced and revered. Sixth, we have started on a very ambitious, long-range strategic planning process for the university and have hired consultants from an internationally recognized consulting firm to guide us as we plan for the future.

Already the impact of these key changes, or transformations, can be clearly seen. We have hard evidence that our efforts have paid off where it really matters most, student achievement, as we see here today. The data shows that at the start of this semester, for example, the University achieved its highest Fall-to-Spring undergraduate retention-rate in over a decade, as well as the highest grade point average for first-year students in almost ten years. In addition, our student-athletes achieved an average GPA of 3.05. That's due to do the fervent working relationship that exists between the Athletic Department and Academic Affairs. All of this in less than three years. As a result of this and other initiatives that were put into place, the MSCHE, which at one point considered holding back our accreditation, something that would have had a devastating impact on every aspect of our university, instead sent us a letter praising us for our success and, in the words of the MSCHE, bringing about nothing short of a "complete transformation"--there's that important word again--in how the University conducts most of its business.

Many share the credit for generating these outstanding signs of progress. The faculty and staff deserve a great deal of praise for their enthusiasm and commitment to our students. Their use of best practices in teaching and in early-intervention strategies for struggling students has made all the difference. Likewise, the leadership from the Provost, deans, faculty chairs, and campus administrators are essential parts of our current and continued advancement. I thank everyone for that. There's no doubt that Gallaudet's transformation has been a team effort, a Team Gallaudet effort. It's far from being completed, but it's off to a good, dynamic start. I am honored to have led the University through the critical beginning phases of its transformation, and although this is the last commencement over which I will

preside as President of this great institution, I will leave office knowing that I have given my heart and soul to making my beloved alma mater a much better place than it was when I arrived three years ago. Whoever becomes Gallaudet's Tenth President, I know he or she will continue the transformation begun by Team Gallaudet.

In closing, I offer my heartfelt congratulations to the Class of 2009. I hope and pray that you continue to build upon the lessons you have learned at Gallaudet. May the degree you've earned here, whether undergraduate, master's or doctoral, be the beginning, not the end, of a life-long thirst for knowledge. May you prosper, both professionally and personally, and may you always consider yourself a proud member of Team Gallaudet. Now it is your turn to use your Gallaudet education to make your world--our world--a better place for everyone.

Thank you.

[Visual applause, standing ovation] [...]

Thank you.

[End address]