

PRESIDENT STEVEN P. O'DAY
AUSTIN COLLEGE
Opening Convocation Address
August 24, 2020

DIFFERENT

Tomorrow is the official opening of the new academic year, and there are a lot of things that are different.

Some things will *look* different and some things, many of which we've taken for granted in the past, will *be* different.

What looks different? Well, students have already moved into the new North Flats. Each suite has individual bedrooms, a bathroom, kitchen, living space, and their own washer and dryer. The building also has a beautiful common area. I hope you enjoy these spaces since they represent some of the best student housing in the country.

The renovation of Wynne Chapel is complete. Not only are the Clifford Grum Sanctuary and Sallie Majors Chapel beautiful, they also are designed for multi-purpose use, with new seating and audio/visual technology.

We have refreshed Hughey Gym with the new Jim Rolfe Court along with scoreboards, team seating, and some other touches. Hannah Natatorium has seen some updates too. Craig Hall has a new HVAC system, and outdoor space there is being developed. Even the dining hall has had a refresh with new equipment, new colors, and new food stations—including an allergen station to help serve those with food sensitivities.

The most dramatic change to a building is in Ida Green with the creation of the Sally and Jim Nation Theatre and Learning Commons. It is simply stunning! We now have a world class theatre, new classrooms, and new student study spaces, indoors and out, that I predict will become some of the most popular spots on campus.

Yes, things *look* a little different. I hope you will go explore!

How we *do* things this year will also be different than what we're used to. Students, faculty, and staff—all of us—will be asked to wear masks, practice social distancing, follow new instructions

about traffic flow in buildings and the caf. You may be washing your hands and using sanitizer more often than you ever imagined you would. You're completing daily health screenings on your AC App so you can be cleared to go to classes. You're going in certain doors and leaving from others. These are just some of the many changes to everyday life on campus as we navigate Covid.

As I stand here this evening, I am reminded of how fortunate we are to have the opportunity to be here. This has always been true, but even more so this year. These rules about mask wearing and social distancing, health checks and sanitizing, are in place to help keep everyone safe, and to make it possible for us to continue being here.

No one wants to be "that guy or girl," the one who ruined it for everyone. So don't be that guy or girl. It is okay to remind people about social distancing. It is okay to remind someone to put on his/her mask and wear it correctly over mouth AND nose. Every morning before I leave the house, Cece asks me, "Do you have your mask?" Be that person who helps everyone remember.

What is it we're trying to do here? Protect you students? Well sure, but many of you are walking around believing you're invincible, not at risk, and even if you are at risk, you may be willing to play the odds. Here's the thing though; we're asking you to wear masks, stay distanced, do daily health checks, use hand sanitizer, use certain doors, don't gather in groups for reasons that go beyond you. You're doing it for your professors, your classmates and roommates, your coaches, your advisors, the staff, Cece, and me. It's not just that you might contract the virus, it's that you might transmit it to those who might get really really sick.

It's not just about you.

Amidst all that is different, at least one thing will stay the same, though. We will continue to look out for each other. We will continue to be good to each other.

I have been asked by a number of people, "Do you really think students will follow those rules? Do you really think they can be responsible?" My answer is "YES!" "You don't know Austin College students," I tell them. "You don't know Austin College. We are good to each other."

Indeed, being part of this extraordinary community demands that we "Be good to each other."

If you pause for a second and think about it, everything boils down to that. Every decision you will face, during the day or at 2:00 in the morning, will boil down to a question of being good to each other. Every rule, every policy, every oath has that as its premise.

We must be good to each other. Each of you knows in your heart and your head what that means. If you are good to each other, just about everything else takes care of itself. Please remember that as we begin this new year.

To all our new students, there are a few more things I hope you'll remember. You come to us with rich backgrounds and experiences. You are entrepreneurs, singers, dancers, and performers. You have taught refugee children and learned sign language. You have created technology to assist the visually impaired. You've competed in robotics, in the pool, on the court, and on the field. You've even spent a little time with Oprah!

I know you may be feeling a little nervous. Don't worry! This is an exciting time of renewal, reinvention, and possibilities. You have this opportunity but once in your life. Many never have it all. You bring to us so much and, in return, we have big plans for you.

You will be doctors and therapists, counselors and teachers, artists and musicians, entrepreneurs and leaders in your communities. Somewhere in this space, among us right now, are people who will help sustain the planet, make our lives more beautiful, cure cancer, and achieve peace and justice. You are going to make the world a better place.

And finally, as darkness falls all around us this evening, I'll let you in on something. Seniors, faculty, and staff members who have heard me speak before probably know this already. I like history. I read speeches from important moments in history.

Of course, we've all read or studied Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. There's Churchill's "Finest Hour" speech when he braced his country for the Battle of Britain. Martin Luther King Jr. inspired us all to be better with his "I Have a Dream" speech. There are so many more I could name.

Throughout human history, words have been spoken at significant times by significant people. Those words have been intended to bring out our best selves, to reach higher, to go further, or sometimes to just hang on.

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I don't know how the Covid pandemic will be remembered in history, and I am reasonably sure that I will not be one of those remembered with the likes of Lincoln, Churchill, or King, but I would offer these words to us, in our corner of the world here on our campus, at this significant time.

We are faced with something the world has not seen for a hundred years. We can lament all that is different and feel sorry for ourselves, or we can acknowledge the hand we have been dealt, step forward and do what needs to be done. We have to look out for each other. I believe we can rise to the occasion.

LET *US* SHOW THE WORLD HOW IT SHOULD BE DONE.

LET *US* BE EQUAL TO OUR MOMENT IN HISTORY.

Thank you very much. Let's have a great year!