

MAKING CONNECTIONS

President Gordon's inaugural address defines the role of Defiance College as a place of opportunity

Mark C. Gordon was inaugurated as the 18th President of Defiance College on Oct. 8 during a ceremony in the Weaner Community Center. Delegates of numerous institutions of higher education were joined by the Defiance College community and the community at-large in attendance.

Offering greetings to the new president were Bev Harrington, college registrar; David Stuckey, faculty member; Rev. Benjamin Green, alumnus; Margaret Noble Mikula, faculty emerita; Angie Franklin, community services director of the Northwestern Ohio Community Action Commission; and Kyle Shong, student senate president. Invocation was given by Sister Maureen Fay, president emerita of University of Detroit Mercy. Philip Mallott, chairman of the college's Board of Trustees, led the investiture, and Barbara Silvis, chair of the presidential search committee, gave the welcome.

Thank you Chairman Mallott, and thank you to the entire Board of Trustees of Defiance College for the faith and confidence you have placed in me.

I must say that one of my great joys as President so far has been knowing that I am part of a team with a wonderful and dedicated Board of Trustees. Their devotion to the College is unsurpassed, and their commitment of time and resources to this College is truly unequalled. Please join me in thanking them all.

Thank you also to the Inauguration Committee which has put together such an outstanding event and which has done such a tremendous job in implementing my request that this ceremony – and this celebration – be not about me, but that it be a celebration of the College. And a special thank you in this regard to my assistant Judy Lymanstall – who has worked so hard in preparation for this event and who truly knows everything that is going on at the College.

I also want to express my profound gratitude to the participants in this program who have already spoken so eloquently and

with such passion for the College. With a personal mention of particular thanks to Sister Maureen Fay (who was the President of University of Detroit Mercy when I was hired as dean of the law school seven and a half years ago, and who is a valued mentor and friend).

While I will talk this afternoon about the future, I know that I stand on the shoulders of the great and dedicated leaders of this college before me. People like Charles Warren, Jerry Wood, Jim Harris, and Marv Ludwig, and many others who have expressed to me their support and continuing devotion to Defiance College. I am honored to now be counted among them.

And a special thank you to the leaders of the Defiance community – whether government officials, business people, or community activists – who have provided such a wonderful welcome to me and my family.

I know that first impressions matter, and so let me take a moment to share with you two different first impressions at two very different educational institutions. The first was my first impression when I started as a student at Harvard Law School.

One of the first things that happened, you know the Law School is very proud of its library and its wonderful tradition, and so we students were taken on a tour of the library. As you know, it's ornate, and it's grand, and it's wonderful, and there were books there that go back to the mists of antiquity, even the dust has dust on it. And there was a librarian who took us around and was so proud of the collection, and we got to a floor where there were all of the statutes, all of the codes, all of the laws for every state in the union, and she said with great pride, 'Here you will find every law for every state in the United States of America, organized in alphabetical order from A for Alabama to Y for Wyoming.' I called Anne that night and said, 'I don't think Harvard is going to be as tough as it's cracked up to be.'

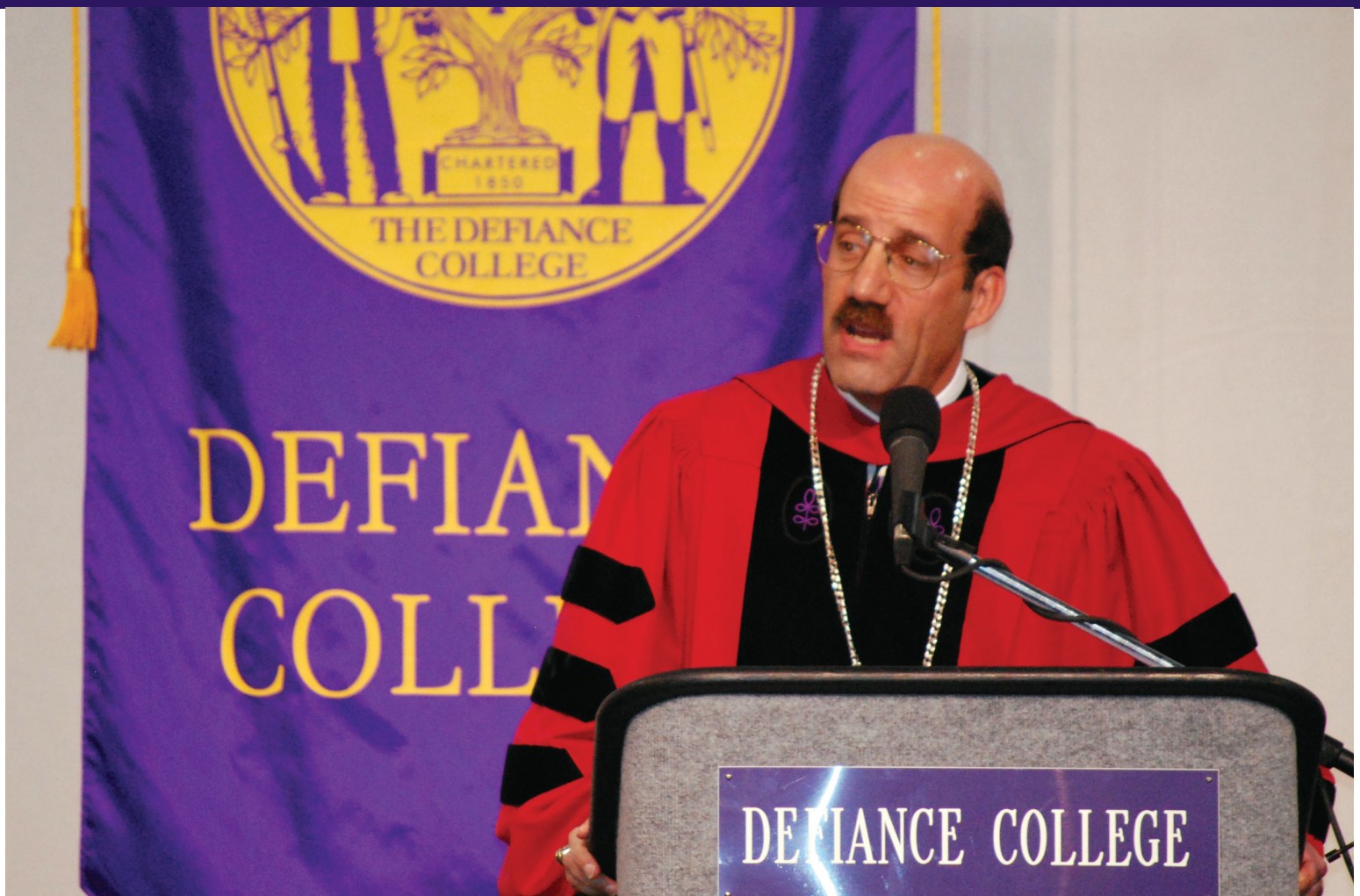
My first impression at Defiance was very different. In fact, just one day after

my appointment as President had been announced, I called Ted Czartoski, who oversees our communication systems to ask him what provider I should use for my new Blackberry – wanting to be sure that I used a provider with good service in Northwest Ohio. My appointment as President was announced on Friday, and on Saturday, I called Ted. I said, "Hi, Ted, this is Mark Gordon calling. I was hoping you could help me figure out what service provider I should be using." There was silence on the line, and then Ted – who had been travelling away from campus when my appointment was announced – said, very simply, "I just have one question. Who are you?"

It was that honesty, that Midwestern directness and candor, that provided a wonderfully refreshing first impression of the College and the faculty, administrators, coaches, and staff who make it the special place that it is. And so while there are many dignitaries to acknowledge, I would, most of all, like to recognize the incomparable faculty, staff, coaches, and administrators of Defiance College. And I would like to ask them please to stand.

Ladies and gentlemen, while as President I am now the public voice of this college, there should be no mistaking the fact that standing before you are the people who represent the true heart and soul of this beloved institution. They go above and beyond on an almost daily basis. They are the ones who breathe life into all our pronouncements about excellence in teaching, about caring for our students, about challenging minds, and opening doors, and so much more. Please join me in thanking and saluting them for the many often unacknowledged steps that they take to make Defiance College the special place that it is.

I would also like to ask our students to stand. No College President can be a success without enjoying wonderful students. And I am blessed with the best college students I could imagine. They are caring, dedicated, hard working, and good-hearted. And they are even willing on occasion to let the



President treat them to ice cream. Please join me in recognizing the honor our students do to us every day.

The students and faculty together with our wonderful alumni – have led the way in making me and my family already feel an integral part of Defiance College. As you have welcomed me to your family, please permit me to take just a moment to introduce you to mine. My wonderful wife, Anne, and our two boys – Chris and Charlie; my father, George Gordon; my brother, Stephen Gordon; my cousins, Eve and Mark Epstein, and Irene Black; and many other dear friends and colleagues who are too numerous to name individually but whose presence here today touches me deeply.

Your warm welcome is not unexpected, as there is a long history here of welcoming newcomers to our campus. I heard just a short time ago from an alum who remembered coming to the campus as a new student over half a century ago. He wrote that when he arrived on campus, he was greeted -- by name – by a school official who knew not just his name, but where he had come from, and much more. And when he got to his residence hall, this alum wrote me,

he spoke with other new students who had had the same experience. The person who greeted him was Gerry Mallott – but it could just as easily have been Ray Dericotte, or Dick Stroede, or Randy Buchman, Maggie Noble Mikula, or Dick or Carolyn Small or many others.

For there is a truth about Defiance College which should be apparent for all to see – while the canvas on which we write is extraordinarily broad – whether we are sending students to Cambodia or New Orleans or places in between on service or preparing students for lives of meaning here at home – while we write on a broad canvas, we do so with tremendous attention to each individual character. We are a place that impacts life beyond our halls and campus, but does so first through offering opportunity and compassion and caring one student at a time.

And that is as it should be. Leo Baeck once noted that, “One can always find warm hearts who in a glow of emotion would like to make the whole world happy but who have never attempted the sober experiment of bringing a real blessing to a single human being.” That notion is an important part of who we are as a College -- Part of our strength, part of our uniqueness, grows from

our ability to do both, and to recognize that while the impact that our students have through their hands-on experiences while they are here is great, the impact they will have throughout the course of their lives is far greater.

And so we direct special attention to helping students grow as individuals. As I have met and spoken with alumni, I have heard story after story about the ways that their lives have been guided, propelled, and shaped by the personal and individual attention of particular faculty and administrators.

Whether it was Bernie Mikula, who explored the genetics of corn while planting seeds of inspiration in hundreds of students; or Zeke Frey, who knew how to use laughter to open the gates of learning; or Calista Olds and her ability to teach religion while also modeling both faith and tolerance; or Jan Younger, who led a generation of students to excellence in speech, rhetoric, and debate, while building confidence and character at the same time; or Randy Buchman, whose knowledge extends from the arrowheads of American Indians in Northwest Ohio to the goalposts of the football field, and whose heart is even larger – I could go on and on



– and we would be here all day were I to start naming the ways that current faculty, coaches, and administrators are having a similar impact with today’s students.

I must confess that I have had the pleasure of hearing from many people in this room with advice about what I should say today. Some have told me that I should make a formal address; others that we should have a more informal chat. Some have suggested that I celebrate the past, and others that I lay out a path for the future. And one, who shall remain nameless, threatened that if I spoke too long, she would divorce me.

I do not think that it makes sense for a new college president to come into office, and having been at the college for merely a few months, to pretend to possess an expertise he does not have and to impose a new vision for the future on the college. But the good news is that I don’t have to. Because I have spent these past weeks and months speaking to many of you, and listening to your thoughts and dreams about your own lives individually but even more about the College. And if you think about what many of you have said about who we are and what we can be, I think there is already a common vision that just needs to be somewhat more explicitly described. The dots are all there, if you will; we just need to connect them.

We begin, as I already began, with the connection between each individual student and his or her faculty and coaches. That relationship, that intimate connection, is, I think, at the heart of who we are and what we celebrate today.



President Gordon with his father, George. Upper: Board Chair Philip Mallott places medallion on President Gordon while sons, Charlie and Chris, and wife, Anne, look on.

But that connection is just the beginning of a series of connections that both describe us today and help point the way to our future.

As a college in the liberal arts tradition, we take the liberal arts canon seriously as a key component of our fundamental mission, which is, after all, academics. We believe that students need to be connected to a core of common knowledge that helps define what it is to be an educated person in today’s society. We believe that there is indeed a meaningful connection between the thoughts of the past and the promise of the future. But we are not just about connecting students to knowledge and ideas – critically important

though that is.

We believe that in order for students to know, they also need to understand. And much of what occurs in college is opening students’ minds to different ways of understanding. You cannot write or speak meaningfully, if you do not first learn how to think. And that means being introduced in college to a wide range of analytical frameworks, different ways of thinking about and analyzing problems, that can be put to use no matter what the subject matter – and no matter how much substantive knowledge changes in decades and generations to come.

Yes, we require students to be introduced to a breadth of knowledge that cuts across many different topical areas. If anyone previously questioned the need for such intellectual breadth, the economic

experiences of the past year should have made clear how valuable a broad base of knowledge is. After all, during a storm, it is the trees with the broadest root systems that survive. And especially in a world defined by today’s economic storms, our students need that broad root system not just to survive but also to thrive.

But the knowledge is not enough. I have heard from faculty members as we have spoken in your offices or in the lunchroom, about how we need to challenge our students even more to make connections among the different pieces of the puzzle. They need to see that the analytical process they are

learning in chemistry class can also provide an intellectual framework that will help them understand a piece of creative writing in English class. We need to help them understand that their deliberations about form and function in art class are relevant to the questions about how different governmental structures operate in history class. And that the ways they learn to communicate and impart information in their education classes are not unrelated to the methods they use to analyze business challenges in their marketing class.

The truth is that we can take the liberal arts tradition and build on it. Build on it by making these intellectual connections more precise and the analytical frameworks more explicit. Build on it by -- as we have already been doing -- drawing connections to new developing areas, such as digital forensics and environmental sciences such as restoration ecology. And build on it by even more closely integrating students' intellectual experiences with their other activities at the College.

What do I mean by that? We need to help students see the analytical connections not just among the academic disciplines but also between academics and their other activities. Take, for example, athletics, which we have already begun discussing together among faculty and coaches. Many students here engage in athletics, whether through intramural or external competition. We have all grown out of the ancient Greek tradition that values a sound mind in a sound body. But speaking just about that tradition misses a key point.

The truth is that athletics -- like many other activities -- can also be an important part of a student's intellectual development. In participating in athletics, students are engaging in decision-tree analysis, they are engaging in strategic thinking, they are engaging in argument and counterargument -- and much more.

We have an opportunity to make a real contribution to our students and to higher education generally, by connecting the analytical frameworks introduced in the classroom with those on the athletic fields, in the chapel, and in a wide range of other student activities.

The fact is that we have already done this in part through our focus on service -- another area of distinction. For Defiance College realizes that students need to learn, to think, to understand, in many different ways -- both actively and passively. And serving is a key component of that.

I have heard from some who have expressed skepticism about service and engagement, who somehow see service and commitment to strong academics as being in tension with each other. Nothing could be further from the truth. A true understanding of the liberal arts tradition can only arise when one is challenged to apply that knowledge to today's realities; when one is challenged to manipulate knowledge in light of human interactions; and when one is required to ponder the connections among the work of the brain, the hands, and the heart.

Defiance College has already set a pioneering path in commitment to service learning and engagement-- from the spectacular McMaster School for Advancing Humanity to service days and innumerable activities throughout the academic year. Students can see that we live and breathe our commitment to serve.

And now we have the opportunity to integrate that learning even more deeply into our approach by becoming the first college in the country to establish a student-run non-profit in which all students at the College will participate.

I deeply appreciate the faculty's receptiveness to this idea as the next logical step forward for us as a College committed to expanding the breadth of service learning, and I look forward to working with the faculty to make it a reality, as we prepare our students not just to serve but also to lead.

Beyond the individual connections with the faculty and coaches; beyond the intellectual connections in the classroom and other activities; beyond the connection with others and with the best within us through service and engagement; we at Defiance College also believe in connecting students to the diverse community that more and more defines the 21st century in which they will operate.

It is a global community of continuing need. We help prepare our students for that community not just through teaching them to serve but also by, as a College, strengthening our own ties to the community -- both locally and beyond.

By working more closely with the community to involve our students in community events and residents in college events. By embedding some of our service learning even more securely in the work of local community non-profit organizations. By enhancing our role as a key player in regional economic development. By expanding programs like our wonderful Hench Autism Studies Program which is

every day teaching students to question underlying premises, showing that all of us can learn by being better connected to the analytical frameworks used by people with autism; and all of us can benefit when we see autism through the lens of diversity. And we can better prepare our students for the world in which they will live by welcoming at Defiance College -- and more aggressively recruiting to Defiance College -- students who bring greater diversity -- whether geographical, racial, ethnic, or ideological-- to name just a few. We are committed to becoming even more a college of vibrant intellectual debate, in which diverse opinions are challenged in turn in the great marketplace of ideas, and in which our daily lives and interactions sparkle with intellectual excitement.

Through these connections with the community and in the other areas also described, we aim to expand for each of our students their own individual opportunities in the context of a life of meaning. We are committed not just to opening students' minds, but also their hearts; and to opening for them doors and opportunities. As I tell our students when they arrive on campus, we want you to be successful in the classroom, successful on the athletic field, and successful in life. We are committed to expanding the ways in which we offer opportunity for our students, whether through networking with alumni, or greater exposure to internship and other opportunities.

Through our new advisory boards for our different majors, through our growing national and international networks, we truly want to be a place where students can make connections that further their careers.

But we also want to defy the ordinary, not just by connecting them to mentors and careers, but also by helping them connect to the very best within them, as they grow spiritually and ethically. As part of their intellectual experience, we want them to be challenged to consider what living a life of meaning entails for them individually, given their own particular circumstances and beliefs.

As we help students connect with the world around them, so too must we as a college engage more actively with that outside world as well. The truth is that we have a tremendous story to tell. We defy the ordinary as a college where students can truly make connections. Connections among different intellectual frameworks; connections through service and engagement; personal connections that will help them

to succeed and then to lead. (And, for those alumni who are here, I certainly hope that we also become a place in which lasting connections are strengthened as well. While we are interested in all connections with our alumni, I would be remiss if I did not point out that this includes the connection between the generous sentiments expressed through your words, and what we hope will be the even more generous feelings expressed through your wallets.)

We need your help – as alumni – and we need the help of everyone in this room, because never has the need for our Defiance College voice been greater.

We confront a world of increasing complexity, in which the ability to make these kinds of connections, is all the more critical. We confront a nation in which our civic discourse has too frequently strayed from the robust exchange of ideas that characterizes a democracy at its best. And we confront another challenge – a cultural challenge in which I fear the purposes and aims of higher education have gone astray.

I am not referring to any of the cultural wars that the press so likes to focus on. I am talking about something that has been far less remarked upon, but in which our Defiance College voice is far more needed.

We at Defiance College are particularly proud that we have been and remain a true school of opportunity. Many of our students represent the first generation in their family to go to college. Bravo. Unfortunately, too frequently in our national discourse about education – given the focus on rankings and competition among different institutions – we seem to confuse excellence with exclusivity. Too frequently, defining something as selective or as elite has become a short-hand way of describing it as excellent. How strange that is. And how perverse it is, that our society makes that mistake when talking about educational institutions, especially since education is supposed to be the great leveler, the path to opportunity in a democratic society.

We have a real and important role to play on a national stage in standing up for excellence as measured on its own terms. The measure of an educational institution should not be related to the extent to which it admits only the few, but rather to the extent to which it broadens opportunity for those who attend. Excellence should be measured by how a college helps students, challenges

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-- Mark C. Gordon, DC President

students, draws connections for students, provides analytical frameworks for lifelong learning for students. Excellence is related to successfully opening doors for students so that they can take their places in society, not by one’s success in denying admission to as many students as possible.

Our society seems to have forgotten the difference between excellence and elitism, and Defiance College is ripe to serve as a national model of excellence which furthers opportunity rather than restricting it.

There is a personal reason why I care so much about this issue. My mother -- who is no longer with us -- was born in Germany in 1931. One of her earliest memories was standing in the playground while the other children held hands in a circle – but they would not include her because she was a Jew. She and her family were lucky enough to escape and make it to the United States. And they taught me, as did my father and his family, which had escaped the pogroms of Eastern Europe a generation earlier, about the importance of education. In a world in which everything you own can be taken from you, what you possess inside your head and your heart remains with you still.

An educated population provides the crucial framework for democracy and for liberty – and the thought that an educational institution’s prestige in our country is now based on its ability to keep students out, rather than its commitment to letting them in, corrodes the very essence of what education is supposed to be, to offer, and to achieve.

The very fact that I can stand before you today as the new President of Defiance College says something wonderful about education and our country. And the fact that Defiance College would choose as its new President – a Jewish fellow married to a Lutheran woman, who was Dean of a Catholic law school and is now President of a UCC college – well that says something wonderful about Defiance College as well. When we at Defiance draw the circle of

opportunity, we aim to include as many as we can.

Our voice on behalf of opportunity and excellence is one that we need to raise on a national stage. I know that is a tall order. But if we do not raise the bar for ourselves, then we will never see how much we can achieve.

We cherish the individual connections; we are committed to strengthening all the other connections; and now is the time for us to write boldly on that broader canvas as well.

I know that we can do it, because I have already seen the strength of our community. I know that we can do it, because I have already experienced the commitment and devotion of our faculty, coaches, administrators and staff.

I have seen faculty reaching into their own pockets and giving of their personal time to make a difference for the College and its students. I have seen administrators and staff working late into the night and on weekends – time and time again – to implement new programs and enhance for our students the richness of their college experience. And I have seen coaches and athletic trainers and staff, rising at dawn, working to improve our playing fields with one hand while devoting their hearts and souls to shaping our student-athletes into men and women of commitment and character.

And I know that we can do it because I have already watched as our students have risen to different challenges, from the neighborhoods of Defiance to the villages of Cambodia and Belize, Jamaica and Guatemala. I know that we can do it, because there is nothing more powerful than a dedicated group of people armed with knowledge, persistence, character, and the strength of an idea whose time must come.

Yes, we can make Defiance College into a national college that truly does defy the ordinary – a college where connections are made. Intellectual connections. Connections between the heart and the mind. Personal connections. Career connections. All while we help shape a diverse society in which education is once more the great equalizer, and in which we reclaim excellence in education as the true engine of opportunity.

We have it within us to challenge our students to open their minds while casting their eyes outward and their hearts upward. I am deeply honored to have been given the opportunity to work with you all in helping make the potential and dreams of so many come true. ♦