

Ohio
Wesleyan
University

PRESIDENT ROCK JONES' 2011 CONVOCATION REMARKS

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The Power of Intellect and Passion: An Education to Change the World

Rock Jones, Ph.D., President of Ohio Wesleyan University

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Members of the Class of 2015, it is my great honor to welcome you to Ohio Wesleyan University. Today you take your place in a community of scholars with a history that spans nearly 170 years. We gather this afternoon in the glen that is the heart of the academic campus. Five of the buildings casting shadows on us today date to the nineteenth century. The building directly behind you at the top of the hill, Elliott Hall, is the building in which students first convened when classes opened in the fall of 1842. From the beginning, Ohio Wesleyan has been devoted to the values of liberal education, understanding that a rigorous study of the classical disciplines is critical to the development of educated citizens and to the preservation of a free and democratic society. I salute you for choosing to place yourself within the storied history of this great University, and I welcome you on this special day.

Your arrival on campus is the culmination of years of preparation, hard work, and sacrifice, by you and by your family. You are here because you have chosen this University as the place best suited for the extraordinary development that will mark your undergraduate years. And you are here because Ohio Wesleyan has chosen you. Your application for admission was reviewed carefully, with a keen interest in your academic record, your self-reflection, and your engagement in life outside of the classroom. Each of you is an accomplished student. Many of you bring extraordinary records of academic achievement. You bring remarkable achievements as student leaders, accomplishment in athletic competition, significant commitment to volunteer service, and, in many cases, travel experiences that expanded your horizons and enrich the context from which you approach an undergraduate education. While you are well prepared, we all understand that the next four years will be challenging in many ways. But it is because of the challenge of a rigorous curriculum that you have chosen Ohio Wesleyan, and you are well prepared for this moment.

Today you take your place in an academic community whose alumni have provided leadership in every sector of our society. As you walk the halls of these historic buildings and take your seats in OWU classrooms, you will follow in the footsteps of people who later became vice president of the United States, members of Congress, CEOs of multinational corporations, pioneering scientists, Nobel laureates, award-winning writers, internationally acclaimed scholars, and public servants. These individuals benefited from an education that challenged them to think deeply and to expand their horizons in ways they had not imagined before their arrival here.

Two weeks ago I visited with an alumnus who is president and chief executive officer of the second-largest shipping company in the world. His company employs 3,500 people and is the leading transporter of oil in China. I asked him what he valued most about his Ohio Wesleyan experience. He immediately listed the names of three members of the OWU faculty, all of whom now are retired. He majored in international studies and received an advanced degree in international relations from Columbia before beginning his business career. The three faculty he named included his advisor in international studies, whom he noted as the most profound influence on his time here, a professor of English and Humanities-Classics he credited with challenging him to write at levels he had not imagined he could achieve, and another professor of English from whom he never took a class but who reviewed, critiqued, and reviewed again his graduate school application essay. His experience is consistent with the experiences of every alumnus and alumna of Ohio Wesleyan with whom I have ever visited. Invariably they point to members of the faculty who influenced them and who helped shape them for the remainder of their lives.

Seated behind me and in front of you are the members of the faculty who will do the same for you. The quality of your Ohio Wesleyan experience will be directly related to your willingness to gain the full benefit of this collection of master teachers and world-class scholars. Each one of them is at Ohio Wesleyan because of an interest in an institution devoted solely to the education of undergraduate students—that is, to you. They will be your teachers, your mentors, your guides, and your friends. They will challenge you in ways that at times may be uncomfortable but in the end will bring to you a deep sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

I asked the same alumnus what counsel he would offer for undergraduate education today. He affirmed the value of the liberal arts, calling himself a geek who lived in what at the time was called the Bashford Intercultural Center. He talked about the value of the liberal arts as preparation for leadership and as the foundation of his own accomplishments. He then noted two things: Make sure every student learns to write very well and ensure that every student is prepared to work well across borders, including the capacity for empathy and the ability to listen well when working with individuals and organizations from other cultures, with other values, and with life experiences quite different from one's own. He suggested that these are the critical capacities for success and for a fulfilling life in the global society of the 21st century.

As I listened to this alumnus, whose Ohio Wesleyan experience began nearly 40 years ago, I found myself thinking about you who enter OWU today and about the experience you will have here. Consistent with our founding values, you will be required to study across the disciplines, gaining the rich benefit of a liberal education. You will be challenged to think deeply. You will be required to write, and you will be required to write well. You will confront the complex challenges facing our world and consider those challenges from a variety of perspectives, including some that may be quite foreign and perhaps deeply uncomfortable. Our aim is to open the mind. For it is an open mind that liberates individuals and societies from the narrow views that become restrictive and ultimately deadly. A liberal education is, at the core, a liberating experience.

This summer I had the opportunity to spend two weeks in Europe, including time in Krakow, Poland. While in Krakow, I visited the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau, as well as the site of Oskar Schindler's factory. In Krakow and three other European cities, I visited the Jewish ghettos that serve as a stark reminder of the atrocities of the Third Reich and the complicity of leaders across Europe who stood silent for too long. At the same time, I was reading a new biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was an active member of the resistance and who ultimately died in a concentration camp for his role in the plot to assassinate Hitler. There is much that can be said in reflection on the experiences of this summer. But today I simply note that they recall to me the importance of liberal education. We must study history, remembering that "those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." We must liberate our minds and, in the process, be ready to liberate our world. It is to this high purpose of developing educated citizens and liberated leaders that this University is devoted. And it is to this high purpose that you have the opportunity to devote yourself on this day of matriculation.

The accomplishment of this noble mission requires an education that is rigorous and disciplined, and it requires an education that is relevant. At Ohio Wesleyan we find the relevance in the connection of theory to practice. You will be challenged to think deeply about pressing global issues and to engage actively in responding to those issues. In many cases you will have the opportunity to travel to other parts of the country or other parts of the world as a part of your education. Travel itself, with the introduction to new places, new cultures, and new understandings, is liberating. Travel that connects theory to practice contributes to the preparation of educated citizens who are ready for leadership in a complex world.

As you take your place at Ohio Wesleyan, I challenge you to ready yourself for an intellectual journey in which you open your mind and unleash the full force of your intellectual capacity. Combine the force of your intellect with the power of your passion, the things about which you care the most. What are the questions you most want to ask? What are the global challenges you most want to confront? How might you channel the power of your intellect and passion in to an education that liberates you as an agent of change, even to change the world?

On this bright day, you stand on the threshold of an amazing four-year journey. When you gather next as a class in this setting on Mother's Day 2015 and look at this journey in the rear-view mirror, what will you see? And how will you be different? It is a remarkable thing to consider. And it is a privilege to imagine being a part of the journey with you.

To the parents and families who accompany this entering class today, I know this is a bittersweet day for you. You have devoted 18 years in preparation for this day. Today we share your pride, even as we acknowledge the mixed emotions you feel. With gratitude, we honor the sacred trust your families have bestowed on Ohio Wesleyan with the arrival of these students.

Welcome to the Class of 2015. We are thrilled you are here, and we look forward to the journey together.

Thank you.