



Inauguration Address

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Villa Maria College
Delivered November 15, 2019*

Thank you, Tom. It is truly a blessing to be standing here as the 4th president in Villa Maria College's history. Thank you for sharing this day with me, my family, and the Villa community.

Thank you to Sr. Paul Marie and the Felician Sisters, Monsignor Caligiuri, Fr. Ayaga, Deacon Paul, Sr. Barbara, Peter Gonciarz, and everyone else who played a role in the beautiful mass this afternoon.

Thank you to the inauguration planning committee and the staff who made this ceremony possible, to the delegates from various colleges who are here, and to the distinguished guests on stage for your presence and kind words.

I'm not trying to charm you with false humility when I say that being on stage with these people, as a college president, is not something I ever imagined happening to me. It has not been my career ambition, a long-term goal toward which I carefully built over many years.

In fact, there have been few things of importance in my life that I have deliberately planned with a clear end goal in sight.

My tendency, instead, has been to pick a road that feels right, with a vague sense of where it might take me, and to go down that road, "the long brown path of the open road," as Walt Whitman puts it, often building the road as I go, and always arriving at surprising places along the way.

So many roads. So many roads have led me to this place, to this day.

Roads like Chili Avenue, the road I drove down 26 years ago, after completing my shift as a cashier at Tops, looking for a left turn onto Autumn Wood, where I would pick up Jen Desiderio for our very first date, and meet my future in-laws for the first time.

Roads like Interstate 81, the road on which my college friends and I took a van that had a fried radiator, an ignition that you didn't need a key to start (you just turned it with your hand), and a door held up by bungy cords, to follow the Grateful Dead across the country, finding ourselves along the way.

Roads like High Street, the road on which Jen and I drove into Columbus to start one of the most directionless endeavors you can imagine, a Ph.D. program in English, guided by the simple premise that we were nerds, and weren't ready to be done with school.

Roads like Brantwood Road, the road Jen and I drove down 14 years ago to our new home, to begin our lives at Villa and Canisius, in a city where we didn't know a single soul.

I'm so thankful for our extended family of Buffalo friends here today, for your constant support, friends from Canisius, and Amherst, and the place ruled by a wild pack of shoeless kids and a female dog named Kevin, the dead end of Brantwood Road.

Thank you to my college friends for goin' down the road with me all these years, to my graduate school friends for your camaraderie, and especially to my in-laws, the Desiderio family, for welcoming me in, for bocce and board games and frof, for knowing that you are always there for us.

The one road I didn't choose for myself was Overbrook Avenue, the street in Rochester where I was raised. Some of my best friends, friends I've known since childhood, are here today—we share an unbreakable bond that I will always treasure.

Overbrook Avenue is a very small street; it often felt like our house filled it up. Thank you to my aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews, to my brothers and sisters in-law, Tiffany, Sharon, Jim, and Dan, and especially to my brothers and sisters, Tony, Tom, Ann, and Sarah. As the baby in the family, I've learned from the four of you, put up with you, and looked up to you my whole life; you're my best friends.

We were fortunate to be raised in a loving home by two incredible parents. My father, Al, passed away 4 years ago. In so many ways, I look and act just like him. Needless to say, he was an extremely handsome and charming man. I know he is right here with us today, proud and teary-eyed.

My mother, Nancy, is here. She is still my go-to person. She instilled in me a "this too shall pass" spirit which serves me very well when I'm standing in front of Faculty Senate. As a trailblazing woman in the Catholic Church, she taught us how to pursue something you love, how to overcome barriers, and how to be yourself. Ma, you've always put your children first. This celebration is as much yours as anybody's.

And that leads me back to Brantwood Road. Getting married and having children is perhaps the ultimate example of building a road as you go along and trusting that it will all work out.

Sophia, Lucy, and Alice, I am so lucky to be your dad. Whether we are belting out "Let It Go," practicing our cross-over dribbles, or having another Smidge Sunday, you bring me constant joy. Thank you for the sacrifices you have made to get me to this point. You will have your own roads, "no simple highways, between the dawn and the dark of night," and I will go down any of them with you and for you.

And to Jen. You put your trust in MG a long time ago. That was the best thing that ever happened to me. We've done all of this together, hand in hand. Thank you for your enduring, unwavering love; it is the only way I ended up here. I love you.

And so here I am. When I drove down Pine Ridge Road for the first time 14 years ago, I thought that Villa would be a brief pit stop in my life.

What changed for me was simple: the community I found here, and the conviction that we are truly making a critical difference in the lives of our students.

Thank you to the faculty and staff, for the many years of support, fellowship, and laughter, for the hairs I've lost, the wrinkles I've gained, the wild stressed out dreams I've had, and the many precious moments of my kids' lives that I've missed because I've been too distracted by an email you just sent me about copiers.

Thank you to all the vice presidents I have had the pleasure of working so closely with, and particularly my hardworking current team:

- Rick Pinkowski, thank you for . . . well, I'm not exactly sure what—he's only been here 3 months;
- Don Monnin, thank you for your integrity and for years of perfectly timed deadpan sarcasm;
- Ryan Hartnett, thank you for your steadfast support, wise counsel, and the gleam of joy you get every time you walk in my office and successfully sniff out that I've had sardines for lunch again;
- Mary Robinson, thank you for saying yes to everything I ask of you and for getting your revenge by reminding me, every chance you get, about your weekends at the cottage on the lake;
- And Brian Emerson, thank you for originally seeding in my head this idea of being the next president, for being a confidant, advisor, and source of laughter, and for all the unsolicited critiques, verbal and nonverbal, of my shirts, ties, haircuts, and shoes.

A very warm and special thank you to Michaelene Karpinski, my beloved assistant, for constant listening and constant optimism. We make a great team.

Our former president, Sr. Marcella Marie Garus, is here with us today. She's the one who put me on this path seven years ago, for which I will always be grateful. I learned so much from her prudent leadership.

I owe deep gratitude to our Board of Trustees, and particularly our Chair, Catherine Cooley, for steering the college through a prolonged period of transition and entrusting me with its leadership.

I am honored that Dr. Grandillo made the journey to join us today, as well as a true believer in Villa, Terry Schweizer from Felician Services; thank you, Terry, for your many years of support.

I am humbled that the Felician Sisters have the faith in me to lead this great ministry. To all Felician Sisters, especially Sister Mary Christopher Moore and the Our Lady of Hope Provincial Council, please know that I will always put mission first, that I will remain faithful to your spirit and legacy.

Finally, I want to thank our students.

Each of our students is here on their own journey, their own Viking Voyage. What they do here will help define them for the rest of their lives, will help them build their own roads in life.

It has always been easy to overlook Villa Maria College. Given our small size, between 500 and 600 students, it is tempting to focus on other institutions, as if size equates to status and value.

As a new president, I'm supposed to make headlines about my plans for campus expansion, new athletic teams, or the boatloads of money I will raise. We do have hopes along those lines, but we're not here for those things. We're here for the people we serve.

Higher education does not exist to boost the egos of presidents, to fill football stadiums or sell merchandise, to separate the haves from the have nots as yet another marker of privilege in our society.

Instead, higher education exists to change and improve lives. By providing students the opportunity to learn more about themselves and their world, higher education sets them on the road to a better life.

Imagine if we evaluated colleges on this simple criterion: how well do they change and improve lives?

We wouldn't be so obsessed with SAT scores or how selective admissions offices are. Our rankings wouldn't be dominated, year after year, by colleges comprised mostly of white, privileged kids.

Rather, we would be asking a whole different set of questions, not only about the backgrounds of the students who attend, but about how well the institution serves them.

We might ask, for example, not just what grades and accolades incoming freshman achieved in high school, but also how many hours they worked to support their families, how often they cared for younger siblings, or how long they spent mastering assistive technology for their learning difference.

We might ask not just how rigorous the college coursework is, but what the program is for helping students make the transition from high school to college, for integrating them into the campus and readying them for challenges ahead of them.

We might ask not just what amenities are available to students, but how well the college mobilizes when a student is in crisis, or is overcome with anxiety; when a student is dealing with loss or the effects of traumatic violence; or is single, pregnant, working, and STILL making the effort to attend every class; when a student doesn't have enough to eat, or doesn't know how to advocate for herself.

We might ask, not only where the faculty earned their degrees and how well published they are, but how much of their time is actually spent on teaching students, how hard they work to make their classes engaging, and how much they carry the strain home with them, every night, of being mentors and parental figures to their students.

We might ask how available campus offices are, how often staff stay late to help students navigate the complexities of financial aid, or advise them about whether to change majors.

We might ask to what extent athletic programs serve the needs of students and their education rather than the needs of sponsors, boosters, and corporations.

We might ask how actively the college recruits, admits, integrates, supports, and champions students with

learning differences, students with autism, dyslexia, and ADHD.

We might ask students to describe the culture of the institution, trying to gauge how welcoming and inclusive it is, how it lives as a diverse community reflective of its region.

We might try to measure the intensity of the tears, the tightness of the hugs, the broadness of the smiles, and the sincerity of the thank yous that graduates and faculty share with one another at commencement, as well as the swell of pride that parents feel as their graduates walk across the stage to receive their diplomas.

Too often, we talk about higher education as a monolithic entity. The truth, of course, is that the United States is fortunate to boast an incredibly diverse array of colleges and universities.

I am a product of large, state research universities. I would never diminish their value to our society, nor question the vital importance of their faculty's research.

But I will always insist that the types of colleges that score well in the considerations that I have just articulated are unfairly and shamefully undervalued, that their faculty also perform vitally important work—reaching and teaching students in order to help improve and change their lives—work that is just as intellectually grueling as publishing a new piece of research.

If we were to factor these things into our rankings along with SAT scores, admissions selectivity, and faculty credentials, then small, mission-driven colleges, like and including Villa, would be scattered high on the lists.

Villa Maria College has never, and, under my presidency, WILL NEVER, forget what its true purpose is—to change and improve lives, to bring about individual and communal transformation, guided by our Catholic faith and our Felician Franciscan tradition.

Our Physical Therapist Assistant students beat national averages, every year, in graduation rates and licensing exam scores. Our Interior Design graduates have been involved in some of the signature restoration projects throughout Buffalo. Our Graphic Design students take home prizes annually in advertising competitions, and our arts and literary magazine, SKALD, routinely receives national awards when judged against much larger colleges. As you have seen, our Music students can SING.

We have dynamic academic programs like Animation, Game Design, Music Industry, Business, Psychology, and others, led by highly accomplished faculty. We have talented, capable, bright students.

But what sets us apart is that we strive to be the most innovative student-centered culture around. We have taken bold steps to improve student success, establishing our mentorship program, supplemental instruction, the Achieve Program, the Care Team, and the Honors Program, among others.

And we have done it for a diverse student body. We have higher percentages of Pell grant recipients, of African-American students, and of students with learning differences than most, if not all, of the private colleges in Western New York. 75% of our students are from Erie County, and 40% from Buffalo—mostly the East Side. Our students reflect the actual makeup of our community.

They are the reason that Dave Wisner doesn't flinch if he has to finish a wiring project at 4:00 in the morning; or that Sarah Hanson and her colleagues put on the 24-hour Animation competition, sacrificing their entire weekend; or that Becky Strathearn reassures parents over and over again that we will look after their kids if they choose to come to Villa; or that Jim Kelly comes in on Saturdays to hold open labs for students; or that Lucy Waite puts a smile on her face, no matter how badly her day might be going, and warmly greets everyone who passes by her desk.

They are the reason that Brian Emerson, Ryan Hartnett, Mary Robinson, Rick Pinkowski, and Don Monnin put in long hours during the day, respond to emails at night, and come up with one great new idea after another on the weekends.

Our commitment to our students. That is why Villa is the premier student-centered institution in Western New York.

In the coming years, we will launch new academic programs that prepare students for the workforce, advance cutting-edge pedagogy, refine co-curricular programs to enhance student success, and develop and strengthen partnerships, in Buffalo and beyond, to maximize the reach of our mission.

We will be even more intentional about devoting our talent, time, energy, and resources to put students on a new road, THEIR road that will take them and their communities to better places.

We will do all of this because we have learned from the seminal figures we, as a Felician ministry, take as our inspiration.

Figures including St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi, St. Felix, Blessed Mary Angela Truszcowska, founder of the Felician Sisters, as well as the Felician Sisters of Buffalo, past and present, all of whom have traveled over countless roads in selfless service of God and others, rebuilding the Church along the way.

We will do all of this because we adhere to the core values of the Felician Sisters—compassion, solidarity with the poor, justice and peace, respect for human dignity, and transformation.

We will do all of this because we are a Catholic college, and our community needs us.

Over the course of this past year, we have been developing what we are referring to as the Villa Way, the guidelines that dictate how we behave as part of the Villa community.

But it only recently dawned on me that there is another way to understand that term, "Villa Way." Villa, of course, means "home," or "house." "Way" is a synonym for "road" or "path."

For those of us who work here, who study here, who graduated from here, Villa is home. Whatever individual roads led us here—Overbrook Avenue, Brantwood Road, Bailey, Genesee, George Urban, Walden, Jefferson, the 33, the 90—Villa is the place where we belong.

But it is also a home from which our students eventually leave. The Villa Way is the road they embark upon as they depart. A new path, a better road in front of them than they had when they arrived. They will

continue to build that road, with living stones, for the rest of their lives.

For the sake of our community, we need the Villa Way. To fulfill the promise that Buffalo Schools and Say Yes provide to our city's children, we need the Villa Way. For the East Side of Buffalo to continue its momentum as part of the Buffalo Renaissance, we need the Villa Way. For the prosperity of Cheektowaga, Erie county, and the region, we need the Villa Way. To help bring about the spiritual renewal of the world, we need the Villa Way.

For all of our students, their families, their friends, their neighbors, for all we serve, for our partners and supporters, and for us, we need the Villa Way.

I am honored to be the present caretaker of this home. I will work hard with my colleagues to nurture and sustain it. I will give everything I have to make sure that the Villa Way is the right way.

So many roads to lead us home. Thank you, all of you.