Convocation Address to the Class of 2014: On Accountability, Responsibility, & Choice

President Irma McClaurin, PhD
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New students, returning students, faculty, staff and administrators, alumni, trustees, my cabinet, and friends of Shaw College, it is my privilege to stand before you as your new president. This is a journey of which I have longed dreamed, and now I have arrived at this destination, the campus of Shaw University.

I intend to address each and every one of you, but convocations are ceremonious times when institutions of higher education welcome newcomers. So first let me speak to the newcomers (freshmen and transfer students). Congratulations on having accomplished your aspiration of attending college; and, I welcome you to the first day of the rest of your life.

It is the same for me—this is the first day of the rest of my life. I have achieved a long-standing dream of mine to be at the helm of an institution of higher learning. And while it will be a new adventure for all of us—a quest, similar to that of the mythological Jason of the Argonauts, in which you will pursue the “golden fleece” of education, while I pursue the task of leading this institution to new plateaus of greatness.

It will not be easy, change and transformations, and being new, are processes usually fraught with challenges, many distractions, and both recognized and unrecognized opportunities. I ask that we weather our first year together, keeping each other on track, all the while steering the boat of our destiny on a steady course.

Of course, we should make each other accountability partners. It will be my job to remind you of what your ultimate goal is—to walk down the aisles during commencement and be awarded your sheepskin—the symbol of significant accomplishments.
And you, along with many others, should remind me, if I appear at all to venture off course, that I am here to steer Shaw University to a new level of financial stability; increased gift giving from alumni and friends; improved and innovative curriculum and facilities designed to inspire you to achieve at new heights; and increased opportunities for students in all areas of study, including global programs, internships, and community service and engagement. Should we follow this course of action, each of us will become wiser, more experienced, and accomplished in our efforts.

A year ago, as I am sure you can attest, I could not have imagined myself here. Yet here I am, and while to some it might seem a miracle, or an act of grace, I am here because of my own hard work, because I believed in myself, and because I surrounded myself with supporters, as well as critics, who all were united in their belief in my ability to achieve to this position.

I am also here because I did not take the gifts with which I have been blessed for granted. I am humbled by my success and recognize that it could have been otherwise—I have seen many falter as they struggled to achieve and know that “but for the grace of God,” I could just as easily be standing in their shoes. So my achievements are always undergirded with a profound belief in service, social responsibility, and giving back.

Class of 2014, you and I have entered into a new phase of our lives. My story is also your story; we have both left the comforts of our home, our supporters, our family, and all that is familiar to us to journey to Shaw University. This is NOW “HOME” for us-- for you it will be home for the next four years. For me, it will be a longer tenure during which I will call Shaw “home.” The “Shaw Universe” is now your family. And it is here that you will embark on the beginning of what is an individual and collective journey of opportunities.

Take a moment to pause and reflect. I want you to look at the person next to you, and take his or her hand in yours. I now charge you to become responsible for that person, and he/she for you, to finish this journey of opportunity. Be your brother’s and your sister’s keeper. I charge each of you, as Shaw Family members, whether you know each other or not, to offer words of support and encouragement, especially when the journey seems difficult, the next time you meet or see each other in class or around campus,. I charge each and every one of you to give cheers and praise when you see someone who has climbed hurdles and overcome potholes in the road of academic life. I charge you all to give words of caution and wisdom when your sisters or brothers seem to stray. Are you not your brother’s and sister’s keeper? And finally, I charge each one of you to hold yourselves accountable for your actions—positive or negative.

Remember, from this day forward, you are solely responsible for your actions. You have passed the point of being able to blame parents, teachers, siblings, friends, or environment for your success or failure. In the Shaw Universe, YOU are responsible for your own actions. No one can make you do anything you do not wish to do. You always have choices. You can choose to do well, or you can choose to do harm.
And be very clear, not making choices, not taking responsibility for your actions, or ignoring warnings, will not make problems go away. Not taking action, getting around to it, or ignoring problems are ALL ACTIONS. But they are acts of avoidance, which ultimately come back to claim their place in your life—bigger and far worse than before. They may seem to go away, because you choose to ignore them, but in truth, they are simply hidden from your everyday consciousness—possibly out of sight, but certainly not out of your life.

The choices you make here at Shaw University over the next four years matter; the roads you travel, the people you choose to associate with, the way you behave—conservative, radical, gangsta, faith-based, ethical, will set a path that will follow you for the rest of your life. What happens here MATTERS. Never forget that.

What you do (or as the case may be for what I hope is a very small number, what you don’t do) at Shaw University will impact the rest of your life. Know this, moving forward, the only person responsible for your success, and I hope this will never be the case but the only person responsible for your lack of achievement, is YOU. Four years from now, at Commencement, I would like to see each and every one of you receive your degree. And we, the Shaw University administration, faculty, and staff are here to assist you in achieving that goal. Make use of us. Hold us accountable as you hold yourself accountable.

Consider the efforts you expend and time spent here as your personal investment in your future. As an investor in yourself, you are completely responsible for your actions. There will be no one to wake you up in the morning for classes, EXCEPT YOU.

There will be no one to hound you to do your homework, EXCEPT YOU.

You will be confronted with many activities and diversions competing for your attention. Choose wisely—focus on nurturing your mind, your body, and your spirit. Focus on being of service to your University and to the larger community here in Raleigh and back home.

I urge you to pursue this liberal arts education in all of its breadth and diversity, with phenomenal vigor and energy. I charge you to never ever lose sight of the fact that in the end, it is what you accomplish and commit to learn in the classroom that will be the test of your mettle, and that will determine your ultimate matriculation at the end of four years.

Be aware of the history of Shaw University, and be proud. We are an institution steeped in a rich history of creating opportunities in the midst of opposition; this institution was founded on the vision and prayers of Henry Martin Tupper and his wife Sarah amidst much opposition. And their courage reminds us that the road to success is never easy. The famous anthropologist Margaret Mead once wrote: “A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”
I now wish to address the upper classmen. You are the role models for the freshmen. I charge you to guide them well, share with them the wisdom you have acquired over the years, and model for them the ethical and studious behavior needed to successfully complete their time at Shaw.

To Faculty, staff, and administrators, the future of these 707 new students, and the destiny of the remaining 2000 upperclassmen rests in our hands. I charge us to do our jobs effectively and to model for them patience, understanding, and compassion. I ask that we provide assistance to them when they request it, and even when assistance is not asked for, but much needed, that we stand ready to respond. We must be observant so as to forewarn our charges of potential pitfalls along their journey through the Shaw Universe.

In closing, let me turn to a former colleague from Minneapolis. Dr. Verna Cornelia Price is an educator who founded a mentoring program called “Girls in Action.” Dr. Price has written a very important book entitled *The Power of People: Four Kinds of People Who Can Change Your Life.* Let me close with some of her thoughts; she writes:

> We need people to exist, to truly live, to love, and to dream. People are powerful. We are powerful forces of life who can and have moved civilizations to great innovations and progress and to incomprehensible demise. That is the power of people. Why are we so powerful? Very simple: God created people to be powerful. By giving us the most powerful tool known to humankind: the power of Choice.

> …So you see, as people, we are very powerful because we choose. What does having choice mean? It means that we can change our lives. It also means that we can influence other people by the choices we make and the consequent actions we take (1-2).

I charge you students, new and returning, to learn from all those who have come before you, and choose wisely. Influence others with graciousness and compassion, with humility and integrity. Be the change you wish to see in others. There is greatness in you, for you are the hope of Shaw University’s future and the world. Blessings upon you.

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