Introduction

Welcome. Welcome two presidents emeriti of Rollins, Dr. Thaddeus Seymour, the College’s 12th president, and Dr. Rita Bornstein, its 13th. Welcome faculty and staff of the College. Welcome students. Welcome faculty. Welcome parents and family members, without whom none of this would be possible. Welcome alumni, members of the community, and guests.

Today we begin, officially and in earnest, a new year of liberal inquiry. It is an honor, a privilege, and a joy to launch our noble work together.

Let me extend a special welcome to those students, faculty, and administrative staff members for whom this is their first new beginning at Rollins College. Know that you are joining a community of learners that has been committed to the enterprise of liberal education for over 130 years.

Today I will share thoughts about our mission, our common purpose as a liberal arts college, and your role in that mission. I think it is important to remain
mindful that our work here together is a **social investment into the future**, not just the future of you, our students, but of global civil society.

This is why we are gathered here. It is why Rollins College was founded in 1885 and why it exists today. Though we have a variety of roles in this undertaking, we are each here to engage in this important work in the only way it can be done: **together**.

Working together, living and learning together, will be a challenging and profoundly enriching experience. The process of liberal education is inherently social; the quality of our relationships determines the quality of life and learning on campus.

We are a diverse learning community on purpose. For many of you, this is the most diverse community in which you have ever lived or studied. We intentionality seek to welcome students, faculty, and staff who represent a broad diversity of identities – racial, ethnic, religious, gender, national, political, and socioeconomic – because we believe that only by learning with and from people who see the world differently can we fulfill our mission with integrity.

**Our Common Purpose**

What is our mission? Why does Rollins College exist? What are we doing here? What justifies our existence, gives purpose to our gathering? It is this:

Rollins College educates students for global citizenship and responsible leadership, empowering graduates to pursue meaningful lives and productive careers.
We are dedicated to scholarship, academic achievement, creative accomplishment, cultural enrichment, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship.

We value excellence in teaching and rigorous, transformative education in a healthy, responsive, and inclusive environment.

That’s it. This is why I am here. It is why I get up in the morning, and it is what I think about when I go to bed at night. This is why all of the wonderful people who prepare your food, who take care of the campus and your residence halls, who manage the technology and business of the College, and who raise money for Rollins, for your education, are here.

This is why the deans, the librarians, and the coaches are here. They are all part of this noble, common project. **It is why they have my utmost respect and deserve yours.**

Most importantly, this is why each one of your professors is here, why the professional staff in Student Affairs are here. They are a brilliant and committed group of people, each of whom has chosen to be at Rollins, devoted to our common mission.

Their professional purpose, their calling, is to help each of you graduate from Rollins with greatly expanded capacities as a creative and independent thinker with exceptional abilities to ask important questions, research complex issues, solve problems, and communicate new knowledge and insight.
Making Up Your Mind

Today, I am asking each of you to reflect on our mission and to examine the extent to which it resonates with your own sense of purpose. Kate and Charles, what is your purpose in being here? Chrystal, Julian, Rob, and Isabelle...what are your goals and aspirations? Is your reason for being here the same as the College’s? Compatible? Harmonious? Or are they discontinuous in some ways?

Let me say at the outset that it is okay for you to feel uncomfortable or disturbed by these questions. It is okay for you to be uncertain about the answers. The journey you have now begun is a quest for clarity; the road can be difficult, bumpy, winding, challenging, thrilling, and fun.

In my thirty years working with college students, I know that you range across a broad spectrum of clarity and resolve when it comes to the question of what you think you are doing here.

Some of you have a clear vision of your future. You know why you are here and you are eager to get on with it. You have discerned your driving passion and your way is clear. I say, good for you. Along the way, however, remain open to insights and inspiration that can come from quarters you never anticipated.

If your quest is to become a writer or a violinist, understand that geology, math, and physics can expand your soul.

If you are resolved that medical school or scientific research or business is in your future, remember that philosophy, literature, history, and art will cultivate your humanity in ways that you will draw upon throughout your career, indeed, throughout your life.

Now, let me hasten to add that it is a rare 18-year-old whose vision of their future remains clear and singular. It is much, much more common for you to
begin with a sense of your direction, to explore it, while encountering a range of new ideas and disciplines, and for you to **change your mind. I am here to tell you that this is perfectly appropriate.**

Reflect on the phrase, “I changed my mind.” What a wonderful thing, to change one’s mind. And that is exactly what we are here to do.

Many of you will struggle with these changes. In some cases you will realize that the purpose you thought you had was not yours at all, but the aspiration of your parents. In other cases, you have built your identity around a certain vision of yourself and your future. It will be a struggle to liberate yourself from these mantles, but we are here to help.

**You see, happiness is a function of discovering and cultivating your passions and pursuing them with gusto.**

A sure recipe for unhappiness is trying to live someone else’s vision for who you are and what you should be doing. The pathway of moving from childhood through adolescence to adulthood is a journey of increasing **agency**, of doing things on purpose, not because you were told to do them but because you have **chosen** to do them.

But choice entails reason and reflection. It entails risk, experimentation, and acting on purpose…acting with intention.

The object of your quest is nothing less than the formation of your identity, the discernment of your future, and the making of meaning. One of the precious dimensions of college is the opportunity it affords for you to engage new and challenging books, authors, ideas, and theories; it is through these engagements that you will literally make up your mind.
One author I hope you have the chance to engage is the existentialist philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre.

In his novel, *Nausea*, the protagonist slowly comes to realize that purpose and meaning are not inherent in reality, not fixed or given. The opposite, in fact. Unmediated reality is devoid of meaning. When the protagonist glimpses this realization, he is overcome with waves of nausea: vertigo caused by meaninglessness.

But the nausea is also caused by his grasp of what is entailed by the fact that one’s purpose is not given, one’s meaning not provided. Why? Because this realization unmasks the burden of ultimate freedom.

*If meaning is not given, then if it is to exist, it is the responsibility of each person to create it out of nothing.* Sartre talks about life as a project; it is the responsibility of each agent to bring meaning to experience, to create a coherent narrative as an act of will.

*This is how I would have each of you face the project of your liberal education.* Without owning, creating, your own sense of purpose here, the meaning we intend in our curriculum can be lost on you. Moving through it could leave you as the autodidact in Sartre’s novel, who seeks erudition by reading his way through the library alphabetically.

A curriculum is not a check-list; a Rollins degree is not a commodity to be acquired by fulfilling requirements. Our curriculum asks certain things of you, as do the majors and minors you will choose. But I urge you not to treat these as checklists but to make your own meaning of them. Use them to pursue questions, ideas, and topics with significance to you. It is your responsibility to bring meaning to your time here, *to create a coherent narrative as an act of will.*
You have embarked on a four-year project to make up your mind.

Of course, though the burden of responsibility falls to each of you individually, this is not a quest that can be achieved on one’s own. We want you to take ownership of your liberal education. But learning, understanding, and insight are deepened through dialogue.

**We are all participants in one another’s quests, all finding our way in a community of learners.** At Rollins you will be surrounded by wise and caring guides. One of the ways your faculty have provided guidance is through the very design of the curriculum; through this they are the architects of your programs of study. From the designs of the Rollins College Conference program to the rich interdisciplinary neighborhoods of study in the Rollins Foundations of the Liberal Arts, your faculty have provided creative landscapes of knowledge for your exploration, your liberal education.

Enjoy these quests; through them you will come to appreciate that the world’s most pressing problems can only be adequately engaged by bringing together multiple methods of analysis, multiple ways of knowing that we call disciplines, to bear.

This is why a Rollins education is the best preparation for global citizenship and responsible leadership, the best intellectual equipment for pursuing a meaningful life and a productive career.

But your professors are much more than the architects of your educational experience; they are also here to engage you as an individual, talk to you about your ideas and your work, challenge you to think in new ways, and mentor you in
your journey. Each of you already has a professor who is your advisor, and you will likely have many as you find your way.

You will also have very influential relationships with mentors in Student Affairs. I encourage you to talk with your professors and deans about your ideas, your questions, your aspirations. Keep in mind, always, that these four years can and should utterly consume your imagination, but that **you are also building a foundation that you will be standing on for the rest of your life.** Make sure it is strong and seek advice every step of the way about what should go into it.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, let me offer this final thought. If you seek clarity within yourself, if you craft, scrutinize, revise, and experiment with your own sense of purpose, you will have a fundamentally different kind of relationship with the faculty, and really, have a fundamentally different relationship with the College.

**You will be a producer of knowledge, not a passive consumer.** Instead, **your liberal education will be your own; you will create its meaning through your own act of will.**

Further, and this is the point about the alignment between Rollins’ mission and values and your own sense of purpose, if you do this you will be here for the very reason this college exists. **In realizing your purpose, you realize ours.**

And now, will the members of the Class of 2019, and all new students please.
By virtue of the authority vested in me by the Board of Trustees and on behalf of the faculty of Rollins College, I do hereby matriculate you as candidates for the degree Artium Baccalaureus and Artium Baccalaureus Honoris.

With great respect for our common purpose and profound optimism for our common future, the 131st year of liberal education at Rollins College is hereby convened.