Installation Address

April 9, 2005

Rollins President Lewis M. Duncan

George D. and Harriet W. Cornell Professor of Distinguished Presidential Leadership

The Song of My Soul

Fiat Lux. Let there be light.

Today, here at Rollins College, is a day to rejoice, a celebration of the remarkable history of this exceptional institution, and an opportunity to enjoy the special fellowship of friends and colleagues in this esteemed academy of higher learning. Also, we are called together to dream great dreams and to dare great deeds, as we share great responsibilities and serve great needs. For ours is the privilege to teach, to prepare rising generations of outstanding young women and men for roles of leadership and service in a difficult world. Never has the need been greater for a liberally educated citizenry, never the need greater for a rising generation of servant leaders of enlightened minds and compassionate hearts.

For Rollins College, this is a day not only of confirmation and installation, but also one of affirmation. We ask ourselves to reflect anew on the fundamental questions at the heart of our academy...of why we teach, of what we teach, and how.

The why of teaching is easily the most straightforward of these to address. As educators, we are devoted to the ideal of preparing each rising generation of citizen leaders in our society. Together, as we cross this threshold of a new century, of a new millennium, we must continue to learn from the lessons of the past, even as we look with hope and promise to the future.

The call to teach is indeed a profound responsibility. Ours is the call to translate information into ideas, experience into insight, knowledge into wisdom...the transformation of all that has been into all that still might be. Our heritage is all of past history and human experience, our legacy a still unwritten future. Ours is the heritage of nature, of the evolutions and competitions of ascending orders of natural complexity, and of the ascent of the moral consciousness of man. Ours is the heritage of knowledge and understanding, born of the oral histories once shared around primitive campfires, and accumulated and refined over centuries ever since through the intellectual filters of retrospection and reflection. Ours is a heritage of civilization, the human journey from savagery to society, shaped and united through our conquests, our collaborations, and our commerce. Ours is a heritage of culture, endowed by the arts, literature, and music, enriched by the traditions and abundant diversity of our world communities. Ours is a heritage of reason, forged in the Socratic forums of ancient Greece and confirmed by the sciences.
of the Enlightenment and the rationalities of the modern world. Ours is a heritage of promise and of possibility, informed by our philosophies of theology and of thought, and empowered by the unrelenting exponential of technological progress. Ours is a heritage of learning, revealed through the triumphs of ideas over instincts, of freedom over fear, of cooperation over conflict. Across this threshold of a new millennium, liberal education today serves both as an interpretive lens on the lessons of the past and as prospective arbiter for the promises of the future. Truly, in and through liberal education, ours is the enduring human legacy of hope. That is the higher purpose which inspires our profession as teachers, which ennobles our calling to Rollins, and which we reaffirm here again today.

As to the inquiry of what we teach, we reflect more deeply. First, it is important to recognize that not all schools of higher education serve equal missions, nor share equal values and visions of these times ahead. Liberal arts colleges hold a special place among the assembly of institutions of higher education. And by our history and by our aspirations, Rollins College shines as its own bright star among the constellation of preeminent schools with special devotion to the arts, sciences, and practice of liberal learning. We serve this mission ably through the offerings of our traditional College of Arts & Sciences; through the Hamilton Holt School’s distinctive baccalaureate and master’s evening programs, bringing the enlightenment of the liberal arts to a whole new body of deserving eager learners; and through the exceptional professional programs of the Crummer Graduate School of Business, combining the insights and moral reasoning of the broad liberal arts and sciences with the multidisciplinary practice of commerce in a global society.

Collectively, this is who we are here at Rollins. Yet for many in higher education, the goals of what is taught are far different and less clear. Post-secondary education assumes many forms today, extending from pre-professional and vocational training institutes to the largest public and private research universities. As I have asserted, small private liberal arts colleges serve a special role in this group, although most schools of every type attempt to offer some variation of an undergraduate liberal arts experience. Briefly, today, I would like to speak about the special challenges to liberal education and to small private liberal arts colleges posed by the rise and dominance of the great research universities of the 20th century.

These large research universities serve our nation well in many important ways: through the production of new knowledge across all disciplines, through scientific discoveries begetting the technologies that shape the future, and through scholarly analyses reilluminating the lessons of the past. Their faculties are scholar-teachers and their educational goals are defined in large part by post-baccalaureate education on the frontiers of the most demanding disciplines of study. The wellspring of ideas and innovations arising from such research universities serves as the foundation for our industry and the expanding opportunities of our people. The continued development of the large research university is inarguably one of our nation’s great success stories. And collectively, American higher education stands today as the envy of all the world.

However, within research-oriented schools the delivery of traditional liberal education, i.e., the value-centered general education of undergraduate students, is to some extent necessarily a subordinate concern that must be accommodated within the framework of disciplines and faculty expertise assembled for other purposes and organized around other priorities. Most often the liberal-education needs of undergraduates are addressed by means of a curricular compromise. Instead of presenting a truly coherent sequence of interdisciplinary undergraduate courses, most research universities choose to substitute a template of distributional requirements, a catalogue of offerings to be selected from across the segmented disciplinary breadth and depth of the modern research academy. The substance of general education then relies upon the student’s own synthesis of these collateral distributional selections. Such a surrogate model for liberal education was first introduced at Princeton University by James McCosh in the late 1880s, and continues to define the curricular design of many leading research universities today.

Fortunately, for the small colleges of the liberal arts and sciences, this need not be our chosen way. Our subjects of study and of thought spread across traditional research disciplines, and are better built on the synergies at their intersection and on learning shared as colleagues within a truly interdependent and interactive academic community. Our smaller scale and more generalist mission need not conform to the structure of the large research university, and we must be vigilant to the pressures to conform our liberal arts academy to emulate the research university’s own imitation of ourselves.
We are indeed in competition for the minds and monies of the world's brightest students, and for many the research university environment suffices. But liberal arts colleges everywhere must continue to assert that we are the appropriate and, for a select few, better choice for those who would be more broadly educated as citizen leaders. However, in competitive response for attracting these chosen capable elite, many larger research universities now promote some variation of an honors college, promising programs of study with smaller student-faculty ratios to a segregated community of academically gifted students. While such improvements are laudable, we should not confuse context with content. Unless such programs radically restructure their traditional undergraduate curriculum into a coherent, truly interdisciplinary experience, they still offer only the same distributive metrics and synthetic imitations of a true liberal education.

Recognizing this need for broader cross-disciplinary coherency in undergraduate education, some public and private universities moved toward an alternative curricular variation. Over the first half of the 20th century, this concern for coherency was the genesis for a supplementary model of liberal education, motivated in part by the need for an informed citizenry to sustain our democracy, and also in part by American ideological needs for a strong national identity. American higher education serves such national purpose when its teachings reaffirm our cultural continuity and shared democratic values. Traditionally, this approach has been presented primarily from the perspectives of Western civilization, with the most celebrated of these being the "Great Books" curriculum introduced at the University of Chicago in the 1930s by Robert Hutchins. Founded on classical Greek philosophies of thought, such historically constructed models of learning celebrate great works and great ideas, and attempt to distill the wisdom of past human experience and reflection, or at least that of the Euro-American experience, into lessons of contemporary civic awareness and the installations of social responsibility. As advocated in the landmark report General Education in a Free Society, developed in 1945 at Harvard University under the leadership of James Conant, such programs are designed to engage a cross-disciplinary breadth and instill a strengthened bond of civic identity by affirming the distinctions particular to Western civilization. Somewhat curiously, however, the design of such civic approaches in the past has rarely explored uniquely American literature or ideas, but rather has served primarily to reinforce our Western European heritage and our associated common cultural bonds. At their core, such curricular approaches accentuate the differences among modern civil societies and exalt what Samuel Huntington describes in his provocative Clash of Civilizations as the tradition of individual rights and liberties unique to Western society.

I would assert that while such approaches may well have served the needs of our nation in the 20th century, they offer distorted virtues for dealing with the new world order of the 21st. Democracy is far more than only a form of government; it is a bond of common human experiences and reciprocal interests that serves as the touchstone of liberal learning. For the truly liberated mind, the world of ideas is unconstrained by the boundaries of geography or national identity or religious ideology. For the truly liberated mind, patriotism and beliefs are measured by principle, not by politics or theology. This is the true American virtue, the liberty of thought. It is in the private liberal arts colleges, rather than the public universities or the strongly religious-affiliated private institutions, that we find liberal education less influenced in its dependencies on financial support from governments or religious organizations, and conversely more dependent upon the generosity of benefactors who understand and support our higher independent purpose. And so it accrues to our independent institutions of higher learning that they should be truly emancipated from the political and theological allegiances that inevitably work to compromise the fundamental tenets of our academic freedoms of thought. It is this freedom of thought that defines the liberated mind.

Of greatest relevancy to Rollins, a third model of higher education emerged in the 20th century that also addresses the question of what we teach in our colleges and universities today. This approach, championed by the respected pragmatist philosopher John Dewey in his acclaimed study Education and Democracy, serves as the foundation for much of the curricular design found in liberal arts colleges today. This pedagogy emphasizes the cognitive development of our students as individual free, critical, and creative thinkers, and is correspondingly less concerned with memorization of specific information as the subject of course content. Learning the modalities of thought becomes more important than the teaching of a specific body of knowledge. The goal of liberal education then becomes one of preparing students for lives as reflective human beings, with abilities for critical reasoning and an enlightened tolerance for dissent, and with an understanding of learning as a rewarding and necessary lifelong endeavor. Such an approach then far better prepares students to embrace the many changes and uncertainties of life after college, while admittedly leaving them initially perhaps somewhat less vocationally skilled. As Dewey noted, "Education must first be human, and only after that professional."

However, this pragmatist philosophy of education also went far beyond the abstract "life of the mind" traditional to liberal arts education of that time. Beyond the idealist notions of the purity of thought, Dewey called upon liberal education to also prepare students for lives of social responsibility, civic engagement, and citizen leadership. He noted that it was just those ages when learned
men had contempt for the material and practical processes of everyday life that progress toward improving the human condition was most slow. He found incomplete an education "of isolated logical reasonings and so-called knowledge created merely from the most general moral principles." Knowledge unto its own end was too lofty and divorced from the basic human necessities of social engagement, career, and citizenship. Today, most liberal arts colleges fully endorse the viewpoint that the past cannot be segregated from the present and embrace the expectation that action must be a corollary to understanding.

Dewey also spoke eloquently of the relationship of liberal education to democracy, and the importance of an informed and engaged citizenry. This was, of course, not a new concept; Plato defined a slave as anyone who accepted commandments that would determine conduct without question or understanding. The purpose of a liberal education, then, cannot be guided by the preservation of beliefs or perpetuation of custom, but rather must be an ongoing commitment to open inquiry and critical reasoning, and the application of ideas and innovations for the progressive improvement of the human condition. Thomas Jefferson described knowledge as the most powerful democratizing force, and so it was in the liberal arts colleges of our young American republic that liberal education was redefined as expression of both thought and deed, of mind and body, of lives of wisdom and of work. An educated, informed, and actively engaged citizenry was, and remains today, a requisite for our democracy. From our freedoms of thought, inquiry, and expression come the strength of our republic and the unfettered opportunities of all our people.

Dewey further questioned if public education, including public higher education, could ever separate itself from the political ideologies of the government. He declared, "The inculcation of state values, the nationalism of ideals, the industry of purpose and training of our working classes are all servants of state purpose and perpetuation." To this end, the attitudes of political acceptance and the sensitivities to cultural correctness have become watch sentinels intimidating and quieting our public voices of dissent. Our private liberal arts colleges must reassert their essential role in preserving the ideals of a democratic society, manifested in our pluralism of perspectives and the diversity of our opinions, through the open transmission and competition of ideas, in our forums of debate, and as refuge for dissent. And through this process, we then further empower our graduates to a higher calling of social responsibility, moral thought, and civic leadership.

As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall declared, "Democracy cannot flourish amid fear. Liberty cannot blossom amid hate. Justice cannot take root amid rage... We must dissent from the indifference. We must dissent from the apathy. We must dissent from the fear, the hatred and the mistrust... We must dissent from the poverty of vision and the absence of moral leadership."

Liberal arts colleges of America today must stand as havens for those who would give voice to informed dissent, just as we must for those who would defend with vigor the prevailing beliefs of our times. We must be home for those who would dare think the unthinkable, challenge the unchallengeable, question the unquestionable, and dream the undreamable. We must confront our doubts as we would also confirm our beliefs, with integrity and open minds.

This, then, is our answer to the questions of what and why we teach. But our response to the question of how we teach is more personal to our institution, closely tied to Rollins’ history and our vision for the future. From the strong foundations of Rollins College today, together we dare dream a future boldly. That we can aspire to build a college of unfettered future and highest academic ambition is only because we stand so encouraged by this moment’s uplifting opportunities and the promise of such possibilities unbounded. And just as surely, if we might see this future clearly, aware but unblinded by challenge, it is only because we stand on the shoulders of the many who have come and served before us.

Like many small liberal arts colleges, our particular history is a saga of great ambitions derived from modest beginnings. Throughout the formative years of our American republic, the American Congregational Church had an historic educational mission, founding numerous colleges, such as Harvard, Yale and Dartmouth, Amherst and Williams, Oberlin, Carleton and Middlebury. At the 1884 national meeting of Congregational Churches, held in Jacksonville that year, schoolteacher Miss Lucy Cross made an impassioned appeal to establish a college bringing liberal arts education to the Florida frontier, a dream she referred to as “the song of my soul.” The assembly concurred, and in competition among prospective communities, small Winter Park made an astounding offer of $125,000 in cash and property. The largest and naming gift of $50,000 came from Chicago businessman Alonzo Rollins, who exemplified the responsible stewardship and generosity of leading industrialists of that age. Similarly, our first residence halls of
Pinehurst and Lakeside Cottages were provided for by Massachusetts industrialist Francis Knowles, and the building of our first library stands today as a gift from Andrew Carnegie. And so was established in 1885 the region's only privately financed, nondenominational liberal arts college, and one of only a few schools of higher learning in the nation at that time to be coeducational.

Under the founding presidency of Reverend Edward Hooker, in whose chair I am privileged to sit this afternoon, and followed in our first decade by President Charles Fairchild, our school's first years were precarious. The school's endowment was tied closely to local agricultural interests and was all but wiped out in a series of citrus freezes, recessions, and epidemics. Through the early years of the 20th century, George Ward and William Blackman brought the College back from near bankruptcy and modernized the curriculum into one of general educational studies. During World War I, Calvin French introduced pre-professional courses in law, medicine, and business. Robert Sprague and William Weir each served transitionally, leading up to the defining presidency, from 1925 to 1949, of the formidable Hamilton Holt.

Holt arrived at Rollins a renowned peace activist and owner/editor of The Independent, a liberal magazine of social and political thought. His vision of liberal education as a foundation for active citizenship was influenced greatly by the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey. Holt established an imposing ethic of service and expectation, declaring that "Nothing worthwhile comes easily. Work, continuous work and hard work is the only way to accomplish results that last." Additionally, Holt introduced to campus the Walk of Fame and the Animated Magazine, bringing to Rollins a succession of distinguished authors, leading politicians (including two American Presidents), and social reformers such as Jane Addams. This legacy continues today through our prestigious Winter With the Writers program. And only yesterday, we added yet another stone to our Walk of Fame, a stone from Jerusalem honoring Abraham, the father of three faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Hamilton Holt was also a man of noteworthy principle and courage; during his presidency, we awarded an honorary degree to educator Mary McLeod Bethune, making Rollins the first Southern educational institution to so honor an African-American leader.

Holt was a man of great intellect and perhaps even greater persistence and attitude, defining the essence of the Rollins teaching philosophy that continues to this day. In addition to being strongly influenced by John Dewey and his vision of a practical liberal education, Holt greatly respected the views of Jean Jacques Rousseau, a renowned French educational philosopher of the late 18th century who championed a pedagogy based upon active-learning and critical-reasoning approaches to study. In an effort to re-create the energy and interactive exchanges of his journal's editorial meetings, Holt initiated at Rollins the Conference Plan. Across small classroom roundtables, students were compelled to become actively engaged learners in student-teacher dialogues addressing important world issues of the time.

This style of teaching, combining the ancient Greek model of interactive forums, the Rousseau focus on active learning, and the Dewey emphasis on engaged real-world citizenship, produced a uniquely Rollins learning experience. Purposefully, this model was introduced in pointed contrast to the common tradition, even today, of lectures delivered by professors to auditoriums filled with passive students, an approach derived from the Middle Ages when a professor would read from what was often the institution's only copy of a manuscript text. Holt proclaimed such professorial lecturing as "probably the worst scheme ever devised for imparting knowledge." He similarly described the college lecture as "that mysterious process by means of which the contents of the professor's notebooks are transferred by means of the fountain pen to the pages of the student's notebook without passing through the mind of either."

Hamilton Holt was not alone in his time as an educational reformer, but he was advantaged over others as the president of a small college, and under his leadership Rollins became the creative laboratory for testing of such ambitious and innovative teaching experiences. As a result, Rollins served in part as the model for many of the well-publicized pedagogical reforms that swept the country in the 1930s and since. In 1931, Holt organized a national colloquy here at Rollins on The Curriculum for the Liberal Arts College, chaired by John Dewey and attended by presidents and representatives of many of our nation's leading institutions. Notably, the small first-year seminars now routinely offered by many colleges and universities as part of their students' introductory liberal-education experience have origins tracing back at least in part to the original Rollins Conference Plan and associated experiments in student-centered learning that Holt initiated during his presidency.
On our own campus, these small interactive classes continue also for all first-year students as the Rollins College Conference. This level of faculty-student engagement at every level of education, in Arts & Sciences, in the Holt School, and in the Crummer Graduate School of Business, this continues to distinguish Rollins in terms of how we teach...as a caring community, focused on important and fundamental issues in society, and dedicated to student-centered learning. At Rollins, learning is a pursuit both of content and of character. That is the enduring legacy of Hamilton Holt.

After Holt’s long and visionary tenure as president, and following the transitional presidency of Paul Wagner, Rollins elected one of its own faculty, Hugh McKean, to lead the institution forward. McKean initiated the Honors Degree Program, graduate programs in education and business, the Holt School for evening continuing education, and an eagerly anticipated annual celebration of Spring known as Fox Day. Jack Critchfield modernized the Rollins curriculum and governance structures, and introduced environmental and other interdisciplinary studies. Thaddeus Seymour, with us today and my precedent to Rollins from Dartmouth College, reintroduced the classics and reaffirmed our institutional commitment to student-centered learning, student life, and the highest standards of liberal arts education. As President Seymour describes, our goal here at Rollins is a “comprehensive understanding, the ability to transfer knowledge from the known to the unknown, and leadership which asks not simply how, but why. In short, the liberal arts seeks to prepare individuals to know what they ought to do.” And also here today is my most immediate and eminent presidential predecessor, Rita Bornstein. President Bornstein continued to raise both standards and endowment, providing for the wonderful physical facilities and strong fiscal base that so well position us for the future. As President Seymour provided the conviction, it was President Bornstein who secured the means to elevate Rollins to the highest levels of comprehensive liberal education. At another national colloquy she convened, and in its collected papers, *Education and Democracy: Re-imagining Liberal Learning in America*, President Bornstein reaffirmed our legacy of special purpose. As she described, “We want the next generation of citizens to cherish the diversity that characterizes Americans, to be well-informed critics of society, and to be active participants in the political process. We educate for diversity, liberty, and democracy—our American values.” As I begin my tenure here at Rollins, it is with enormous gratitude that I acknowledge that if there is so much more that we might dream to do today, it is in largest part a testament to the remarkable accomplishments of these visionary leaders who have come before us, to our many generous benefactors, and to the many quiet heroes who have served and continue to serve Rollins so well for so long.

Collectively, we continue to distinguish ourselves at Rollins today by our commitment to excellence in all of our academic endeavors, by our willingness to innovate in exploring new approaches to student-centered learning, and by our building of community through the genuine collegiality of our campus and through our dedication to the principles of service to society, active citizenship, and enlightened leadership. Today we reaffirm these values, we reaffirm our commitment to the principles of excellence, innovation, and community. And as Rollins College’s 14th president, I so too pledge to serve, to act, and to lead as together we work to provide the very finest in comprehensive liberal education.

Ours is a mission of highest purpose. So let us rise up together, rise up to meet new challenges and discover new opportunities. Rise together, because in this life we are given so few and precious opportunities to make a difference...a difference in lives, a difference in the world around us...and by transcendence...a difference in ourselves. Let us rise up to new levels of expectation...rise up to the call for societal leadership and active citizenship, rise up to the call for higher standards of our conduct in how we live our lives, rise up to higher levels of compassion and care in how we build our communities; let us rise up to broader understandings of the world around us and the diversity of perspectives, ideas, and needs that it may share to enrich our lives as well. Let us rise up together to find the very best within ourselves.

Today I stand before you exemplar of an American dream, a child of Appalachia, a reflection of the sacrifices made by family, friends, and a host of benefactors untold and mostly unknown; blessed by a loving family, caring teachers, and gifted mentors; honed by the honesty of hard work and enriched by the experiences of a curious life. Today I come before you unfinished, learned yet still learning in both mind and heart. I have such overwhelming gratitude that you have asked me to join you within your academic home, now my home as well. Here, together, we will nourish the mind, the spirit, and the body. Let us rise together with the open-mindedness of
shared wisdom, with the confidence of experience, the industry and integrity of our intellects, and with the courage of our convictions. Today I pledge to you the full measure of my service.

Let us dream together of the art and science of life, and rise up to discover our futures shared. *Fiat Lux*, Rollins. Rise, and we will resonate with light.