Matriculation Convocation Address
August 24, 2004

Rollins President Lewis M. Duncan
George D. and Harriet W. Cornell Professor of Distinguished Presidential Leadership

Women and men of Rollins College, welcome!

I stand before you today privileged to serve as the 14th president of Rollins College, and unarguably the most senior member of your entering class. Just as you have these past few days, in my first weeks as president, I have been learning about Rollins and its many traditions. The ceremony today is our tradition of convocation, an affirmation of purpose that celebrates the beginning of another academic year and that marks your formal matriculation into the academic community of Rollins College. Its complement will be your commencement ceremony upon graduation, when your class banners will again frame the stage and the historic book that serves as symbol of the educational purposes that bring us together today will again rest before the podium.

It is my special pleasure to welcome you, the Class of 2008, and all other new students who are entering this year. You bring much to us, to enrich our lives and learning. We are delighted to have you join with us.

A recurring theme throughout Rollins College’s history has been its attention to excellence and innovation in liberal education. Seventy-five years ago, Rollins hosted a national conference on the liberal arts curriculum, chaired by the legendary philosopher and educator John Dewey of Columbia University. Our College’s visionary eighth president, Hamilton Holt, drew national attention to Rollins by implementing a student-centered curriculum that emerged from that meeting, linking the classic ideals of liberal learning to the contexts of social responsibility and global citizenship in a modern world.

As Dewey described, “the problem of securing to the liberal arts college its due function in democratic society is that of seeing to it that the technical subjects which are socially necessary acquire a humane direction.” To this end, under the Rollins Conference Plan, faculty were no longer constrained alone to the sterile delivery of lectures, but also engaged students openly in shared debates, encouraging you to challenge assumptions and to think creatively and critically in the dynamic forum of seminar discussions within and beyond the classroom. This distinguishing innovation inspired the Rollins Conference Course developed more fully under the leadership of President Thaddeus Seymour, and which serves today as the foundation for your own first-year curriculum.

Furthermore, declaring that “it is the professors . . . who make a college great,” President Holt populated the Rollins faculty with “golden personalities,” thought leaders and master teachers. These exceptional scholars, and those who have followed in their footsteps, established Rollins’ reputation as an institution of higher education whose foremost commitment is to student learning. As
you have heard from Dean Casey, the faculty who will be instructing, advising and working side by side with you as co-learners, reflect and sustain this Rollins tradition.

We expect foremost for you to assume responsibility for your own academic growth, for ultimately all education is self-education. Take fullest advantage of the enormous opportunities for learning to be found among our many faculty scholars.

Woodrow Wilson described, “contact, companionship, familiar intercourse is the law of life for the mind. The comradeship of undergraduates will never breed the spirit of learning. The circle must be widened. It must include the older men [and women], the teachers, the men [and women] for whom life has grown more serious and to whom it has revealed more of its meanings.”

And so seek out our faculty, as teachers and scholars, as fellow intellectual explorers, and as role models of lifelong learning.

Derek Bok, president of Harvard, conceded, “only in colleges where teaching is the dominant concern of the faculty is one likely to find a large number of professors making a sustained effort to connect different fields of learning.” So it is here at Rollins. We call upon you thus not to become narrowly focused on preparation for profession, nor merely to be the devoted disciples of any one discipline, adhering blindly to the doctrines of any singular school of thought. But rather, we call instead for you to become broadly learned, preparing to become informed participants in the great debates that define our times, willing to ask the most difficult questions and to acknowledge the enrichment of ideas that follows from diversity of thought and differences of perspective and experience. As steadfastly as Rollins stands as physical shelter in times of nature’s storm, we also stand as sanctuary to the refuge of ideas that in debate and discourse define our enduring sense of civilization. Immerse yourself in the life and ideas of our shared academy.

As we step together across this threshold into the 21st century, with its technological imperatives and accelerating rates of change, never more than today has a truly liberal education been more essential to navigate the inevitable convergences of human conflict and competition, of commerce and cooperation. The most challenging societal issues escalate at the intersections of our traditional disciplines of study. They are a tapestry woven of many threads, of history and culture, of politics and philosophy, of ethics and economics, of theology and science. The world we soon bequeath to you is a complexity of constant change, demanding no less than your commitment to lifelong learning.

In 1997, Rollins’ 13th president, Dr. Rita Bornstein, convened another national conversation about the liberal arts curriculum – The Rollins Colloquy. This consideration of the role of a practical liberal education for the 21st century drew key leaders in higher education, including nearly 200 college presidents and educators. The very concept of a liberal arts curriculum that is also practical to the modern world has been rejected by many to be a radical departure from the Platonic principle of purity of thought. Yet we aspire for you to become graduates who will be not only reflective human beings, but also reflexive individuals stimulated to engage their lives in service to community and the improvement of our human condition.

Our mission, as affirmed within our ongoing Quality Enhancement Plan, is “to enhance student learning by developing an institutional culture that embraces integrity, strength of character, respect for others, leadership, and global citizenship.”

As the poet Mary Oliver implored:

When it’s over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder
If I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
Or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

She speaks of a life fulfilled with engagement. And so, too, you must be more than just a visitor to Rollins. Engage deeply and responsibly in the social life of our residential campus. Attend also to your physical education, and care for your health and well-being, as you also attend to your intellectual studies. And embrace this invitation to become an integral member of our community of learners. Live of this world, not merely in it. For ours is an education at Rollins of mind and body and heart. As you find your passions, throughout your time here with us, as throughout your life, engage them with courage and conviction.

And now, will the members of the Class of 2008, and all new students, please rise. Today, you are of Rollins College. Rise together as newest members of our academic community, arise standing on the shoulders of generations of proud Rollins graduates who have come before you, rise up supported by generosity of the many benefactors most of whose names you will not know, rise uplifted by the labors of our staff and the efforts and high expectations of our faculty. Rise together, and in your time here, may you soar to the heights of your own abilities, energy and imagination. Rise up. Rise up together, no longer as visitors to our Rollins campus, but as new citizens of our academic world. Find your future among us. Accept the challenges and the opportunities of your days and years here, as we now welcome you warmly into our academic home.

This ceremony marks your formal matriculation into Rollins College. The matriculation certificates you have signed, presented earlier by Dean Erdmann, will be affixed in the book that stands before the podium. As you so begin today, you are of Rollins for your lifetime.

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.

Congratulations.

Please be seated. I welcome you again into the Rollins family, and declare the College to be in session for the 2004-2005 academic school year.

Convocatum Est. We are convened.