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QuickTakes!

Investiture Speech of William Paterson University President Richard J. Helldobler

October 7, 2018



The following is the Investiture Speech of William Paterson University President Richard J. Helldobler, presented during an on-campus ceremony at the WPU Shea Center for Performing Arts, Friday October 5, 2018. The speech includes a moving personal account of Dr. Helldobler's journey to the presidency, as well as profound commentary on the value of public higher education in New Jersey (highlighted)

As someone with a doctorate in theatre, I have always wanted to say this and have it mean something: "I'd like to thank the academy." In all seriousness, I am in awe of the academy and all that we in higher education accomplish together in our dedication to improving the world. I am honored to be your president, and I thank you for your trust in me.

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I thank the members of the Board of Trustees of William Paterson University for their support and service to this wonderful institution, and for their helpful advice and guidance—wise women and men, as devoted to our students as those of us who learn and live at William Paterson daily. I thank the Alumni Executive Council and the Foundation Board for their presence and support today. These individuals give so generously of their time and resources. To the faculty, staff, and students who, since July, have emailed me, sent flowers, cookies, sweatshirts, books, and tons of advice and good wishes, I thank you. I know you care deeply about the academic life of this institution. I would also like to recognize and thank all the elected officials that are with us today.

I want to recognize my predecessor, President *Emerita* Kathleen Waldron. For eight years, Kathy presided over and transformed this institution. Regrettably, Kathy is out of the country, but I know she is here in spirit. I am grateful to her for being so generous during the transition process.

I would also like to recognize President *Emeritus* Arnie Speert, who served as president for 25 years. Your presence here brings a sense of history that is so important to universities on days like today. Thank you, Arnie.

A special thank you to President *Emerita* Sharon Hahs, who taught me so much of what it means to be a president—resolute with grace during both difficult and joyous times—and, that on board meeting days, you get to eat as many cookies as you want.

In the arts, because the work is so public, taking a chance on unproven talent is risky. Thank you to Marie Vogt and Paul Causman for taking that chance on me and seeing something in me I did not see in myself.

And to “the committee,” as we are known at the American Council on Education—Jackie Taylor and Michelle Behr. Our weekly talks have always provided both perspective and sanity, and just a few laughs. Your friendship continues to mean so much.

Perhaps most important is that I have had the good fortune to meet the kindest person I know—Robbie Brown—who selflessly has gone on the journey with me, who always reminds me to be my better self, and on challenging days, tells me, “Slap on the happy; you’re going to have a great day.”

I would especially like to recognize and thank my family members who are here today. You mean the world to me. I am so grateful that my sisters and brother and my in-laws are here, along with nieces and nephews. Especially touching for me was that my niece, Dr. Calli Helldobler, was part of the academic procession.

I thank my teachers, mentors, friends and colleagues from my ballet world, my theatre world, my higher education world, former students, and the Royal Court. This is truly a “this

is your life” moment. I know many of you have traveled far and wide to share in this special day; thank you.

However, I am certainly missing my mom and dad today. Perhaps my dad the most. Many of you have heard me talk of my dad, an immigrant from Germany who did not graduate high school. While I am sure he still would not have agreed with my decision to get a doctorate in theatre, today would have been a big day for him. He is with me today; I am wearing his cufflinks, and that is all I will say about that before it becomes very un-presidential.

When I started exploring the possibility of becoming a university president in 2005, I applied to become an American Council on Education Fellow. ACE Fellows spend time over the course of a year shadowing and being closely mentored by university presidents and other senior leaders.

On the day of my interview, the then-director of the ACE program pulled me aside and stated, “As an openly gay male, while not impossible, it will be very difficult for you to become a university president. Most boards of trustees will not hire you. There’s currently only one in the country—his name is Chuck Middleton, at Roosevelt University.” Yes, the Chuck you just heard from. I immediately thought, “Well if he can do it, so can I. I need to meet this Chuck Middleton. A couple hours with Chuck and I’ll be good to go.” Thirteen years later, here I am, an overnight sensation, as we say in the theatre.

So, as I was saying, I applied to be a fellow at Roosevelt with Chuck. I got a, “No.” Not because he didn’t want to—he is a strong supporter of the program. But despite common belief, presidents don’t always get to do what they want to do. Other factors come into play. However, those that know me know that when I think a “no” should be a “yes,” I am going to get to “Yes.” It may not be the “yes” I had originally intended, but I will get there. Through one of his vice presidents who was a former Fellow, I got myself invited to be on campus for a week.

I soon learned in that week that Chuck was a non-stop president. We went from 6:30 in the morning until 10:00 at night. One early morning, I was standing on Michigan Ave. in Chicago, with the snow swirling around me, clutching my coffee, thinking, “There is not enough caffeine in the world to get me through this day.” Chuck pulled up, and in his usual cheery way said, “Good morning.” I replied, “With a schedule like this, I am not sure ‘good’ is a word I would use. Why would anyone want to be a university president?” He then, in his exceptional way, led me through the joys of what it means to be a university president. It was clear from that week, I had found a close mentor. Chuck didn’t know it yet, but I did. After that week, I tried to get 30 minutes with Chuck every time I was in Chicago or we were at a professional meeting together. And every time, he said “yes.” Those 30-minute sessions became longer, as my questions got better, or campus issues I was facing became more complex. While Chuck was the first openly gay president, he was unwilling to settle for just one. Over the next few years, along with a small group of other openly gay and lesbian presidents, he started the Association for LGBTQA Presidents. Through his work, while in

2005 there was one openly gay president, now there are 98 members of the Association who identify as openly gay or lesbian presidents in the country.

I often tell students: Not one of all the people I've talked with has ever said that a smartphone, a computer, or PX90 changed their lives; it was always a person, mentor, professor, staff member, or experience. Chuck certainly is one of the people for me, and for many of the LGTBQA presidents, who followed through that closet door he opened.

So Chuck, as a token of my appreciation, Robbie and I have endowed the Charles R. Middleton Scholarship for Higher Education Leadership, here at William Paterson University. Thank you so much.

To my president colleagues in the room, we need to talk more about the joys of these jobs. Challenging, yes, but they are amazing in so many ways. The next generation of leaders is—trust me—watching and listening. Let us be mindful of the challenges of the job, but also more open about the joys. Stephen Sondheim's lyric says, "Careful the things you say; children will listen." And while not children, if we are messaging more about the challenges than the joys to those we mentor, we must own in part the shrinking pipeline of potential university leaders.

I hope we all reflect on the people or places who have made a difference in our lives, who have given of their time, resources, or dollars, as we continue to create a culture of giving at William Paterson University. With declining support nationwide for public higher education, we must seek to provide monetary bridges through scholarship support to continue to provide access and opportunity, especially for the population of students that we serve at William Paterson. To that end, I look forward to working with the Foundation Board, the Board of Trustees, and the Alumni Board to close our \$10 million scholarship campaign soon.

Today, I want to us to reflect on the important role that places like William Paterson have in reshaping the social fabric of our region, and I would argue, the country. As a country, we are experiencing greater gaps in income inequality and increasing social injustice issues. We face greater racial, ethnic, and gender disparities in parts of the academy, as well as in leadership in local, state, regional and national governments, not to mention policy-making institutions.

Institutions of higher education have a particular role in overcoming these injustices and disparities. Michelle Obama said, "Public education is our greatest pathway to opportunity in America." We at William Paterson agree, of course. We see evidence of this every day, especially on commencement day. Meanwhile, we hear stories that the Ivy League schools are going to admit a more diverse pool of students from the lower socioeconomic quartile. We have been hearing this for years, by the way. But let's face it, even if the Ivies agreed that 50 percent of their incoming classes would be from the socioeconomic demographic we serve, the number of students they would collectively admit would still be fewer than William Paterson and other publics admit every year. So, despite their bold pronouncements, who really is changing the social fabric of the country?

As we provide a pathway to opportunity, our responsibility as a public institution of higher education is to increase our commitment to the civic engagement of our faculty, staff, and students. We have to discover and develop new ways that we can apply the intellectual power of the faculty to assist the region in its economic redevelopment and revitalization.

It is no longer acceptable to claim we are an economic driver of the region just by the number of people we employ or students we bring into the community. It is time to be a university without walls, moving more fully into the communities to help revitalize them. We have the resources to do this. We have our brilliant and inspirational faculty, and our dedicated and committed staff to partner with community leaders to lead these efforts. We have students' robust intellectual curiosity coupled with their life experiences that can inform new and existing projects in their home communities.

You see, we are proud that we have attracted such a broad representation of people from the surrounding communities. Yes, I'm talking about our diversity. Personally, I love that word and respect what it means. But, as I said during my opening day address, it is important that we do more than just note our diversity. We must continue to develop ways to learn with and from one another. Many students have commented to me that they sought out William Paterson because they understood from their high school years the importance of learning with a broad array of people from different backgrounds and experiences. We know that building a cohesive social network and finding ways forward require a deep understanding of one another and ourselves. Our students are smart to figure that out so early.

As I have spoken with alumni of all ages and from all eras, as well as current students, I have heard many similar and wonderful stories that start with something like, "William Paterson University changed my life." These stories reflect the impact that this community has had on our students historically.

Through the years, demographics, academic programs, technology, and teaching techniques have changed, and yet our mission has remained remarkably consistent. Think back on the University's founding in 1855 as a normal school that prepared professionals to teach children to read, write, think, and to provide those children with a previously unavailable public education. A University that in preparing new teachers, opened the professional world to women, this University has been changing and transforming lives during its entire history.

Today, we are a comprehensive university with extensive program offerings that have an important impact on lives and the economy. We prepare diverse students for high-demand jobs at an affordable cost. As we band together as a community, we can continue to strengthen the legacy of William Paterson University by educating the next generation of leaders in New Jersey, the region, and the nation. As we look around, we recognize the need to add more of our graduates' faces to the leadership table.

As many of you know, I have been engaged in getting to know the University through a listening tour that has provided me with insights into the community and the value of what we do here. One of my questions is often: "Who are we as a University?" I have heard various answers. Responses usually start describing student success stories, and one faculty member added, "I don't know *who* we are, but I know that we are necessary." And folks, she is right. We are necessary.

Our job is to assist students in the transformation of their lives. To be as effective as I know we can be, we need to have the courage to transform ourselves, to become the leading regional university in the State of New Jersey through our intentional attention to every student.

I questioned myself as a college student and a potential academic leader because that's what gay, first-generation college students do, and that's what others do to us. I tell you this story to remind you first, that we can challenge and change society's rules and views through being ourselves and being proud of who we are. Second, some of our students do not feel they have the right to be here. They feel they are not worthy, or smart enough, or skilled enough to succeed. They have learned to hold these views of themselves from others who think them "less than." People helped me to overcome my own fears and roadblocks, and to find value in who I am, and I am grateful.

I urge us all to be those people for our William Paterson students. Yes, they may need more of our time, they may need help navigating a system that was created by people of privilege. But if we all are truly honest with ourselves, we know someone who found time for us. Can we ask any less of ourselves?

The public value of William Paterson University is that we do, in fact, change the social fabric of our region. We know that education is a way up and a way out for many of our students. I say to you, there is no better work. We should all be proud to be part of an institution with such a rich history of success, and I am excited to be part of a university with such great promise for the future.

Oscar Wilde famously quipped, "Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken." So let us let Harvard be Harvard, TCNJ be TCNJ, and Montclair be Montclair. All have a purpose, but so do we, and it is *quite* amazing.

William Paterson University is changing the social fabric of the region. As we graduate more first-generation and underrepresented students, and move them into advanced study and meaningful careers, we add more depth, color, and dimension to the rich social fabric of our region. And the more successful we are, the more colorful and multi-dimensional that fabric

will be, *and* the more the connective thread of that fabric will be orange and black. That is the *Will. Power.* of William Paterson University.

In closing, when life gives us moments that are so overwhelming, as academics, we at times return to our disciplines to find ways of understanding or expressing feelings. No, I am not going to do an interpretative dance, but today, as I am installed as your new president, I feel confidence in all of us to accomplish the important work ahead, and I struggle to find the right words to express the gravity of the moment along with my great joy.

So I leave you with a quote from the musical Hamilton—

*There are moments that the words don't reach.
There is a grace too powerful to name.*

Thank you, William Paterson University. I am honored.