

UVI FRESHMAN ORIENTATION

**Remarks by Dr. David Hall
UVI President
Tuesday & Wednesday, August 11 & 12, 2009**

It is a special honor to welcome our new students and their parents to the University of the Virgin Islands. I will forever have a special bond with each of you because we are starting this journey together. I have just become the new president of UVI, and you are the first group of students I have had the honor to speak to since becoming president. Therefore I want to do whatever I can to make sure that you and I are successful on this journey. I want to thank the parents who are present for entrusting your child into our care. You brought with you your most precious possessions and our goal is to treat them with the same care you have shown to them.

To the students present, I congratulate you on your decision to pursue a college education, and on your decision to attend the University of the Virgin Islands. I hope you will embrace this opportunity with all the power, faith and dedication that dwells within you.

As you begin this journey, it is important for me as president to remind you of the things you need to do in order to be successful. However, I want to place my advice within a broader context. When you agree to become a student at UVI, you are also agreeing to commit yourself to becoming an excellent leader. I'm not talking about leadership in the narrow sense of holding office in an organization on campus, but in the broader sense of preparing yourself to become the best person you can so that you can make a difference in the lives of your family, community, nation and world.

The people of this territory, through their taxes, which subsidize your education, are investing in your future. Implicit in this investment is a belief that you will make their

investment pay off by using the resources of this university so that you can leave this territory better than you found it.

Therefore we cannot squander this opportunity, or allow you to just go through the motions of being a college student. We must demand more of you than that, and what we will demand is that you transform your lives while you are here and transform these islands and the world after you graduate. Therefore, I want to speak to you about “leadership now and forever.”

At this moment in your life you may feel that all you are deciding to do is become a college student. This may be a dream that you have nurtured for years. You may be the first in your family to make it to this point, or you may be following in the footsteps of family members who have Ph.D. degrees.

Whatever your circumstances, you must understand that you are doing more today than just entering college. You have accepted a challenge, entered into a covenant with your parents and this institution that you will make us proud today and in the future.

This university, by accepting you, is indicating that you have the potential to be a leader. You were chosen over others. The fact that you have made it this far sets you apart from others. There are those who went to high school with you who are not on a path to college, and may be headed down a dead end road. You are special because you have been given this special opportunity to transform your life and the world.

So today you can become just a college student, or you can also choose to become a leader. The first one is automatic; the second one is a choice. By enrolling in our programs and attending this affair you have become a college student. But now you have to choose to become a leader.

For leadership is not a product of the position you occupy, but the values you possess and manifest in life. You will not automatically become a leader on this campus just because you are elected to a certain office or become a member of a club or team. The choice to become a leader rests in your mind, heart and soul.

Leaders are not born; they are fashioned by the forces of life and the choices we make. We make that choice by deciding to rise above our circumstances and do something special with our lives. When we choose to go against the grain, and defy the peer pressures to do the wrong things, then we are choosing to be leaders.

When we care about the conditions of others and not just about ourselves, then we are choosing to be leaders. When we give of ourselves, not for selfish gain, but for the good of others then we become a servant leader.

When you decide not to settle for “just good enough,” but instead push yourself to become an excellent student, you are choosing to embrace the mantle of leadership instead of mediocrity.

So, as president of this university, I need each of you to pledge to become leaders this day. I need you to look into the mirror of your soul and answer the question, “Am I just here to go through the motion of being a college student, or am I here to push myself in ways that I have never done before?”

If you only want to be a college student, you can still stay with us. But if you want to embrace the majestic label of leaders then this experience will be more than you could ever imagine.

Please understand that my definition of leadership is not focused just on how you get others to follow you. My definition of leadership is based on how you are able to lead yourself. Lead yourself away from the traps and temptations of life that will only destroy you and others. Lead yourself away from “just getting by” and into the plane of excellence. Lead yourself away from drugs, violence and abuse of each other and into the place of respect and pride. Only if you can lead yourself, can you truly lead others. Only if you have the discipline to conquer your own fears, can you inspire others to be courageous.

Many presidents of universities around this country and world are welcoming students and informing them about all the things that the university has to offer. Though UVI has much to offer you, that is not why I am here today.

I am here to ask you to join me on a mission. I am on a mission to improve this university as much as I can. I am on a mission to make sure that every student who enters these doors will graduate and reach his or her full potential. I am on a mission to inspire each one of you to never give up on yourself or on your potential. If UVI is to reach its full potential then I need you to join me on this mission. I want to have the honor of conferring upon each of you your degree and applauding you for having become a leader at UVI, but beyond.

Some would say that this mission I have is unrealistic. How dare I dream of a class where no one fails or leaves? Well, I am willing to chase dreams that for others seem impossible. I am willing to chase the dream that each of you will be successful here because I understand the consequences if we fail. I’m also willing to chase idealistic dreams because I know that we all have the power within us to make the seemingly impossible, possible.

When I look at my own life I know that nothing is impossible if we truly have faith and are willing to work hard. I grew up in the clutches of segregation. My family was poor and uneducated. My mother went to school one day, and chose to take care of her ailing grandmother instead of returning to school. My father only completed the third grade. We lived in a society that told me I was less than others. We were forced by law to sit on the back of buses and could not go to certain movie theatres in town. Our schools received books that the white students had already used. Signs both visible and invisible told me and my friends each day that we did not belong in the best places or at the front of the line of life.

Yet, there was something inside of me that said, “You are special”. There was something about the love that my parents poured into me; something about the prayers that they ushered up; something about the whippings that they gave me, that said, “You have calling to fulfil, a place greater than the one we now occupy.”

I embraced the dream of becoming a lawyer, though I had no lawyers in my family or neighborhood. I stand before you now having been a dean of a law school, a provost of a major university and now president of this special university. I share my story not out of self promotion, but out of reverence for the power of the human spirit to overcome obstacles and barriers.

As the song says, “If you can see it then you can do it. If you believe it, then there’s nothing to it.” So I believe you can fly. I believe each of you can touch the sky of excellence and graduate from this university. But you have to believe it, and you have to work hard to turn that belief into reality.

But, the leadership I am asking you to embrace is not just for the sake of UVI. I am asking you to put on a garment that you will never take off. I am asking you to travel down a road that has no end. For not only do we need your leadership at this university, we need your leadership in this territory, this nation and the world.

When you think about all the problems that are facing this nation, from poverty to climate change; from economic recession to a health care crisis; from an AIDS pandemic that takes too many lives, to a crime problem that makes all of us feel less safe, we should understand that there is important work for you and me to do today and in the future. Only brilliant, dedicated and humble leaders will allow us to find answers to these complex problems. If you choose to just be a college student, these problems will not be solved. If you choose to drop out, or not do your best, then you may become part of those problems.

We need you to be leaders now and forever. When I look into this crowd I know that I am looking into the eyes of the future. You are the best investment we have if we want this world to change. So the mission I am on is not limited to today. I am also on a mission to transform so much of the reality I see. No child in these islands should ever live in poverty, or fail to reach his or her full potential. No person in this territory should be homeless or without a job that can address his or her needs to survive. We need a new generation of leaders who do not take these conditions as a given, but see them as temporary challenges that they must change.

When the history books of the U.S. Virgin Islands are written in the future, I want them to say that there was this class of students who not only entered into college, but entered into the sacred bond of leadership; who embraced the challenges put forth by their president, and even

exceeded his expectation. Class of 2013, you have the potential to make history through your faith, effort and dedication.

In Dr. Martin Luther King's last speech before he died, he said these words, "I may not get there with you, but we as a people will get to the Promised Land." Well, I plan to be there with you when you reach the promised land of academic excellence and social transformation. I want to be there when you defy the skeptics and cynics who say that some of you will not graduate. I want to be there with you when you walk across the stage and demonstrate that faith conquers fear, that hard work is mightier than doubt, that the human spirit is more powerful than any prediction.

So I ask that you enjoy your days at the University of the Virgin Islands. Bathe in the beauty that surrounds you. Smile a lot and party when you can. But remember that you are here for a greater mission and calling, and you and I have a rendezvous with destiny. I know I will see each of you often in the days and years to come. But the place I really want to see you again is at your graduation. Place that idea and vision in your mind and don't let anyone or anything destroy or distract you from your goal.

Welcome to UVI, and let's make history together.