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10-11-2017

Inauguration of President Brian Bruess

Brian Bruess
St. Norbert College

Ken Zahorski
St. Norbert College

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Recommended Citation

Bruess, Brian and Zahorski, Ken, "Inauguration of President Brian Bruess" (2017). *Inaugurations, Dedications and Special Events*. 1.
<https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/specialevents/1>

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Inauguration Remarks

October 11, 2017

Abbot Neville, Norbertine confreres, Bishop Ricken, Board Chair Van Asten, Vice Chair Haddad, esteemed members of the board of trustees and trustee emeriti, I am humbled by your generous endorsement and I will work daily to keep your trust, to advance our mission, and achieve our shared vision.

I would like to recognize two of my predecessors, Tom Manion and Tom Kunkel. President Manion, thank you for your service as my president and for being here today. Carol and I are thrilled to have the wise counsel of both you and Maureen. President Kunkel, your leadership while president was extraordinary. Your generosity during the transition and your faithful ongoing support is a great gift to me and the college. We are eternally grateful for all you and Deb have done for the college, Carol and me. Tom, Maureen, Tom and Deb, would you please stand to be recognized?

Cabinet, faculty chair, faculty colleagues and faculty emeriti, Dr. Ken Zahorski, staff association co-chairs and staff colleagues, alumni board president and alumni, Sister Andrea, Dr. Knepfelkamp, Mayor Walsh, Rolf Wegenke, community leaders, delegates, friends, higher education colleagues from across the country – from Minnesota, Ohio and my dear St. Catherine – Association of Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges & Universities colleagues, student government association President Danny Wilson, student organization leaders, and the students of St. Norbert College: Thank you for being here.

Thank you, co-chairs Amy Sorenson and Jay Fostner, and all the members of the inauguration committee, for organizing such a remarkable array of events. Just amazing. Would the inauguration committee please stand and be recognized?

In the front row here, Mom and Dad; my amazing sisters Kelly, Jenny and Michelle, and your families; Mike and Janet, Carol's parents and family: Thank you for being here. Tony, Gracie and my bride Carol: I am so proud of how each of you is so, authentically, yourself. I love you.

Ever since Convocation, when my medal was over here, Carol has been very worried about my medal. Thank you, dear. These details seem to matter.

I would like to invite the students to please rise. Stay standing, students. Students – most of the people I have just recognized have given a portion of their life and, in some cases, their entire vocation, to you: for your education; for your transformation; for you to become a smart, principled and inspired person. Thank you for honoring their contributions by being here today, for inspiring us daily, and for your hard work in becoming the next generation of our legacy, the fullest expression of our mission and our greatest hope for the common good. Students, this is your chance to show your gratitude to these fine people ... by clapping!

Please be seated.

I have been to many inaugurations. This is my third one at St. Norbert College. I love inaugurations. Inaugurations are inspiring – great celebrations, lifting up and honoring the institution. For those who

have never attended an inauguration, it's hard to know what to expect. So, today, I want to practice the most basic educational principle: Set clear learning expectations.

At St. Norbert College, we expect our students to be active and engaged in the educational experience. That can take many, many forms, but today, what it means for this congregation is that if I happen to say something that approaches humor, you'll laugh – a giggle; it could be a belly laugh; however you're moved – but some gesture of humor would be good. If I happen to say something that approaches inspirational, you would clap – a golf clap is fine, or something more robust ...

The second responsibility we have for our students is that they, in fact, take responsibility for their education. That, too, can mean many things. In its most basic sense, it means do your homework. So today, at the end of my remarks, I will offer a charge or an invitation, and when you leave, you have to act on that – you have to do your homework.

The third expectation for us today is that I want you all to know that we – particularly the faculty, but also the staff and the students – we love assessment. We do. We love assessment at St. Norbert College because assessment helps us document the beautiful outcomes that we produce in our students, and it helps us in the feedback loop to improve our educational experience for students. We love assessment at St. Norbert College. Correct? Yes. So, I thought there should be an assessment tool for my remarks today. I have developed a very parametrically sound tool to do this. It's one question: a multiple-choice question with four options. Are you listening? Option A: If during my remarks you become bored or uninterested, you can play Candy Crush on your phone. Option B: You could be an ambassador of St. Norbert College; when you leave, go out and say good things and recruit smart and talented students to come here. Option C: You can make a financial contribution today. You might not know that's acceptable etiquette and behavior at an inauguration. You can do a cash gift; we can, you know, take a credit card, estate planning ... We have people to do that with you here today.

And, of course, option D for any good multiple-choice question is: all of the above. So, play Candy Crush, be an ambassador, make a financial contribution or all of the above.

What I want to accomplish today is rather straightforward. I want to talk about the essence of St. Norbert College. I want to share with you the story of St. Norbert College: who we are and what you can expect from the college as we move confidently into the future.

The story of St. Norbert College begins, of course, with St. Norbert and our theme, *Fiat Lux*. *Fiat Lux*, a Latin phrase drawn from Genesis and, as many of you already know, constitutes the first divine command in creation: "Let there be light."

Norbert was born in 1080 in the town of Xanten on the Dutch-German border. As depicted by the beautiful sculpture named "The Conversion," which you see on the northwest corner of campus (thank you, Miriam and Jim Mulva, for the generous gift of "The Conversion"), the sculpture depicts the moment when St. Norbert was thrown from his horse by lightning. It was then that he received the call to "turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it."

That's right, a bolt of light led to the founding of the Order of Canons Regular of Prémontré, France, in 1121, and the Norbertines were gifted to us. Abbot Pennings, our first and longest-serving president,

founded St. Norbert College right here on the banks of the mighty Fox River in 1898. A fun fact, I believe it is true that President Abbot Pennings is the longest serving head of any Catholic college or university, ever.

Abbot Pennings, and generations of Norbertines before and after, gave us our tripartite mission: Catholic, liberal arts and Norbertine – a mission that I’ve come to see so clearly, in my first 100 days, as one this community cares deeply about. It’s a mission that permeates the campus and educational experience of students. Our level of mission affinity makes us, St. Norbert College, quite distinct and very distinctive.

From our Catholic tradition, we seek the integration of faith and reason, we seek justice, we seek to promote the dignity of each human person, and we seek the common good.

From our liberal arts tradition, we seek truth and wisdom, we seek to train the mind and develop the personal character of our students, and we seek to prepare students for a fulfilling life.

From the Norbertine tradition, we seek, among many things, *communio* – our unique way of describing community, one that recognizes trust, sincerity, mutual esteem, responsibility, faith and civility.

It’s essential, as so many of you have heard me say before, that we hold the integration of the three parts as precious because it is only in the integration of these three dimensions – Catholic, liberal arts, Norbertine – that we are able to provide a most-transformational educational experience to every student, no matter that student’s passion, background, country of origin, age, stage of life, program of study, hometown or belief system.

Yes, it is true: We, at St. Norbert College, are the only institution in the world with such a mission – truly. Think about that – “the only.” It is quite remarkable.

On Christmas Day, in 2021, the Norbertine order will celebrate its 900th anniversary. And so it is: A nearly 900-year-old tradition is the genesis of our story. And so it is: That each of us who is in love with or been impacted by this place called St. Norbert College has our own stories of how the St. Norbert College mission has transformed our lives, our minds, our families and our communities.

We each have stories, both the mundane and the magnificent, about how the transformational power of a St. Norbert experience fully advances the very messages that Abbot Pennings articulated and that are now part of all of our life stories: messages of love, contemplation, action, *stabilitas* and radical hospitality.

I ask all of you – in the spirit of fully-engaged participation – to call to mind a story of your own, right now. Perhaps a single moment, whether that moment be big or small, dark or light, current or in the distant past, recall a story when your interaction with St. Norbert affected you, changed your thinking, moved your soul, challenged your way of living, and/or helped you see the light or darkness in this world in a new way. Bring that story into your mind. Hold it in your consciousness for a moment. It’s that very story – the collective power of those stories, of those stories woven together, of the stories all of us in this space that we are thinking about right now – that provides a most profound answer to

the simple question: How can St. Norbert College continue to produce such vivid outcomes in our lives and in our communities?

The stories for me are a layered narrative beginning over 30 years ago. (When I say that, I really feel old. And so it is, over 30 years ago.) These stories – a layered narrative that includes light moments and dark moments. Each, a moment that has illuminated my and my family's life, and in turn, the lives of all those we encounter.

Among those stories of transformation are those of gathering scholarly articles – so many articles – in the bowels of Todd Wehr Library for Dr. Ray Zurawski as his research assistant. About being opened to the stark, hidden and humbling experience of the homeless from Professor Karina O'Malley. I'll never forget Dr. Jim Benton's Sociology Research Methods course when I "painfully" collected three days of participant observation research data in my effort to better understand the fishing culture below the De Pere dam. True story.

If ever there were a way to help a 19-year-old young man learn to love research methods and see the power of ethnography and grounded theory, it is to encourage him to see how the places and spaces we adore most – below the De Pere dam (one of the three greatest walleye fisheries in the world, Mayor. I shouldn't have said that; now everyone knows. Sorry, Dad.) – to see how those places and spaces can be sites of profound critical thinking and sources of new wisdom, and ways of listening, seeing, thinking, feeling and being.

My capstone experience was an experiential-learning internship seminar course, taught by the late Tom Faase, which included working with the YMCA to develop, market and offer a leadership program for youth. As part of that class, Dr. Faase showed a video (on a VHS tape – students, you don't know what that is) of a lecture on experiential learning – a radical concept of education back in the mid '80s – delivered by none other than Dr. Lee Knefelkamp. That was an experience that would expand wildly in my graduate work as I studied human development theory, which now shapes everything I do as an educator. And I will never forget the transformational experience of taking Classical Music Appreciation from the late Gerry Mattern.

And, of course, I am indebted to my dean of students, Dick Rankin, for asking me, during the spring of my junior year, "Brian, have you ever considered a vocation in higher education?" He leaned back in his chair, and I said something like, "Ah ... no." Well, Dick, I'm happy to say that I have.

Oh, and how can I forget about Christian Ethics with the late Father VerBust helping us develop an ethical mindset and prepare us for life's journey of being a principled person? It's also true that I can't forget that class because it's only the second class that I took with Carol. One of us got an A, the other got an AB, which is basically an A-, right? I don't think it would be appropriate to say which of us got those two grades – but, rest assured, I wouldn't have put it in my inaugural speech if it wasn't me. To be fair, the rest of that story is a little bit more complicated because the other course we took together was in Ray Zurawski's Psych 100 class. One of us got an A, and it was not me.

These seemingly independent experiences, along with so many more, are like compounding interest, over time, accumulating and collectively adding up, for each of us, to the transformational experience of St. Norbert College.

Today more than ever, the St. Norbert educational experience pushes our students out into the world for global, diverse, interactive, integrated, experiential, technology-rich and rigorous curricular and co-curricular experiences.

Foundational outcomes including critical thinking, analytical skills, reflective judgement, effective communication skills, ability to work effectively in groups and problem-solve, technology literacy, mature interpersonal relationship skills, a principled and ethical mindset; and a desire to contribute to the common good – these are the outcomes that define a St. Norbert student.

It's no mystery that there is a global struggle on a vast array of issues: hunger, lack of access to safe water, war, dramatic health disparities, economic injustice and horrific violence, specifically against women and children and those on the margins. Domestically, the headlines are all too familiar: pervasive political rancor, inexcusable legislative gridlock, persistent and evil discrimination and hate across a wide spectrum of difference – race, cultures, gender, sexual orientation, religion. Let us also call to mind all those who have suffered in the natural disasters in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico, and those victimized in the awful tragedy in Las Vegas.

Society is fraught with pain, evil and suffering. Society, it seems, is fraught with darkness. As such, we need not look far to understand why a St. Norbert education matters. A St. Norbert education is an experience challenging every participant to consider the complexity and interconnectedness of all humans and all human systems.

One of the challenges we face as educators – in our effort to advance learning, freedom and justice – is that our society persistently attempts to fit life into grossly dualistic frames. Everything is either good or bad; right or wrong; liberal or conservative; a blue state or a red state. Students come to us naturally thinking and feeling in developmentally appropriate but dualistic ways. Our primary educational task is to move them to an understanding of the complexity of truth, not to a dualistic simplicity. As you have heard others say before, I repeat: We are not in the business of teaching students what to think; rather, how to think.

When students are overwhelmed with dissonance – emotional, cognitive, psycho-social, whatever the type may be – it is our support and guidance in our curriculum, in our co-curriculum, and in our intentionally constructed learning environments that guide them into more sophisticated ways of thinking, feeling and knowing. It is those learning opportunities – in and outside of the classroom – that move them away from the natural entrapments of individualism and stagnation in their growth.

Said another way, darkness matters and where there is light, there is darkness. As educators and mentors and leaders and students, we must seek out the darkness in our world. We must run into the darkness. We must drag the darkness into the light and confront injustice.

When we know and believe this is our task, we understand that our students depend on us to guide them as they seek understanding; as they seek wisdom; as they seek to carefully listen with compassion to those they encounter – to many voices, to every human, seeing each person as valuable. Each story – no matter how mundane or how magnificent – is worthy of careful consideration.

As I conclude, let me say very clearly: Our future is bright!

The most frequently asked question of my first 100 days has been, “Brian, what is your vision?” When I ponder the future of St. Norbert College, I return to our most foundational essence: our motto, *docere verbo et exemplo* – to teach by word and example.

My vision is our vision: for St. Norbert to be an exemplar Catholic liberal arts college, offering a holistic and integrated educational experience so that our students can flourish and make significant contributions to the betterment of society.

Therefore, it should be no surprise that our mission and our vision are situated firmly in our strategic plan, a plan centering on teaching and learning in such a way that we seek to optimize the power of education.

We are sharpening our focus on great teaching and great learning by delivering increasingly more sophisticated educational practices, or what the American Association of Colleges & Universities has termed high-impact and signature work. What you can expect from St. Norbert College in the coming decade and beyond is to see us further advance the distinctiveness and rigor of the student experience.

Wrapped around this focus is a sophisticated effort to ensure operational excellence and financial health for the college. This orientation to planning and our future will enable us to successfully navigate and address the perfect storm that higher education is facing. The demographic downturn, decreased public funding, increased competition and erratic market forces will challenge us – challenge us to continue our efforts to carefully manage affordability issues, to deploy increasingly more sophisticated enrollment management practices, and to implement lean practices in order to fine-tune the delivery of high-quality educational programs.

Characterizing our future will be a continuation and expansion of strategic partnerships we’ve built with businesses, health-care systems, nonprofit community groups, and other colleges and universities – like our partnership with the Medical College of Wisconsin. We will remain active and engaged in the communities of De Pere, Green Bay and the region.

We are also attending strategically to our intergenerational equity: the principle of balancing long-term financial strength and immediate needs. After a decade of remarkable success fundraising for state-of-the-art facilities, naturally our focus has shifted to the long-term sustainability and generativity of our essence – the educational experience of students – through the aggressive growth of our endowment.

To use the words of Henry David Thoreau, “Only that day dawns to which we are awake!”

Since I fear you might be on the edge of sleeping, allow me to close by speaking of hope. What gives me the most hope in the pursuit of our mission and vision? Quite simply, it’s that every student I have met is eager to learn, and every single one expects to flourish here.

For our part – faculty, staff and trustees – I have no doubt in our mission. I have no doubt in our vision. And I have no doubt that we are poised to exceed our students’ and our own expectations.

As we work to do so, I invite each of you here today to join me, to join all of us, on our mission to lead our students, to go collectively as a community into and through the shadows, into and through the darkness, into and toward the light – a light that is purely and forever the holistic development and education of our students, a light that is their and our human flourishing, a light that is uncompromisingly focused on the common good.

As you accept that invitation, we are now bound together as part of the bright, glorious, light-giving, darkness-illuminating and brilliant kaleidoscope that we call St. Norbert College.

I invite you, go forth and let light be made!