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“A Welcome, A Warning and a Wish: On Entering LMU through the ‘First to Go Program’ in the Year 2020”

Dean Bryant Keith Alexander, PhD
Loyola Marymount University

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**“A Welcome, A Warning and a Wish:
On Entering LMU through the ‘First to Go Program’ in the Year 2020”**

A Keynote for the 10th Anniversary Cohort

Bryant Keith Alexander

Introduction:

It is a pleasure to share a part of your orientation to LMU. You are an impressive new cohort, adding to an illustrious history of those students who have preceded you in this program. So, today I want to frame my brief time with you with the working title: “A Welcome, A Warning, and a Wish: On Entering LMU through ‘First to Go’ in the Year 2020.” This is a variation of a message that I delivered just several weeks ago to a new cohort of doctoral students in the LMU Graduate School of Education in which your First to Go Coordinator.¹ Ms. Alexia Pineda is now a student. I am so proud of her.

When she asked me to present this message to you, I jumped at the opportunity to support her. I jumped at the opportunity to support you. And when my mind finally turned to modifying the message, I then realized that there is no difference in your ambition, and the ambition of the students in the doctoral program. I realized that there is no difference in your talent and the talent of the students in that graduate program. I realized that there is no less responsibility that you bear than they bear entering the university through this pathway and at this particular time in history. Hence, unless there is a direct address to First-to-Go, the primary text has remained the same. This is my testament to the fact that your first-generation student experiences, entering the university anew are not different from incoming doctoral students with similar passions, possibilities and potentialities. And the fact that Ms. Lexie, your director, was both a First-to-Go student and now she is in a doctoral student—serves as evidence that her success is literally a bridge to your possibility-- to go as far you want to go. So, it is my supreme pleasure to engage you at this important time.

First: “A Welcome”

As many as you know, Loyola Marymount University (LMU) has a powerful mission statement that includes three pillars that are often cited and recited: The encouragement of learning; the education of the whole person; and the service of faith and the promotion of justice.² As I welcome you to campus, I welcome you into the recognition of this now shared mission statement as a joint commitment to encouraging an integration of knowledge; in which “faith and reason bear witness to the unity of all truth” (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1990, #17) and to instil in our students the abilities for life-long learning that includes but is not limited to: critical thinking, the ability to research, the practice of discernment, the ability to ask the important questions, and the ability to apply that knowledge in meaningful ways for self and others.³

As I welcome you to university, I welcome you into the recognition of this now shared mission statement as a joint commitment to the encouragement of integrating for students and diverse others in educational contexts—their thinking, feeling, choosing, evolving self (unifying their mind, body and spirit)—into the educational endeavour.

As I welcome you to the university, I welcome you into the recognition of this now shared mission statement as a joint recognition that the service of faith (like any constructed purpose of

education, educational leadership and social commitment) is incomplete without the promotion of justice for all especially for the least amongst us, who, through social inequities don't have equal resources and opportunities.

I welcome you into the recognition of this now shared, mission statement as a joint commitment that the purpose of education must include the critical processes of *information, formation and transformation*: information—not just the actuality of knowing but the diverse processes of seeking knowledge for diverse peoples in diverse social and cultural contexts. And formation--not just the development of one's spiritual or religious self but the process of forming ones attitudes, beliefs, values and politics; the very ground on which they (we) stand that motivates action; a positionality of self and towards society which I hope is emancipatory in nature for the common good. And to recognize how information and formation leads to one's commitment to the transformation of self and society and indeed the world in which we live in.

And as I welcome you to the university, I welcome you into the recognition of this, now shared, mission statement as a joint commitment that the service of faith and the promotion of justice are interrelated constructions; religious pluralism grounded in ideals for the common good that participate in the struggle for justice in ways appropriate not just to this campus community—but to the stretch of our human community; and as a requirement not simply an option that applies both specifically to where we are at LMU--- and what all programs in educational leadership and social justice should be instilling as we/they are preparing our professoriate(productive citizens) to do in the world.⁴

So welcome.

I welcome you to LMU through “The First to Go” program that offers first-generation college students valuable resources coupled with opportunities for their (your) academic, professional, and personal growth. A program with a powerful mission that is sutured to the broader university mission-- to reinforce and build upon the unique sources of cultural capital that you bring to the university in order to help us, the university, realize our educational commitments to promote and progress your success during your tenure and time at LMU.⁵

In other words—it is your particularity and your plurality as young first-generation scholars entering this program. It is your personhood and your practical knowing that has gotten you this far. It is your possibility and your promise to not only transition into this university, but to succeed for your own purposes and to help this university to fulfill its commitment to all members of society. It is your presence here—like so many of us who were also First-Generation students to higher education; your presence helps to expand the diversity of this campus. Yes of course--diversity as race, class, culture and gender in the demographical statistics that matter. But also, a diversity of lived experiences; a diversity of cosmologies (ways of seeing, believing and knowing), and a diversity of thought and critical imagination that helps us all to experience the world anew. That is what this university, and the world, needs more now, than ever. That is what you bring. So, bring it!

I hope that you are up for this challenge—because we need you to be fully alive (and fully woke) during your time with us at LMU.

Allow me to share with you some things about my personhood; my being and becoming. I have a PhD in Communication and Performance Studies, I am an active teacher/scholar and I serve as the Dean, College of Communication and Fine Arts at LMU. But way before all of that, I was a first-generation college student—just like you. And that reality stays with me always. It guides everything that I do. My mother, a good Catholic girl, had a high school diploma and got married immediately out of her Catholic high school. She accepted all of God’s gifts, having seven children and two miscarriages—which prohibited her further education. My father had only a fourth-grade education and he worked most of his life as a labourer—with the last 30 years as garbage man.

My parents created a loving and safe home for their children and demanded that we strive for excellence in all we do. Out of the seven us—three did not finish high school but are all successful in their own right, two graduated from high school, an additional two went on to complete bachelor’s degrees and from there I went on to complete a doctorate. Before passing away, my dad took great pride in introducing me to his friends, as his son “Dr. Alexander!”

I tell you this not out of personal pride, but out of a joyful respect for the possibility that comes in having a support structure and helping my parents to reach their goals through me. I remember my parents putting money in a coffee can that they hid in a kitchen cabinet—saving pennies, nickels and dollars to pay for my college tuition. Everyday my dad would empty his pocket into the can, as ritual practice. I remember my mother’s hand shaking as she wrote tuition checks—waiting to the last possible day and calculating when the check would reach the bank—just to make sure it didn’t bounce. I remember my parents refusing to let me have a job as I lived at home and went to the local university—because they wanted me to focus. My parents begged, borrowed and potentially stole-- to make sure that I made it through my undergraduate degree. And I paid them back by completing a master’s degree and a doctoral degree on other people’s money because of achieved academic excellence.

I tell you this as a welcome and a motivation to recognize those who are loving you and supporting you into your possibilities. Be true to them and be true to yourself in demanding excellence and striving toward your dreams and their goals for you.

Second: “A Warning”

One of my favorite poems is "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" by Langston Hughes. He writes:

*I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.*

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

*I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln*

*went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.*

*I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*⁶

Separate from the beautiful lyricism of this piece, I appreciate the economy of language in historicizing the Black experience without giving short shrift of that struggled survival. The poem traces our Black history through the metaphor of rivers; the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile and the Mississippi.

Rivers as a metaphor for life; as baptismal, spiritual and sacred countenance.

Rivers as sustenance for agriculture, industry and the fuel for labor.

Rivers as yearning for adventure and freedom; as cultural location and identity both fixed and fluid.

Rivers as sites of struggle for direction, domain and destiny; and the historical struggle over river rights and the benefits and bounty of rivers.

The struggle over the fertility of rivers—like Black bodies to be bred, owned and exploited.

Rivers as invocation of travel; travel as both mobility and survival; as middle passages and *travels* in the folk sense of Blacks living-to-tell-the-stories of slavery and oppression.

The poem speaks to the induced and forced labor of rivers with effects, affects and artifacts that stand the test of time--- like the construction of the Egyptian pyramids and the historical monuments to slavery that still stand as infrastructure to these United States of America.⁷ The poem is a lyrical argument about the Black spirit steeped in struggle and the longing for salvation. For me, the poem suggests the contiguous flows of Black cultural identity that, like a river, stretches across the human experience; across the diaspora of place and space—as freeman and slave; across the gamut of transfiguration from free human beings in the homeland of Africa to chattel property transported on water to diasporic destinations reconfigured as only 3/5 human, *then*, begrudgingly released as freed-persons, only to be immersed in the continued depths of social struggle and survival in this country that we still experience today.⁸

As a Black-gay-male-teacher-scholar-administrator, not unlike both Langston, I appreciate the celebration of the critical poetic and the historic performative of Black creative reinvention in/of the poem. But I don't get completely lost in the poetics and performative aesthetics of the piece. I don't, because I see the poem as also narrating a pained history. And while rivers are romantic, they are also sites of contestation with runs, ruins and returns that haunt us all. Black bodies were sold up and down rivers like the Mississippi during slavery.⁹

So, I continue here with the notion of a *confluence*; a confluence of rivers, time and space. And the notion of a confluence in the streams of consciousness of this current historical moment, which is both particular and plural; both in the exactitude of the moment of the writing—but like

a river, stretches both forward and backwards to question origins and potentials of future effects. I am fixated on the notion of rivers. Not the romanticization of the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile and the Mississippi but the turbulent conflux of myopic leadership, indiscriminate disease and racism as the persistent scourge on blackness in this country. But now as rivers and streams of consciousness, and how the confluence of these cultural and epidemiological flows, find a problematic potency in this time.

So now I am reframing Langston Hughes's poem as a painful history lesson about racism and struggle; one with some resistance and critique. The piece speaks *to me* now at a confluence of *global cultural flows* in the year 2020.¹⁰ A confluence—not as a gentle coming together of rivers, but a turbulent crossing in which rivers carrying their own chattel are challenged to maintain their own oblivious purpose and pathways in resistance to each other. What happens is each river vies for control of its destiny; each river holds ground of its character and charisms; each river refuses to compromise creating a rapids of encounter careening and colliding to retain its path thus contaminating each with the spit, silt, sediment, salinity, pollution and politics of its purpose—that are truly viral.¹¹ Each contributing and creating a spectacle of nature not unlike the spectacle of human social encounter in these troubled times. In this moment I am writing at a confluence; we are living in the rapids of three intersecting historical realities:

In this moment I am writing at a confluence; in this moment we are living in the rapids of three intersecting historical realities:

(1) the presence and practices of our 45th President of these United States, Donald J. Trump whose politics, temperament and decisions are reshaping the country and the world as we knew it, with particular impacts on our educational systems. On July 18th we were all excited when The U.S. Supreme Court announced its decision upholding the legality of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programs. Which is great because it may impact some of you. Now less than a month later The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) --the federal law enforcement agency under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security with a stated mission to protect America from the cross-border crime and illegal immigration that threaten national security and public safety--put forth policies that would legislate the conditions in which international students in the country can continue their education by requiring a minimal on-campus experience. This while universities like LMU are trying to also ensure health and safety during this time of COVID-19—difficult circumstances, but we fight on the side of righteous to support our students. Thankfully, this charge was shortly rescinded as the act of some benevolent director under public outcry and a massive lawsuit.¹² But the ease in which these things happened should serve as its own warning.

(2). The second stream is the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, an unprecedented infectious disease risk for all persons—that has had once unfathomable impacts on life, our everyday circulation in place and space, and is changing what teaching, learning, schooling and education looks like during this difficult time. And of course, let us not forget the disproportioned impact the virus is having on communities of color because of decades of structural racism, unstable/unsafe work environments, limited access to quality health care, etc.¹³

(3). And the third tributary is the national rise of civil unrest or better yet, activism surrounding the policing murder of unarmed Black people in America, triggered by the particular suffocation death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN and my recent brother Rayshard Brooks at a Wendy's Restaurant in Atlanta George¹⁴ and Brionna Taylor, Sandra Bland, and so many of our Black and Brown sisters killed by virtue of race and circumstance for whom we must learn to #SayHerName also. To highlight the gender-specific ways in which Black women and women of color are disproportionately affected by fatal acts of racial injustice in this country.¹⁵

And how these three (the current presidency, Covid-19, and civil unrest), in a confluence of destruction, become situated in higher education as objects of critique, contamination, containment and contention. These issues and their rise in the year 2020 are not disconnected from each other; the response to the pandemic and the rise of racism and how these impact particular bodies become campaign strategies of continued power and control; reinforcing political factions while people are dying from social *disease* and social *dis-ease*. Each surge in my head, heart and stomach relative to my own positionality. Echoing brother Langston Hughes: *My soul has grown deep like the rivers*.

WARNING: If you have not sensed it yet: You are entering this university as First Generation Students, in a First to Go Program, at a time in which we will all be challenged to address the social, cultural, political and practical implications of these issues and take a clear operational sense of what leadership means for the common good. What health care and social vulnerability means during a pandemic and beyond? And what is the role of students, educators and scholars in/as activists to address these issues in our educational institutions and on the streets? What is our role in resistance and critique in the continued necessity to address the social scourge of racism and violence on Black and Brown bodies in this country? What is the role of learned folks like you and me—in making a difference? The warning signs are all around us that we need to address these issues; both the explicit and implicit features that make each possible present and more potent in our lives—both today and the hopeful tomorrows to come.

WARNING: Enter your program with your eyes wide open—as you navigate your way through the highways and byways to get here (both literally and figuratively) recognizing that higher education is not a protected space. There is no where to hide. In fact, higher education is more under attack than ever. Critiques about the rarefied air that we breath and our perpetuating of social/race/class difference and indifference—and our inability to respond to the needs of *the tired, the poor and the huddled masses longing to be free* to which this country once welcomed and sheltered. Or the need to talk about issues of diversity, inclusion and bias is sterile and clinical ways that can become objectified and mechanized as a way of addressing an age-old-evil. We are not immune. Sometimes we are even complicit! What is our role to play? The space of higher education should be a practiced place for social transformation. We must get busy doing the social justice work for the world in which we live through education and action for today and the hopeful tomorrows to come. What role will you play?

WARNING:

<p><i>Parent Fears for their First-Generation College Children</i></p>
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And if your parents are anything like mine, they send you to the university as an opportunity for your success—but they are terrified that they will lose you.

- They fear that you will learn so much and become so achieved in your intellect that you will forget about family, friends and culture—and what *they* taught you.
- They fear that you will no longer respect them, after you have surpassed them in education.

- (For some) they fear that you will become Whitewashed (in the multiple and varied interpretations of that phrase).
- They fear that you will be ashamed of where you come from.
- They fear that you will not come home again—and not recognize your role in family and community. Yet despite their fears, they love you and support your dreams so much--that they send you to us anyway as personal sacrifice for your opportunity.¹⁶

WARNING: Don't let that happen!

Don't let their investment, their hope, their wishes and their prayers for you end in you forgetting from whence you came. That would be a crime. That would be a sin. That would be an injustice to their sacrifice. The lessons that they taught you will be the foundation for all of your learning here at LMU. It will give you comfort in times of challenge and strength in times of need. It certainly was for me. (Don't push those lessons aside, build on them). It is your responsibility to finish the race and make a difference in their lives, and in your/our communities, and in the world

WARNING: You are entering Loyola Marymount University, but you are only on loan to this place. We are helping your parents to help expand your possibilities and potentialities, we are helping in your processes of *information, formation and transformation*.

WARNING: While you will find a lot of opportunities here of which you must take advantage, don't lose yourself in the process. Work towards becoming *a better version of yourself*, but don't lose yourself.

During your studies with us here at LMU—work on your academics, work on your activism, work on your achievement and leadership, and work towards being *the change that you seek to see in the world*. There are no other choices, less you become a part of the problem. While we may all be bound to the past, we are not destined to relive it—we must create the potentialities of the future. We must create new paths of possibility for self and others.

Third: “A Simple Wish”

I wish you the focused energy and commitment to enter this program with your own purpose. But to enter with an open mind, body and spirit; open to the possibilities and potentialities of what the program can give to you—and *maybe* more importantly, what you will bring to the program and take away with you; take away to apply in real ways with positive impacts on your diverse communities. As a cohort you will have a tremendous impact on the dynamism of each other's educational experiences. You will have a phenomenal faculty and staff here throughout the university. Faculty and staff who will challenge and support you in different ways. They will marshal you not only into the graduation, but into the work of being transformational educational leaders for social justice. But your colleagues sitting next to you (though currently situated in these virtual ZOOM boxes, but still sharing and intimacy of knowing) will also have an impact on your educational experience. Lean into each other's possibilities and push each other to and towards your potentialities.

I wish you the focused energy and commitment to enter this university and your particular programs with your own purpose. But to enter with an open mind, body and spirit; open to the possibilities of what the program can give to you—and *maybe* more importantly, what you will bring to the program and take away with you to apply in real ways, with positive impacts on your diverse communities.

As a cohort you will have a tremendous impact on the dynamism of each other's educational experiences. You will have a phenomenal faculty and staff throughout the university (inside the classroom and outside of the classroom) who will challenge and support you in different ways. They (We) will marshal you not only to graduation, but into the work of being transformational citizens for social justice. But your colleagues sitting next to you, though currently situated in ZOOM boxes due to COVID-19 (but still sharing and intimacy of knowing), they will also have an impact on your educational experience. Lean into each other's possibilities, push and support each other to and towards your very bright futures.

Conclusion:

My welcome, my warning and my wish for you are tied together with a ribbon as a gift; one that I hope you will open slowly and reflect upon deeply as you take it out of the box again later and reexamine its details. In your later close reflection—I hope that you see my selection for you was chosen with a level of care and consideration for your purpose, words crafted with critical care that were easy to hear but maybe not too comfortable to listen to---- less you become complacent. Because this message was not for your entertainment, it is an early contribution to an awakening of consciousness and your development as critical cultural citizens.

I am offering this as a gift to you. A gift that will fit you all differently but will shift towards your particular needs. A gift that is also a set of tools and perspectives to which you may determine how to use with your own critical intention as you embark on this new and exciting journey. The world awaits your critical and creative intellect. And as a professor and dean at LMU, or maybe more importantly as another first generation (First-to-Go) student and a brother in the struggle. I join so many others who are here to serve as your companion on this new journey. And we will all meet together to calm the waters at the confluence for change.

Be well.

Be safe.

Be blessed.

Bio: *Bryant Keith Alexander, Dean, College of Communication and Fine Arts, Loyola Marymount University. He writes and researches in the areas of Performance Studies, Communication Studies, Race/Cultural/Gender Studies and Educational Studies. Formally a faculty member in the Department of Communication Studies, Alexander is also Affiliate Faculty, School of Education at LMU where he sits on dissertation committees. Dean Alexander completed his B.A. and M.S. at the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now, the University of Louisiana-Lafayette) and his PhD at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale.*

NOTES

¹ The formal essay from the doctoral student address in the LMU School of Education will be published as: Bryant Keith Alexander (forthcoming, 2020) “A Welcome, A Warning and A Wish: On Entering a Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership in the Year 2020.” Special Issue: “Higher Education in the Time of Trump: Resistance and Critique.” *Qualitative Inquiry*. With the completion of this address and essay, “A Welcome, A Warning and a Wish: On Entering LMU through ‘First to Go’ in the Year 2020”—I am now engaging a comparative textual analysis with the working title: “Doing Double Duty and the Double Binds of Writing Across Populations in Higher Education (or *Welcoming the Same and Not Not the Same*).” In that writing exercise, I parallel the structures and contents of both speeches while signaling the points of connection and the reasoned elements of difference that attend to their particularity. This while deconstructing what was really the same in these ports of entry into these educational streams of consciousness, confluence and challenge that signal the occasion for a welcome, warnings and wishes. I theorize and speculate on why and how difference is marked with such populations in higher education—doctoral students and first-generation students (also recognizing at that high percentage of doctoral students entering the EdD in Educational Leadership and Social Justice at LMU are also first-generation students.) Thus, building a theory of feltness into the joint challenges of these populations that on the surface are suggestive of difference, but not. I am extremely grateful to Alexia Pineda for inviting me to present to the 2020-2021 cohort of the “First to Go” program at LMU, and thus triggering my thoughts on the subject.

² See: the Loyola Marymount University Mission Statements: <https://mission.lmu.edu/mission/missionstatement/>.

³ See: Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html.

⁴ These are extended interpretive frames of the LMU Mission Statement.

⁵ LMU First to Go Program: <https://academics.lmu.edu/arc/firsttogoprogram/>.

⁶ See: Langston Hughes: <https://poets.org/poem/negro-speaks-rivers>.

⁷ See: James Pasley, “15 American Landmarks that were built by Slave.” *Business Insider*, September 06, 2019. <https://www.businessinsider.com/american-landmarks-that-were-built-by-slaves-2019-9>.

⁸ See: Burt Kaufman, Chris Wolfe, Hays Cummins’ syllabus for the course “Rivers: Images, Policy, and Science (An Interdisciplinary Perspective),” School of Interdisciplinary Studies (Western College Program), Miami University, Spring 2002. <http://jrscience.wcp.muohio.edu/courses/rivers02.html>.

⁹ Langston Hughes speaks to the notion of Black bodies being sold up the Mississippi River as an inspiring component of his poem. This along with a reference to Abraham Lincoln’s witness of slavery on the Mississippi that ignited his hatred for slavery and foreshadowed the Emancipation Proclamation <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cKDOGghMU>>.

¹⁰ See: Arjun Appadurai. (1990). “Disjunctive and difference in the global cultural economy.” *Public Culture*, 291): 1-24 <<http://tcs.sagepub.com>>; and Artem Cheprasov’s: The Five Dimensions of Global Cultural Flow. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/the-five-dimensions-of-global-cultural-flow.html>.

¹¹ See: “When Rivers Collide: 10 Confluences Around the World;,” *Twisted Sifter*; April 17, 2012 <<https://twistedsifter.com/2012/04/confluences-around-the-world/>>.

¹² See : <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/07/14/891125619/ice-agrees-to-rescind-policy-barring-foreign-students-from-online-study-in-the-u>.

¹³ See: “COVID-19’s assault on Black and Brown communities”
<<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/covid-19s-assault-black-and-brown-communities>>. Harmeet Kaur,
“The coronavirus pandemic is hitting black and brown Americans especially hard on all fronts.”

<<https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/08/us/coronavirus-pandemic-race-impact-trnd/index.html>>.

¹⁴ See: Chris Graves, “The Killing of George Floyd: What we know” June 1, 2020. MPR New:
<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2020/06/01/the-killing-of-george-floyd-what-we-know>

¹⁵ <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/06/16/black-women-deaths-protests>.

¹⁶ These fears are different from yet coupled with the worries over resources and socialization:
<https://dornsife.usc.edu/first-generation-college-students-at-usc/what-are-first-gen-common-struggles/>.