

## A sustainable future amid urgent challenges

I want to recognize and thank Board Chair Bob Turner, all the members of the platform party, the staff who planned this event, and the students, trustees, faculty, staff, and guests who are here today to celebrate not a president, but a great College.

The theme of this inauguration is “designing results for a sustainable future.” The first part, “designing results,” is heavily influenced by the ideas that you just heard from Hal Williams. We are currently pursuing a process we call “results-based strategic design”, meaning, instead of doing a traditional strategic plan we are designing solutions to particular major problems that the college faces. We intend for our future to be *sustainable* in all senses of the word: economic sustainability, ecological sustainability, and sustainability as a community. We asked ourselves the odd but essential question of *why* we need to be economically sustainable, and the answer came back that we need to “achieve financial sustainability in order to deliver on Hiram College's mission,” and that is the primary goal of our design exercise. It is a mission worth delivering on. It’s printed in your program, but I’m going to read it out loud anyway:

“The mission of Hiram college is to foster intellectual excellence and social responsibility, enabling our students to thrive in their chosen careers, flourish in life, and face the urgent challenges of the times.” Our mission statement is accompanied by a statement of core values that comprise community, learning, responsibility, diversity, and innovation. This is the mission and these are the values that attracted me to Hiram, and that will carry Hiram into the future.

Hiram’s name has changed from its founding in 1850 as the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute to Hiram College in 1870, but unlike many colleges founded by religious denominations (in our

case, the Disciples of Christ), Hiram has been non-sectarian and co-educational from the beginning, with values that that can be traced directly from its founding to the present. Take for example diversity, which remains one of our core values.

As you probably know, one of the Western Reserve Eclectic institute's early and most influential "principals" was a classical scholar named James A. Garfield, who had also been a student here, who met his wife Lucretia here, and who went on to be an important civil war commander, legislator, and all too briefly the president of the United States until his tragic assassination. Like everyone, he was in many ways a creature of his time, but he firmly believed in equality: he stated, in his inaugural address as U.S. president in 1881, that the elevation of African Americans "from slavery to the full rights of citizenship is the most important political change we have known since the adoption of the Constitution of 1787." We have an even more direct connection to the Garfield legacy: Tim Garfield, the great-great-grandson of James A. Garfield is with us here today. I am honored by his presence and awed by the responsibility I feel as a successor to James A. Garfield in this college presidential role.

In the 1930s, the Drury family gave generous trusts to three colleges that were early leaders in the admission of women and people of color: Berea College in Kentucky, the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and Hiram College (good company to be in). Fast forward to 2020, when, in the wake of the tragic deaths of George Floyd and other African Americans, the student leaders of Hiram College urged us to install a large piece of public art loudly declaring that Black Lives Matter, a message intertwined with other statements reflecting our tradition of social justice. (We had hoped to dedicate this installation this past Monday; however, the unpredictable northeast Ohio weather has presented us with an inevitable delay. The installation will go up this summer and will be dedicated when the students return in the fall.

This evidence of Hiram's longstanding commitment to diversity does not allow us to rest on our laurels, however. We still have a great deal of work to do in order to become the inclusive community that we all want to be. That work is not easy and it often raises troubling issues, but let it be “good trouble,” in the words of John Lewis. More important than statements advocating diversity and inclusion are actions that nurture diversity and create inclusion. One of the greatest honors I have received since becoming president of Hiram is this Kente stole I am wearing, which was presented to me by the Black Student Union at the BSU’s traditional senior sendoff ceremony. For the past 30 years, graduating students, both members of BSU and allies, have worn Kente stoles at commencement, and this year will be no different. I wear this not so much as a symbol of what we have accomplished, but rather as a reminder of what we still need to do.

Inclusion means as we say in our core value statement, that “we are an inclusive community that welcomes people of diverse backgrounds beliefs and points of view.” We also “celebrate freedom of thought and freedom of choice.” We exemplify these values in the classroom by encouraging open debate on important issues and in our speaker series when we invite a diverse range of speakers on important topics to campus.

However, that does not mean that all beliefs are equally valid. As an institution of learning, another of our values is that “we demonstrate an unwavering commitment to the pursuit of learning and quality scholarship.” We believe in truth and facts, which means it's not okay to believe that the world is flat, or that drinking bleach will cure COVID. And we believe in values, including a commitment to “the distinctive contribution of every person in the learning environment” as well as “the well-being of each member of the community.” This means that it’s not okay to believe in the superiority of one group of people over another or to use words or actions in a hurtful way. It *is okay* to believe in the superiority of accomplishments, such as

Hiram's superiority to DePauw in the world of softball (congrats to the NCAC conference champs), but that doesn't mean that our softball players are better people than DePauw's.

But there is no simple set of rules to follow here, which is why lifelong learning starting with the kind of education Hiram provides is so important. Even in the world of scientific fact, knowledge and understanding are constantly changing, which we saw in real-time as our understanding of Covid-19 evolved. And history and culture cannot be taught purely "objectively," because, as the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer put it, we are always understanding the past from within a particular historical horizon conditioned by, among other things, the very past we are trying to comprehend. This means that prejudice—which means "pre-judgment"—can't simply be eliminated, because, as Kant taught us, our understanding of the world would be pure chaos if we did not approach the world within the horizon of some set of categories. So the goal is not to eliminate our pre-understandings in the name of some necessarily limited and time-bound sense of "objectivity," but rather to inform our pre-understandings with the kinds of values that Hiram espouses, and to constantly seek ways to expand the limits imposed by our current horizons.

To me, the most important way to keep our horizons open and expanding is to understand that the other person standing before us can never be reduced to the categories we impose on that person—to do otherwise leads to violence. That may seem like an extreme statement, but here I will invoke another of my favorite philosophers: Emmanuel Levinas, most of whose family was wiped out in the Holocaust. He learned through personal grief how the highly distorted categorization of Jews by National Socialism led to extreme violence. He argues that this happens in everyday life every time we fail to recognize with generosity that the other person always exceeds the categories that we use to classify them. For example, Lisa Baldwin always

exceeds any category I might put her in—even after 30+ years of marriage, she surprises me every day.

We see the potential or actual violence inherent in categorization and labeling all around us, as terms such as “woke,” “critical race theory,” and even “liberal,” “conservative,” and “un-American” are weaponized as labels for what we don’t like, reducing other humans to categories that are not only distorted from their original meanings but also highly reductive and depersonalizing, sometimes leading to actual violence, as we saw on January 6, 2021.

I rarely use the term “liberal arts,” precisely because of the distortion that term has undergone, but thinking these difficult problems through is precisely what a true liberal arts education is.

Moving back to the practical, I believe that it is also important for Hiram’s future to include being an active member of the larger community. The creativity of our students, faculty, and staff must contribute to the betterment of Hiram Village, Portage County, Northeast Ohio, and beyond, and thus I am honored by the presence here today of many of our community partners.

We are proud of the fact that we supply interns, volunteers, and eventually employees to organizations in this area, and we want to do our part to keep young people in Ohio, providing an employee pipeline to the many great companies in this area, instead of sending them South and West with illusions of better weather. To that end, we are active participants in the Team NEO Talent Development Council and the Portage Development Board. Representative Dave Joyce is submitting a federal earmark request on our behalf to fund a new Office of Workforce Development and Civic Engagement (the only college request on his list). We are also working closely with the Davey Tree Expert company, and similar companies to build a pipeline of employees for the green industry. Northeast Ohio is thriving in many ways, but one of our

biggest problems is a shortage of skilled employees, and addressing that issue directly is to the benefit of both the region and our institution.

By the way, though when I mention workforce-ready programs I sometimes hear laments for the good old days of the “pure liberal arts,” I see no conflict here. Employers always tell us that Hiram grads possess not only technical skills but also the creativity, empathy, and problem-solving skills and attributes that one gets from studying, history, literature, science, and the arts. It is also a real benefit, as a provost once said, “for the inside of your head to be a good place to spend the rest of your life.” If we can enable our students to accomplish those results as they face the urgent challenges of the times, then we will have a bright and sustainable future.

Let me close with a blessing from the poet John O’Donohue, whom many of you know on campus from Reverend McCreight’s frequent invocation of this poet. This is from “A Morning Offering,” and it reminds us to expand our horizons as we put fear behind us:

May my mind come alive today  
To the invisible geography  
That invites me to new frontiers  
To break the dead shell of yesterdays,  
To risk being disturbed and changed.

May I have the courage today  
To live the life that I would love,  
To postpone my dream no longer  
But do at last what I came here for  
And waste my heart on fear no more.