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General Student Assembly: "Opportunity and Accountability" - 2004

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General Student Assembly

September 1, 2004

“Opportunity and Accountability”

Good Morning. Even though you have been attending classes for more than a week, it is my privilege to Welcome all of you to the start of a new school year.

I want to give a special welcome to Ms. Bethany Norwood. I am so happy to have her back here on campus.

There is a member of our football team who is in the hospital. I would appreciate it if you would stand and have a moment of silence in honor of this young man.

I want to speak, briefly, this morning about Opportunity and Accountability. There is no question that attending this University, obtaining an education and a degree, can open doors, can lead to Opportunities beyond your wildest imagination. There are so many examples I can use of PVAMU alums who occupy prestigious positions in our society where they are involved in key decision making roles. **Students, I have long believed that once a person has obtained an education then the only person stopping you from doing whatever it is you aspire to do is you.**

But, there is no question that everything in this world comes at a price. That is where Responsibility comes in, that we as students, as members of society, must make good choices.

Regarding you, the students, there is no question in my mind that far far more positive things occurred last year than negative things on this campus. The vast majority of you ~~act~~^{act} in a responsible manner at all times. But, I would be less than honest with you if I failed to say that during my first year as President, I was struck by a number of things, that I found troubling, that happened regarding some of our students: where they failed to make good choices, to act responsibility.

1. That some students, especially Freshmen, dropped out almost immediately after school had started. Why? There could be any number of reasons. I suspect that most of them are not fully aware of all that obtaining a college degree will lead to for them in their lives.
2. That some students came late to class, if they came at all, and that they talked on cell phones, read newspapers, or generally found a way to express their disdain for what the teacher was doing. I was very surprised to see young men wearing their hats in the buildings on this campus.

3. That there were some students who engaged, almost proudly, in inappropriate behavior. Please ~~hear~~^{hear} me on this: I truly respect your First Amendment Rights. But, I also want all of you to have the same opportunities in life that I and others have enjoyed. I don't want you making a decision now that will negatively impact the rest of your life.
4. That some students, again, not all, not most, but a handful, engaged in fights, not just the verbal kind. There were students sent home for this.
5. For me, it hit rock bottom when a food fight occurred in February of last year. Again, only a very few students were involved in this behavior.

6. A key point: last year we had 7,800 students on this campus. So the behavior that I have described was not engaged in by the vast majority of the students, i.e., I suspect no more than 1% of the students. **But here is the problem: students, who act inappropriately can set the tone, can establish the climate for other students.** Here is a parallel from when I was a student attending a predominantly white school: racial tension and often an outright racism occurred at the University of Kentucky when I was an undergraduate. This inappropriate behavior was the actions of a very very small minority. But, the majority of the white students kept silent and by their silence seem to condone this type of behavior. Also, in another parallel, some of the well meaning whites risked being mocked by the others for reaching out. I suspect that there is some male on this campus who is offended by the inappropriate behavior of others but has willingly gone along.

Why are these inappropriate acts so significant: (1) takes away from the “right environment” to learn and experience all that a college has to offer. (2) Inappropriate acts, when committed by members of a minority group, are held up as examples to “prove” the negatives about the group; in other words, this is a very fine school with a rich legacy of excellence, but these things are not emphasized when inappropriate acts occur; (3) it can devalue your college degree.

Think about the sacrifices that your family has made for you. I asked a rhetorical question to incoming Freshmen two weeks ago: “Is there anyone in here, other than me, who comes from a single parent background, where my Mother said to me, I am making a sacrifice for you, and I want you to be “something” in life.

A very crucial question: **“How are we as Administrators, Faculty, and Staff “accountable” to you students?”** (1) We must listen to you and be responsible to your concerns. (2) We must be the type of role models that you respect. (3) We must do our jobs, for you, in a professional manner. I have stressed the concept of Customer Service. I have said that the Faculty must do a better job.

Honestly, how do you feel about the Professors who teach you? Do you respect them? Have they given you the chance to do student evaluations? What about members of the Administration and Staff? How are you treated when you go into offices for the services that you are entitled to at this University?

I have said in the strongest language possible that we are going to root out every instance of inappropriate sexual activity on this campus: “date rape” among students; sex among students and employees, sex among students and faculty. None of these things will exist will occur on this campus. **I challenge you to bring instances of inappropriate remarks, suggestions and above all threats of intimidation to our attention. I told everyone that this is one of the cornerstones of my Administration.**

Students, you too, must be Accountable. By all means have a good time, enjoy being in college, take part in a wide range of activities outside of class. **But, never forget the real reason why you are here: to reach your educational goals and your goals and to use college as a “stepping stone” for your future.**

Please take this piece of advice from me seriously: **Assume responsibility for the things that affect your life.** I am amazed by how often when something turns out wrong, we in American society are too quit to blame someone else.

Let me give you an example of how I took control when I was a freshman. As an Arts and Science major, I was required to take courses in 5 of 7 areas. I met with my Advisor who didn't seem to know as much about this as I did. I clipped the chart out of the pamphlet and kept it with me throughout my college career. I was my own degree-checker.

You need to do the same. **Do you know where many of you need to start: by contacting us, yourself, when you have a problem instead of having your parents to do so.**

As President of this University, I wish that each and every one of you here will take advantage of being here and get an education that will serve you, your family, i.e., parents and siblings who are not fortunate enough to attend college, and your future spouse, children, and grand children.

I wish that I could impress you, and therefore give you the motivation to get your degree here, by telling you about all of the “things” that I have been able to acquire because I have a college education, or all of the places that I have been, or all of the influential people I have met because of the “Opportunities” my education has opened for me. **But more than these “things,” my obtaining a college education has positively shaped my entire life and has given me the “Opportunity” to make a difference in the world.** Since I finished my education in 1977, I have been told every year by former students, that I have touched their lives and made a difference and that they in turn will touch someone else. All of you can do the same.

My college education has led to me thinking through complicated issues, weighing various viewpoints, not accepting the “standard view.” An example, “race” is a very complicated issue. Every stereotype you say about black people is true. And these same stereotypes can be applied to every other minority group and every majority group found in this world.

Since I arrived here a year ago, there have been comments circulating about me that concern students. The suspect: probably being spread by faculty and staff. These comments, might in fact be true; they might not be true. How can you determine the ones that are being said about me (or anyone else for that matter, are true or not?) By interacting, listening, and above all, by deciding things for yourself. All of us must prove ourselves to other people, no matter what we say about ourselves. (Mention that I came along during the time of Affirmative Action and I wonder if I was as “smart” as my white colleagues).

Indeed, I encourage all of you that whenever you have a concern about something that "might have been said," that you let the person know about it. Last week, I had a conversation with you President, Mr. Nigel Redmond. He said that a number of students were upset about some things that were being attributed to me. He took the time to go over each and every one of the points. He also gave me a copy of a Flyer that was being circulated.

Very easy way of dealing with something somebody says to you about me. Tell them, let's go & talk to GCW about it. I promise that I will not "harm" that person, but if they are wrong, I will "correct" the misconception, I have always confronted people throughout every phase of my life.

I want to conclude my remarks by touching upon my Religious faith and what it means to me. It is not my intention to offend any of you by mentioning Religion. While I feel comfortable with my own, I respect the religious beliefs of all people and I respect the right of people who choose not to have a religious belief. **Students, I, George C. Wright, would not be here had I failed to ask My God to bless and guide me in my actions.** If that is appropriate for you, then I urge you to do so throughout this school year and the rest of your life. In other words, if you believe in a Creator, then ask that Creator to bless you, to guide you, and to take control of your life. Everything of importance that has happened in my life—both good and bad—has happened for a reason. I had to move back to the housing project when I was 15 years old; my father was an alcoholic; Why? I am not sure, but these things have let me know all of my life that I am not better than other people. From the day my daughter, Rebecca Ellison Wright was born, I saved money for her college education and then money for her life as an adult; yet God decided to take her home in March. Why? My daughter's situation has given me compassion and understanding of what so many people go through in this world.

I wish all of you the very best. Thanks for your time.