

**Chancellor Nicholas B. Dirks**

**New Student Convocation, UC Berkeley, August 24, 2015.**

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the University of California, Berkeley. You have made an exhilarating and, yes, enlightened choice. We are delighted you are joining this great city of intellect, as Berkeley's first Chancellor Clark Kerr put it, coming along with us for what will be a great ride ahead.

I suspect this is an emotional moment for most of you. A long chapter is today coming to a close: years of school, anxiety about what you would do after completing high school or an Associate's Degree, the long process of applying to college and getting that magic letter from Berkeley, then deciding to take our offer, packing up and transporting your life in boxes to a new place, surrounded by new people in a new environment, ready to embark on a personal and intellectual adventure unlike anything you have known before.

You have no doubt experienced – you are probably still experiencing – a special kind of excitement, and perhaps too a bit of foreboding about what it will be like to transition to this new place and prepare for new challenges. And that is exactly how it should be, as you stand now on the cusp of what will surely be one of the most formative periods in your life.

Even though I have been immersed in the seasonal rhythms of higher education for a long time, I, too, find this time of year thrilling – filled, as it inevitably is, with unprecedented excitement, potential, and promise. Although I never tire of talking about the excellence and numerous virtues of Berkeley's incredible natural beauty, its prodigious academic offerings, its preeminent faculty, its world-class – and world-changing – research, and its deep commitment to the public good, I know this is all well known to you. You are here because of your intellectual curiosity and passion, your extraordinary talent, and your relentless hard work, and you are here because of the unparalleled diversity and energy of this campus that draws you not just from the great state of California, but from around the nation and indeed the world.

This is a great time to be at Berkeley. Our faculty, filled as it is with dedicated teachers, thinkers, innovators and explorers, is simply second to none. An exemplary team of staff members committed to excellence in every facet of the university's operations works incredibly hard to support our academic mission. Our graduate students, with whom you will come into contact as mentors, fellow researchers, and teachers, are extraordinary too. And then there is the practically indescribable energy, enthusiasm and electricity generated by you and your undergraduate peers... a student body unlike any other due to

your unique and compelling blend of elite academic credentials; the broadest possible range of expertise and extra-curricular interests; deep engagement with the world around you, a strong desire for the unique community and connection afforded by a Berkeley education; and a level of socioeconomic diversity that you will not find on the campuses of our private peers. This energy is captured by our many alums, whose larger circle you join today, and who continue to provide support of many kinds to sustain this great enterprise. And, by the way, we'll be expecting that of you too in your lives ahead.

What is currently on offer for Berkeley undergraduates is already stellar – just ask any alum. But we are going to do even more for you. The Undergraduate Initiative we launched last year is putting the pieces in place for what I believe will be a transformational evolution of the Berkeley undergraduate experience... a process you will be among the first to experience while you help us further develop it in the years ahead. And, while we will have more to say and announce about the elements of the Initiative in the months to come, I want to share with you the principles that are guiding our work, for I believe they speak to the fundamental values, benefits, and purpose of the kind of undergraduate education that will be necessary if we are to continue Berkeley's tradition of producing global leaders in this time of ever accelerating change, a time when the opportunities have never been more tantalizing nor the challenges more daunting.

Our foundational objectives for the future are clear: We want to see every Cal student graduate with an education that doesn't simply prepares you for worthwhile careers, but gives you the grounding, the knowledge, and the experience to serve as engaged citizens who have the means to realize your most ambitious goals while also making a positive, lasting impact on the world around you. We want you to be challenged, while also being nurtured; we want you to explore new areas of knowledge while also using your time here to follow your passions and interests wherever they might take you. Even as we want you to be leaders, we want to lead in the way we continue to develop the finest possible form of undergraduate education, combining the best of a liberal arts or engineering college with the rich resources of a great research university. We have much to be proud of when contemplating the history of collegiate education in this country, but we also know that the kind of education we provide here is under scrutiny, viewed critically and skeptically by many of our citizens. We expect our Undergraduate Initiative to place us at the forefront of efforts across the higher education world to redefine and rearticulate the centrality of undergraduate education and the liberal arts tradition not just for our

teaching mission, but for our future as a university and as a society, both here in California and across the nation and the globe.

We are embracing change and innovation – even as we hold to our defining traditions and values – because we know that with the ever-accelerating pace of change in our society and economy, you will likely find yourself needing to reinvent yourself intellectually and professionally numerous times over the course of your life. We believe that now more than ever, the liberal arts will play a critical role in the cultivation of this adaptive and creative capacity, even as we believe that in order to train future leaders, we must be especially attentive to the cultivation of quantitative capacity and ingenuity.

The changes we are making to our curriculum are designed to provide you with a well-defined set of competencies and dispositions to navigate and succeed in this ever-changing world; a world in which your success will be not solely a function of the skills and knowledge acquired while in college, but also a function of your having learned *how to* pursue and acquire skills and knowledge across your whole life; a world in which true fitness will depend on the capacity to ‘cross-train’ intellectually; a world in which seizing the opportunities created by the next great breakthroughs will depend upon your capacity to see across the landscape with discernment, judgment, and perspective; a world in which success will depend on being able to imagine new futures with a full understanding of the lessons of the past.

While today large numbers of Berkeley undergraduates are getting hands-on experience with research endeavors across the disciplines, we believe that engagement in research should be a requirement at the core of the undergraduate experience, no matter your chosen field or major. Research imparts skills that are specific to specialized projects while also teaching how to pursue and develop knowledge on one’s own. Research teaches how to measure the reliability and character of sources of information: how to respect the importance of evidence, while knowing how evidence has been and can be used to different ends, and sometimes with multiple purposes.

Beyond the curriculum we will also seek to strengthen connections between the residential living experience and your academic interests and aspirations; to support and foster academic connections that bring you together here as students, that connect you to the larger community of the university, and gives you the unique opportunity to make acquaintances, and friends, with people from very different backgrounds, with sometimes radically different interests, views, cultures, and ideas. Embrace this moment, and by the way, do so now; studies tell us that you will make most of your lasting friendships and form most of your new network in the next six months: make sure you reach well beyond your comfort zone and make your own community as diverse and as challenging as possible.

While we will have much more to say about the Undergraduate Initiative in the months and years ahead, our efforts to date are already bearing fruit. The highly successful and well-received Berkeley Connect mentoring program has expanded to 11 academic departments. This fall we are launching a pilot foundational data science class for 150 freshmen, to teach them to critically engage with data as producers and consumers, and to apply computing and inference skills to real-world issues. We hope to grow the course to include 3,000 students by 2017, adding both lower-and upper-division courses and a data science major and minor. This makes us the first university to begin integrating data science as a core component of liberal education.

We have launched a new Arts and Design Initiative that will provide you with new opportunities to create, participate in and engage with the widest possible range of forms of expression and creativity. Through new classes and broadened access to the extraordinary array of performances, exhibitions, screenings, and lectures at Berkeley every day of the week, you will be exposed to fresh perspectives, new approaches, and unimagined possibilities.

We have also greatly enhanced and expanded the support we provide to students with an interest in innovation and entrepreneurial endeavors. We now offer more than 30 different courses on various aspects of entrepreneurship and support more than 80 entrepreneurship student groups. And our very own incubator, Skydeck, is home to 24 start-up companies, all generated by Berkeley alumni.

And, as we speak, one of our oldest residential halls – Bowles Hall – is being fully renovated in preparation for its reopening in fall 2016 as a co-ed residential college for 186 students, three graduate students and two professors – a housemaster and a dean. This as a pilot project: a vital step towards the day when we can and will offer all of our freshmen and sophomores housing in residential colleges.

As you choose your majors from among a vast array of departmental programs, we encourage you also to take part in offerings outside your major and broaden your outlook on both the exciting opportunities and the vexing questions associated with our new age of technology and globalization. We hope that in your time here, you will engage in deep debates over and explorations into meaning, value and life's fundamental purposes, not only for your personal development but also to better understand the world around you and to connect your academic pursuits with your desire to make the world a better place.

Ever since thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle posited that the inquiry into the nature of the good life of the individual was dependent on the examination of the nature of a good community, philosophical inquiry has accepted that individuals can best realize their own talents and aspirations in a social setting

that accepts difference while creating communitarian forms, if always imperfect. The history of political philosophy may not provide as many clear models for political communities that work well for both individual life and the public good as we might like, but the university may be the closest example we have of a real utopian community. Flawed though it might be, the university is guided not only by utopian ideals but also by a multitude of everyday practices designed to balance the needs of individuals with those of society writ large. We welcome you as members of this continuing utopian experiment, and believe that at Berkeley we have taken this experiment seriously, using it to guide and to frame our fundamental mission.

The air here is full of dreams and ambitions to confront some of the world's great dilemmas and challenges. We critique the status quo in order to reimagine the future... not just for ourselves, but for us all. This attitude – this ambition – flows directly from the circumstances of our establishment as a public university in 1868, in what was part of a monumental American experiment based on the belief that the national community collectively benefits from broad access to an excellent higher education... that democracy thrives when all of its citizens – not just the privileged and the elite – have the opportunity to garner and perfect the intellectual tools necessary to fully engage with the issues of the day; that society is more just and morally sound when the possibility of social mobility is afforded to all based on merit, and not their origins or family circumstances.

For many of you here today, coming to one of the greatest universities of the world may still seem a dream, if not to you certainly to your families. Let there be no mistake. This is a dream. It was a dream that led to the creation of this extraordinary institution – a public institution second to none. And it is a dream still for all of us here, now. I would encourage you to go back to read W.E.B. DuBois, who wrote about the meaning of higher education in his classic work, “The Souls of Black Folk.” DuBois waxed eloquent in particular on what education meant for him, as a young African American subject to the manifold exclusions and stereotypes that at the time would have consigned him at best only to vocational education, and at worst to no education at all. Instead, he writes,

“I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line, I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you

long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so afraid lest peering from this high [peak...], we sight the Promised Land.”

Please, take your time here and use it well. Immerse yourselves fully in the experiences and opportunities of Berkeley, including our magnificent campus and our wonderful collections- our libraries, museums, art, music, theater and botanical gardens. Consort with Aristotle, Aurelius, Balzac and Dumas, and so many others. Reach out. Engage. Connect.

Again, congratulations for being part of the Berkeley Community; and my profound wishes that your time here may be as important, productive, and transformational as it has been for generations before you. Fiat Lux – Let there be Light.