



Inaugural Address
Scott E. Feller, 17th President of Wabash College
October 8, 2021

Good afternoon. It is an honor to welcome all of you to Wabash College. It is especially nice to welcome our Board of Trustees back to campus for the first time in nearly two years, and I want to extend a special welcome to the delegates representing colleges, universities, and partner organizations, as well as our faculty, staff, students, alumni, and their guests. Finally, I am grateful for my family and friends who have traveled across the country to be here this afternoon.

I am humbled to have been elected the 17th president of Wabash College; humbled because in this great College's nearly 200 years, there have been just 16 presidents before me. I feel lucky to have served Presidents Ford, White, and Hess. I am grateful for what each of them taught me, and that all three are here today.

Wabash has been my home for over 20 years and few college presidents have the benefit of such a long association with the institution they lead. I come to my office every day thankful for the relationships I have developed here and an appreciation for what Wabash means to its students and alumni. I accept this responsibility and pledge my dedication to the mission and core values of this institution.

A Renewed Commitment to Our Mission

Most of the people in attendance today can recite our College's mission statement by heart: "Wabash College educates young men to think critically, act responsibly, lead effectively, and live humanely." Wabash's late poet-in-residence, Don Baker, when crafting the preamble to the curriculum, added another phrase to our short, effective mission statement: "in a difficult world."

"Wabash educates young men to think critically, act responsibly, lead effectively, and live humanely... in a difficult world."

Professor Baker had seen this difficult world with a decidedly different lens than most of us. A veteran of World War II, he witnessed firsthand the rise and fall of fascism; he saw blood and destruction; nations torn apart; the cost of rebuilding.

I think it's important to contextualize our mission with those four words – "in a difficult world" – because perhaps now, more than ever before, our nation and world, need responsible leaders equipped with critical thinking and effective communication skills – grounded in humanity and with a full and complete understanding our differences.

Think. Act. Lead. Live. In a difficult world.

That is our mission; the reason Wabash exists. I pledge to be true to that mission.



Our Core Values: The Roadmap to Success

The roadmap to achieving the mission of Wabash College can be found in our core values – what we believe. I will not use this auspicious occasion to recite them verbatim, but all of us who love and care about Wabash would be wise to revisit them from time to time – I know that the past 18 months have given me many opportunities to reflect on them.

Some of the things we believe in are:

- A rigorous liberal arts education that fosters an appreciation for the intellectual and physical aspects of a good life and an understanding of, and appreciation for, other cultures.
- A personal context to teaching and learning that encourages candid, respectful, face-to-face conversations and freedom of thought.
- Individual responsibility and trust based on moral and ethical awareness, which are required for leadership and teamwork, and are expressed so eloquently in the Gentleman’s Rule.
- And we especially value a socially, economically, and ethnically diverse student body characterized by a dedication to the serious pursuit of learning.

Making Wabash Accessible for All

It is this last core value – and its relationship our mission – that I wish to reflect on this afternoon. The headwinds facing good small colleges like Wabash are real. Think about the pending “birth dearth” that followed the great recession; the very real population declines in the Northeast and Midwest, where most liberal arts colleges are located; and specific to Wabash, *The Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, and *Forbes* have all published recent articles on the declining number of young men who are enrolling in college.

With these realities front and center, it can seem inevitable that there will be fewer and fewer small, private colleges like Wabash.

This may sound like doom and gloom – not exactly the stuff of an inaugural address – but as I look out and see the faces of my presidential colleagues from the Independent Colleges of Indiana and the Great Lakes College Association, I can tell you that these are the things that keep us up at night. How will we survive in a world with fewer high school graduates and where fewer and fewer families can afford to contribute to the cost of a high-quality education?

I will address the access issue first and then return to the demographic changes.

There is a perception that the rising cost of tuition is the reason that so many students can’t access a private college education. But the truth is that it is a family income problem more than a college cost

problem. Over the past several decades, growth in family income has been concentrated in the wealthiest households, representing only a small percentage of prospective students.

Let me tell you a story about my own experience back in Oregon when I was a college student a little over 30 years ago. I worked hard on a farm in the summer and earned a couple of dollars above minimum wage. By the end of the summer, I had earned about \$5,500 to contribute to my education at Willamette – and that was quite a bit of money in the mid-80s.

What would that look like today? Adjusted for inflation, I would have earned more than \$13,000 this past summer. Can you imagine if students could work hard for one summer to earn \$13,000 to help pay for their education? Sadly, that isn't our present reality.

My family and I were able to pay for a private liberal arts education not because the tuition was lower, but because we could earn more of the tuition. The answer to the college access problem is not free tuition; that's a Band Aid on the real problem. I think the answer is strengthening wages for low- and middle-income families.

This college access problem has been growing for some time, though it gained much more attention after the Great Recession. But I think the demographic shifts in our country are going to force us to address the problem head on if Wabash and other quality liberal arts colleges are to survive and thrive.

We are going to have fewer high school graduates in the coming years and there isn't anything that we can do about that. We simply can't go back in time and change the post-recession birth rates. But demographics don't have to determine our fate. The path forward is challenging, but through outreach and strategic investments, as a College and as a nation, we can increase the percentage of young people enrolling in college.

I believe that the only way to meet our enrollment goals – and our nation's need for an educated society – will be by increasing the number of college-bound young people from groups historically underserved by private higher education: low-income, first-generation, and students of color.

Demography is not destiny. We can chart our own future by making Wabash accessible for the many young men who need us. And just as we have for the past 189 years, we will meet those young men where they are. We will maintain our historic commitment to being an engine of opportunity.

Many of our alumni attending this ceremony today were the first-generation sons of factory workers, farmers, and custodians – from Gary, Hammond, Kokomo, and New Castle – or descendants of coal miners and steel workers in Western Pennsylvania. Many went on to become leaders of business, industry, law, banking, education, scientific research, and the ministry. All they needed was a chance, and Wabash provided it through generous financial aid, a rigorous education, and a community that cared about them as individuals.

I pledge to you today that our commitment to the education of promising young men, regardless of their socioeconomic status, will be the touchstone of my presidency.

Higher Education in Crisis

Mixed in with the newspaper opinion pieces predicting colleges will close are the perhaps even more concerning essays questioning the value of a college education. I hope everyone here today can agree on one thing: Exceptional small colleges like Wabash provide enormous value – value added in exponential proportion to our size.

For example, if you combine the total number of living alumni of, say, Wabash and DePauw, over our nearly 200-year histories, the *total* is far less than the current enrollment at Indiana or Purdue universities. And yet think about the disproportionate number of high-placed graduates of our two tiny colleges in every walk of life – from titans of business to school board presidents; from civil rights leaders to pioneering surgeons. Small colleges make an enormous difference in our communities, our nation, and this world.

So, why are quality liberal arts colleges, with dedicated faculty and staff, loyal alumni, and successful students facing such intense pressures? I already mentioned affordability. Residential liberal arts education, with small classes taught by full-time, tenure-track faculty, and with championship athletics and strong student support networks, are never going to be the low-cost option.

But even more concerning to me is the continued questioning of the *value* of higher education, and in particular, the *devaluing* of the liberal arts and the residential college experience.

These days, prospective students aren't deciding which liberal arts college to attend — Wabash, DePauw, or Franklin — nearly as much as they are deciding between liberal arts colleges and more specialized programs at large universities like Purdue and IU.

My fear is that we are seeing an attitude that higher education is a commodity, that students are consumers, and that colleges and universities are simply delivery networks. I already see some of this even at Wabash, when some people want to bargain over financial aid – or even worse – when I hear someone say, “I pay \$40,000 a year to go here so I deserve X.”

Wabash College runs on relationships, not transactions. The commodification of higher education is dangerous to students. It will be fatal for Wabash College. The reason is that treating higher education as a commodity encourages the unbundling of the college experience into individual components so that the consumers can choose just the pieces they want... and want to pay for.

At Wabash, a philosophy course is not a product to be consumed, independent of other courses, independent of a student's discussions with peers, or independent of conversations and programs sponsored by the Career Center.

Can you possibly put a price on the hundreds of life-changing conversations that Coach Clyde Morgan has with students in any given month? Now multiply that by roughly 250 members of the faculty and staff, not to mention thousands of alumni, who are fully focused on the success of each and every student. That's value for which there is no price tag.

Resilience

I suspect most of you came here expecting a different speech, one filled with uplifting proclamations on our College's future and the power of the liberal arts to make our world better.

Make no mistake, Wabash College is on an enviable trajectory. We understand our mission better than **any** other college I know. The commitment of our faculty, staff, alumni, and friends is **unrivaled**. This campus is a place of beauty. And our endowment, the accumulated philanthropy of generations of giving, is at the highest point in our history.

But I will argue that our greatest asset at this moment in time is our resilience, and the ability it gives us to tackle the hard problems head on.

There may have been a time that "Wabash Always Fights" was simply an athletic slogan, but after more than a year of providing an exceptional residential liberal arts education in the midst of a pandemic, Wabash Always Fights has proven to have much broader relevance. And if you are going to tackle big problems head on, the first thing you have to do is to acknowledge what you are up against. We face real headwinds, but we will face them head on.

I realize that we are all anxious to move on from COVID-19, but it will be tragic if we don't reflect on and learn from our experiences over the past year and a half, as individuals, as a society, and as an institution. Some questions that we could reflect on:

How did we, as a College with little experience with online learning, pivot in a single week during March of 2020 to virtual classes?

How did we, with a one-person Student Health Center, develop a comprehensive test-trace-isolate program that was the envy of much larger schools? And how in the world did we put on a vaccination clinic for students, faculty, staff, and dependents within days of the state making vaccine available?

How did we make study abroad opportunities available for students last year?

How did we find ways to acknowledge the milestone events in our students' lives? How did we put on Chapel Sing? How were we the first school in our league to welcome fans into our athletic contests? How did we offer an in-person commencement for the classes of 2020 and 2021 that their families and friends could attend?

How did we manage through a pandemic without a single layoff or furlough? I think you know why we did that, and why we were one of only two colleges in our peer group that didn't cut employee benefits. Our faculty and staff are the heart of this institution – but our ability to face the same challenges as other institutions but to somehow find a different path forward is a valuable lesson we have learned from the pandemic.

And finally, the question I pondered six weeks ago when I rang in the Class of 2025: How did we recruit a promising class of young men to the College who never experienced a Wabash classroom, a Wabash football game, or an overnight visit on campus?

The keys were exceptional faculty and staff and a shared commitment to mission. But without a Wabash Always Fights attitude, and a willingness to make some bold moves, it never would have happened. These are just a few of the lessons learned that we can apply to the big challenges we face.

Listening to Make Wabash Better

The past year taught us additional lessons that will also serve us well as we move forward. We learned that we must work individually and as a College to be more inclusive, and to understand and work against the ways that racism and other forms of bias keep members of our community from feeling the sense of belonging for which we strive. By doing so, we will make Wabash better and we will assure our future.

One of the goals I set for myself when I began in July of 2020 was to be a better listener, and I have been rewarded with enormous personal growth. I have benefited by attending Chapel Talks, witnessing a moving protest by the young men of the Malcolm X Institute of Black Studies, reading the words of alumni in *Wabash Magazine*, attending Black Studies classes and MXIBS events, listening to thought-leaders like Clint Smith and Jerome Adams, and having many, many conversations with students.

The authenticity and vulnerability members of this community demonstrated through their thoughts, stories, and experiences was literally life-changing for me; they also helped me focus my vision.

I have also benefited from conversations with faculty and staff colleagues, many of which were focused on ideas for programming to make us better and chart our future toward a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable Wabash.

These conversations culminated with the highlight of my first year as president when, early last spring, Lilly Endowment awarded Wabash a series of grants totaling more than \$5.5 million that will fund our innovative “Restoring Hope, Restoring Trust” programs. These grants provide our College unprecedented resources to enhance student success and develop a stronger sense of belonging for all. This is work that touches our entire College, from living units to classrooms, across every office, and out into the broader world.

And, most important, it positions Wabash well to welcome the rising new majority students who, like those young men from Gary, Kokomo, and Pittsburgh half a century ago, are seeking access to a liberal arts curriculum led by a faculty that is engaging and accessible, and to an overall educational program that will give them the support they need to succeed.

In Gratitude

A few years ago, I gave a Chapel Talk to our students midway through my tenure as Dean of the College. I said then – and it’s even more true today – that I’m not too old to adopt a growth mindset, which is the belief that our abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work.

One way that I am trying to grow and adapt to my new role as president is to more fully express my gratitude for the innumerable gifts I have been given here at Wabash and throughout my life. So, every day I try to reflect and express gratitude for the people around me, and to be thankful for the opportunities I’ve been given and for the meaning and challenge in my professional opportunities here at the College.

My optimistic outlook arises from my knowledge that I have been extremely fortunate in life. Yet, over the last two years – as more and more of our interactions with others take place virtually – it has become much easier to fail to acknowledge the efforts of others.

We need to do the small things – the things that remind us of what it means to be a member of a community where people care and appreciate each other. So let me close today by expressing my gratitude.

I’m grateful for my colleagues on the faculty whose work in our best years sets the bar for engaged teaching and learning, and who in the last 18 months literally have bent over backward to meet our students where they are. It is rare in higher education to be surrounded by so many faculty who are genuinely passionate about teaching. All of us who love Wabash thank you for your commitment to our young men.

I’m grateful for my colleagues in the Student Life Office, who every day work directly with students, one on one, to turn their mistakes into opportunities to learn; who lift up, prop up, and sometimes drag students across the finish line here; who care for their healthy minds and bodies; and who have the most difficult jobs on campus in times of tragedy.

I’m grateful for this College’s incredible tradition of philanthropy. In my years as a faculty member and as dean, rarely did I want for resources. Indeed, because of the generosity of our alumni and friends, my students and I were able to explore the world of atoms and molecules in ways that faculty at other institutions could not imagine.

My experience was not unique, nor as innovative as my Wabash faculty colleagues who have literally made the world their classrooms. While immersive learning experiences are not restricted to Wabash, the fact that all of ours are free of charge – whether a student travels to Johannesburg, Taiwan, or Rome – truly sets us apart. It is because of the generosity of our alumni and friends that it is possible for a young man from Wabash to leave our country for the first time. Indeed, for many, these immersion trips mark the first time they have been on an airplane.

I'm equally grateful that during the first, tumultuous years of my presidency, we have set Annual Giving records and our Giant Steps Campaign is thriving.

I'm grateful to the Wabash Board of Trustees, who placed their trust in me at the exact moment the pandemic descended on our nation. As I have said, I am honored to serve as the 17th President of Wabash College. And I am humbled to become the first member of the Wabash faculty to ascend to the presidency since the great Byron Trippet. Thank you, Trustees, for your unwavering faith in Wabash and in my ability to lead our College.

I'm grateful for a loving and supporting family, especially Wendy, who is all-in for Wabash College. Wendy is unflappable and so grounded, and those things help keep me calm when everything else is chaos. Thank you, Wendy, for putting up with my long hours and endless commitments at night and on weekends.

Finally, I'm grateful for our students. Many people in this room have heard me say that none of us wanted COVID to write our history. But I would not have wanted to go through this pandemic anywhere but here and with our young men. When we returned to residential education in early August of 2020 and again two months ago, I asked our students to live up to the highest ideals of our Gentleman's Rule – and a whole lot of COVID mitigation tactics – in the most difficult circumstances.

I asked them to be patient – with themselves and one another; to show compassion to those around them who were also suffering; to be their authentic, best selves even when that was very difficult to do; and I asked them to be vulnerable because it is through our vulnerability that we grow the most.

We did these things with one goal in mind – to continue Wabash's time-honored tradition of face-to-face, elbow-deep teaching and learning that has been our hallmark for nearly two centuries.

I am so proud of what Wabash has accomplished in a constantly changing pandemic that has brought so much uncertainty and loss. And so it is with great admiration that I express my heartfelt gratitude to the young men of Wabash and all who have taught, coached, and supported them. You are all some Little Giants.

In Closing: The Challenges We Will Face Together

We have much to celebrate here at Wabash, because we have proven to be both resilient and innovative in the face of this pandemic. I know we would have far more to celebrate if I could tell you that as we walk out of this stadium that the pandemic is ending. But it is not.

We will draw on everything we have learned over the last 18 months – indeed, over the last 189 years – to strengthen this College and the life-defining opportunities it provides for our students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends.

While we have a clear vision of the kind of College we want Wabash to be as we approach our bicentennial in 2032, it is only through a careful study of – and commitment to – our historic beacons that will allow us to be successful in all that we strive to do.

So let me close by calling on all of us to renew our commitment to good small colleges that boast outsized results.

Let us re-commit to the kind of deeply engaged teaching and learning that positively changes the lives of the young people in our charge.

Let us re-commit to challenging the status quo and building on the innovation that got us through the darkest periods most of us have faced in our lifetimes.

Let us re-commit to our mission to educate young men to think critically, act responsibly, lead effectively, and live humanely in a difficult world.

And let our innovation be informed by our core values – those things that matter most to us – as we commit to educating young men of promise and providing a truly equitable experience for all of our students.

Thank you all for sharing this moment with me and my family. And thank you for all you do for Wabash College.

