Inaugural Address
Becker College President Robert E. Johnson, Ph.D.

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The Challenges of Higher Education and the American Student
In the 21st Century: Preparing for the World Ahead

To Jay Di Geronimo, I want to personally thank you for those kind words and your support throughout my time at Becker College. You are the epitome of leadership and a pleasure to work with as we move this institution forward.

To members of the board of trustees, members of the platform party, faculty, staff, students, the inauguration committee, members of the E.C.A. Becker family, community leaders, family and friends, it is with a humble spirit that I accept the privilege to become the 10th president of Becker College.

To my dear friend for over 30 years, Dr. Emmett Carson, thank you for the warm and memorable introduction. As Morehouse men we are brothers and bonded for life, and for that I am eternally grateful.

I want to thank our supporters here from the community and all of my family and friends who have travelled many miles from across the country to be here today.

First and foremost I want to thank my wife, Michelle, and my son and daughter, Alexander and Jasmine for their love, support, and understanding throughout the years. You cannot imagine the sacrifices they have made for me to stand here today.

They are the anchors that keep me grounded. Michelle, thank you for the personal and professional sacrifices you have made for us to be here today.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge and publicly thank two people who have stood with me my entire life and no matter what, they always believed in me. Mom and Dad, thank you for teaching me the power of believing and positive thinking. You taught me you can accomplish and achieve your dream if you just believe and maintain a positive mental attitude.

No matter what, I always knew there were two people who would stand with me regardless of the challenges. Thank you for helping me to believe.
It is the power of believing in something that is the foundation that Becker College stands on today. It is the power of believing that John Hancock and Samuel Adams had, when they signed the original charter for Leicester Academy in 1784.

Today our Leicester campus sits on those hallowed grounds. Hancock and Adams had just come off of the cusp of the American Revolution, and because they believed in an idea, we now live in the most powerful country in the world.

It is the power of believing that E.C.A. Becker had, who founded our institution. This power of believing is something that will propel Becker College today into the future to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

Becker College is built on a simple idea. It is an idea that we can educate an ordinary person to go out and do extraordinary things. I want to spend the next few moments covering three points.

They are the context of higher education in a global economy, the challenges that confront our industry, and lastly, I want to talk about how our students at Becker can achieve their dreams and go out and do extraordinary things.

First, let’s think about the context of the times we live in. The world is rapidly changing around us. The challenge for us today is to build this college and the higher education industry to meet the needs for the present age.

Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric once said that, “If the rate of change in your institution is slower than the rate of change in the world, then the end is in sight.”

The challenge for Becker College and all of higher education is to make sure that our industry does not have the end in sight. Just think about the context of how higher education has changed in my lifetime.

When I was in college, we used a typewriter to do research papers. I thoroughly remember using Wite-Out to correct my typing. I distinctly remember Dr. Annie Watts, who was my English professor at Morehouse, who did not allow us to use Wite-Out.

One night I was typing a paper and got to the last sentence on the page. I made a mistake and had to retype the whole page because she did not want to see any Wite-Out on the paper. Today software corrects your errors as you are typing, or better yet, you can use voice recognition software to prepare documents.

I had to walk through the stacks at the library to conduct research, and today college students have unprecedented connectivity and access to information worldwide.

Our economy has gone global and it is rare that a person will graduate from college today and work for the same company their entire career.
According to the department of labor and some futurists, college graduates today could have 10 to 14 different jobs by the age of 38. Seven of the top 10 jobs today did not exist in 2004.

The global economy is trying to find a new normal and equilibrium that is causing some winners and losers.

The world is becoming flatter as it relates to information and communication and the innovation of new technologies is increasing at an exponential rate.

Going back to Jack Welch’s earlier quote, is the rate of change of higher education keeping pace with the rate of change in a global economy? Is higher education agile enough?

Higher education is at this interesting crossroad when you consider the context of our times. We have essentially gone back to a pre-World War II higher education of system of haves and have nots.

Sure anyone can go to college today, but at what price? If you do not come from a wealthy family, the amount of student loan debt potentially incurred can be staggering.

When a college graduate finishes school they can spend the first 10 or 15 years of their life paying back student loans. Sometimes they cannot buy a house or a new car because of the debt. Many times, they have student loan payments higher than some people’s mortgage payments.

Then they go on to start a family, and because of their student loan debt, they cannot save for their kids’ college education. So the cycle starts all over again with their children who have to borrow to attend college.

Please be clear, there is significant value in attaining a college degree. According to the Census Bureau, a person with a college degree will earn a million dollars more over their career than the person with a high school diploma. A master’s degree and professional degree will reap $1.5 million and $3.4 million more, respectively, over a lifetime.

However, according to the Department of Education, we are on the precipice of student loan debt topping over one trillion dollars. Student loan debt in this country will soon exceed credit card debt. It is potentially the next big bubble that could burst.

At the same time, our middle class as we have known it is disappearing. The new normal is wiping out people who work in Middle America. One of my dear friends I attended high school with in Detroit is such an example.

Right after high school he got a job in the factory at Ford Motor Company. He married someone who also worked in the factory. Each with a high school diploma, they collectively
earned almost $200,000 dollars a year with overtime. They lived in the suburbs, had a summer home, and sent their kids to private K-12 school and college with no student loan debt.

Four years ago, I received a call from him and he said, Robert, what I am going to do? He and his wife both lost their job at Ford. The plant they worked at closed down. At that time, they were 47 years old. Where could they go and get jobs to earn almost $200,000 a year with a high school diploma?

If they had gone back to college, they would have been 50 years old when they graduated. And if they found a job, they would be starting at entry level, making $30,000-$40,000, if they were lucky.

They are typical of how the new normal has impacted many Americans in a global economy.

I tell this story to help set the context of how the industry of higher education is being challenged today. My two friends could be the parents of any student attempting to go to college in 2011 and for years to come.

Globalization will persist, and the middle class as we know it will to continue to shrink. The state of higher education is challenged and at a crossroad. What I have described is the world that I, along with other college presidents, have to lead our institutions of higher learning through.

I believe we can and will meet the challenges of the present age. However, it will not be easy. We cannot solve 21st century higher education problems with 19th and 20th century solutions.

We cannot operate institutions that were created for an agrarian and mass production economy and, in some instances, have not changed, and expect them to compete in a 21st century knowledge-driven global society without shifting our paradigm.

We cannot pretend that public policy has already decided that our industry is no longer a public good.

We cannot pretend that the only way our students can learn in the classroom is from a lecture, when they use interactive tools like iPads and iPhones as way of life.

I could take my cell phone out of my pocket and call my two kids right now, and they would not answer the phone. I could send them a text message or communicate via facebook or Twitter and get an instant response.

When was the last time you saw a phone booth? How many of you read your newspaper online? When you are in the mood for some music, do you fire up one of those old 45 vinyl records, or do you plug in your iPod?
Our industry cannot act as if there is not a new normal in the world and it does not affect us. The world has changed and we must change too.

Unfortunately, not enough of us understand that we must change our paradigm or many of our institutions will close.

As I look to the future, I envision a higher education system that is globally competitive, technologically advanced, and is second to none.

Please note that McKinsey and Company reported that 95% of all students attending college are not attending the elite institutions like Harvard, Stanford and Yale. The elite institutions will be around for centuries to come. But they do not educate most college students.

If the majority of institutions do not adjust to the new normal that is taking place, and change at a more rapid pace, then for some, in the words of Jack Welch, “the end is in sight.”

I am optimistic and believe our industry, and Becker College, will change with the times. It should not be our vision to emulate other institutions. Our goal must be to reinvent ourselves as an innovative college that prepares students for a 21st century global economy using 21st century tools to accomplish that end.

Our students need to create a personal brand that enables them to work as free agents in a competitive global knowledge economy.

Whether America decides higher education is a public good or not, we must pick up the mantle of quality, excellence, and innovation and boldly ensure that this industry reinvents itself and meets the needs of present and future generations.

John Hancock and Samuel Adams fought for an idea that is the embodiment of the American dream. We must believe in the industry of higher education and fight to ensure that we do not just live in the moment, but that we lift up our industry and create the history of today that leaders of tomorrow will be proud of.

The speed of change will continue to accelerate. There were 2.4 billion monthly users of Google in 2006. Today there are over 31 billion monthly users. It does make you wonder, what did we do before Google?

Globalization is a challenge and an opportunity. The question is, will we seize the moment? Will we believe in something bigger than ourselves?

Will we continue to believe in a simple idea that a college education is a public good and can create a better way of life?

Will we fight to make sure our industry is relevant to the meet the needs of the present age?
I assert we must connect our minds to the marketplace.

The pace of change is quick. We are literally educating students for jobs that do not yet exist and to solve problems we have not yet defined. We must be innovative and creative in this environment focused on outcomes and accountability.

Nationally, we have a broken K-12 system that does not adequately prepare students for college or the world ahead. We must reinvent our model of higher education to address this challenge.

The value proposition of higher education is broken. We must find a new equilibrium that adds value and clearly articulates the industry’s role as a public good.

As we press forward at Becker College, we must understand our role in the context of the times we are living. We must not be ahistorical. We must examine the continuum of time—past, present, and future.

This is a tipping point in the industry. We must be vigilant, and we must believe that we shall make a difference.

Since our humble beginnings as an institution, at Becker College we have believed in the basic notion of the individual student and their ability to achieve success. Our challenge today, and in the future, is to never stop believing that each person can make a difference and achieve their dream.

I would like to take just a moment to talk to the students. To the students at Becker, please understand that each of you are a part of something bigger than yourselves. All of the people here today believe in you and so do I.

I can tell you from personal experience the power of believing and the power of having someone to believe in you. I would like to close my remarks today with this personal story about how, in part, my character was shaped and what can happen when someone believes in you.

[Insert “mama’s story”]

What I learned from my parents, which is the embodiment of the Becker College spirit, now and in the future is:

Don't be discouraged by the times and the trends.

Don't be disheartened by the giants.
Don't be stopped by the stones.
Don't be frightened by the opposition.
Don't be intimidated by the mountain.
Don't be defeated by the difficulties of life.

Students, what I discovered, is that when you know someone believes in you,

The giants can't crush you.
The stones can't stop you.
The bricks can't break you.
The rocks can't kill you.
Trouble can't defeat you.
And disappointment can't destroy you.

When you know someone believes in you, you will discover that:

There's not a difficulty that perseverance can't master.
There's not a mountain that determination can't move.
There's not a door that hard work can't open.
There's not a problem that believing can't change.
There's not a sickness that God can't heal.
There's not a prayer that God can't answer.
There's not a wall that love can't level.
There's not a burden that faith can't carry.
There's not a sorrow that time can't remove.

If you just believe in the human spirit, you will understand that:
You've got tough equipment; you've got the right stuff to face any problem and to deal with any challenge.

My parents taught me that:

God's grace is sufficient.
His salvation is unrestricted.
His deliverance is undeniable.
His truth is irrefutable.
His word is indisputable.
His presence is unavoidable.
His goodness is unchangeable.
His power is unconquerable.
His fire is inextinguishable.
His work is unstoppable.
His light is indestructible.

All you have to do is believe.
Don't cry, just believe.
Don't complain, just believe.
Don't cop out, just believe.
Don't drop out, just believe.

When you go home and your family won't treat you right,
When you go back to school and the load gets heavy; don't fuss, don't fume, don't quit.
When your enemies do you wrong, don't repay wrong with wrong, but repay evil with good.
If you lose your job, don't lose your joy.
If you lose your health, don't lose your hope.
If you lose your money, don't lose your meaning.
If you lose your loved one, hold on to God's love.
If your home is broken, don't let your spirit be broken.

Just believe in the human spirit and know that:
If you have a hard way to go, walk by faith.
If you have a problem, work with it until your work is done.
If you have a misunderstanding, settle it.
If they laugh at you, keep smiling.
If they talk about you, keep believing.
If they hate you, keep loving.
If they knock you down, get up believing that you are the embodiment of the Becker spirit and that you will never, ever give up!

Thank you, and I wish you all Godspeed!