Oracles and Odysseys

THE ROAD TO A PRESIDENCY,
THE PATH TO EXCELLENCE

By Archon Robert Johnson, Sigma Boulé

In March 2010 Archon Robert Johnson was appointed the tenth president of Becker College, which has campuses in Worcester and Leicester, Massachusetts, after a seven-month nationwide search. He arrived at the college with his family in June 2010 and officially took on the responsibilities of president in July of that year. A presidential inauguration ceremony will take place at Mechanics Hall in Worcester on September 16, 2011.

As I write this, I am looking forward to my inauguration as the tenth president of Becker College, an institution with two campuses in Massachusetts that traces its history back to 1784. Samuel Adams and John Hancock signed the charter of the college’s first incarnation, as Leicester Academy. The Reverend Samuel May House, which stands on the Leicester campus, is an authenticated stop on the Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. The Worcester campus sits on the site of the former Worcester Agricultural Fairgrounds, where the first perfect game in professional baseball was pitched. These historic milestones gave me a broad perspective upon which to take my first steps as a college president.

When I graduated from Morehouse College, my destination was not higher education. My aim was to go into business, to learn how to make money and to use it to change the world. I worked my way up to vice president of Ohio Works, a company providing employment services, when Dr. Arthur Thomas at Central State University saw in me something that I did not see in myself. He recognized my spirit, and he gave me an important opportunity to further my education. I returned to school, and I have not looked back.

I am bullish on America and believe in the “Yes, we can” attitude. I have found that human spirit at Becker College. We inherit our core values and work ethic from our parents, and we learn it from role models and from heroes. My dad taught me to work hard, not to feel entitled, not to quit or use excuses, and not to walk over others. If you want something and are willing to work to achieve it, go for it, and it will come. My heroes were my Uncle Bob, who was associate publisher and executive editor of Jet magazine; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; and Sun Tzu, who wrote The Art of War. In higher education, we are the role models; I want to encourage educators to be learners and thus, I hope, heroes to our students.
Today it is my aim to set students on the path to become twenty-first–century global citizens. Community is no longer our block or our neighborhood. Today community means continents.

Part of my vision of a global citizen is someone who lives the values of academic excellence, social responsibility and creative expression; someone who values education and is a lifelong learner; and someone who thinks in terms of possibilities, not limitations. It may sound trite, but one person can change the world. In a constantly connected world, that kind of change happens every day, in small and tremendous ways – just as Internet activist Wael Ghonim used technology to open the door to new freedoms in Egypt. It is easier than ever before to chat with and work with people across the globe without leaving home. This contact affects how we interact and allows us to grow in new ways. And I say that this is part of my vision because, just as society is evolving at an ever-quickening pace, the values that make a global citizen will also continue to evolve.

As the marketing guru Seth Godin points out in his book *Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?*, much of higher education is still churning out graduates with a factory mentality, but those jobs where we do what we are told, work at the same place for decades and retire are long gone. From kindergarten, and unfortunately even in college, education has historically discouraged genius. Godin makes the bold statement that we all have genius. We just need the courage to act on it, to fail and to try again – all of us, not just an extraordinary few. The top-ten jobs in demand today did not even exist six years ago, and many of today’s students will have worked at ten to fourteen different jobs by age 38. Education is the great equalizer; it is the responsibility of higher education to take people with ordinary backgrounds and help them become extraordinary in their chosen professions.

Social responsibility is part of the vernacular of today’s graduates, more than at any other time since the Civil Rights Era. It touches every part of our lives today, from religion to recycling. It is the charge of higher education to hone students’ perception of social responsibility. Graduates can no longer just go out and get a job; they must figure out how to create more jobs.

In order to lead this sort of extraordinary life, we must teach, encourage and nurture creative expression. We need this license to allow our genius to flourish, because creativity is not just about art. In the twenty-first century, we can all learn to be artists, to pick up the tools around us – technology, science, commerce, education – and become entrepreneurs.

I was attracted to Worcester by this challenge of preparing career-oriented students for life in a global society. I value the people and the great sense of community that allows practical, hands-on instruction in an intimate environment. Becker’s relatively small size means that there is significant potential for growth, not just in its numbers but also in its position as a leader in this brand of higher education. This is a defining moment for all of us.

I am honored and energized to count myself among a developing new guard of college presidents with an eye on innovation. The process of change has been, and must continue to be, informed by education and experience, but in these times we are in need of something more. In words that are antiquated and yet still instruct today, Abraham Lincoln, upon signing the Morrill Act, which provided for the establishment of state land-grant colleges, said, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise – with the occasion. As our case is new, so must we think anew, and act anew.” And I say, when have the American people, when the situation called for it, not risen to the occasion and triumphed?