Good morning and welcome to all of you: our students, faculty, and staff. It is a great pleasure and a distinct honor to officially open the 2014-2015 academic year.

I have remarked in other settings - including this very occasion one year ago - that our opening convocation serves not just as a way to officially open a new academic year, but also as an important balance to the formal ceremonies we use to close the academic year.

Opening convocation, along with baccalaureate and commencement, serves as a way to mark the passage of time according to the academic calendar - to mark the seasons of our lives while we are here, whether that’s 2 or 3 or 4 years as a student, or 20 or 30 or 40 years as a member of the faculty or staff. In any case, that formality, that connection to academic tradition, is an important part of our academic community and is reflected in the wearing of our academic regalia, the processional music coming in and, in a little while, the recessional music in going out.

And so while Opening Convocation is distinctive, it is not the only convocation program you’ll be encouraged to attend this year. Convocation comes from a Latin word meaning “to call or come together”, and the College offers many opportunities for you to “come together” throughout the year to listen and learn and engage with each other and with a diverse group of invited guests who come to campus. These programs don’t just happen, they take a lot of work. Dr. Pierson, with help from a great many people, has put together another outstanding year of convocation programs. And the work isn’t over - all of the logistics involved in bringing outside speakers to campus and making sure all the individual programs go off without a hitch will keep Dr. Pierson and his student interns, among others, busy all year.

Not every college invests this much effort in a program like this. So why do we do it? Well, there are many ways of answering, but they all depend on this: Bridgewater College is an academic community committed to liberal learning to empower and motivate our students to live educated, healthy, purposeful and ethical lives in a global society. Our goal here is to prepare you to live well. That’s the basis of our mission statement and it’s the animating force behind everything we do.
Think about that for a second. We are a community - we live and learn and work and play together. Our lives - your lives - are and will be lived in communities - local, national, global. We do things together, we take care of each other. And in this special community, this academic community we call BC, we learn together, with and from each other. So “coming together” in convocations of all kinds is an integral part of our core mission. You’ll come together in classes and in labs, certainly, but we believe that learning should not, and cannot, be limited to the classroom. You’ll come together every day in many ways outside the classroom, and every single one of these will be a learning opportunity. And convocation programs are a big part of this. They are a great way to engage new and different ideas, things you may already care deeply about, or things you’ve never even thought of before. Coming together helps foster, helps strengthen, our academic community.

In really important ways, that’s what liberal learning - a liberal arts education - is all about. I’m sure you’ve heard that a liberal arts education will make you well-rounded. Maybe you’ve said it yourself. At one time or another, I suppose all of us have. But I want to ask you for a favor: please don’t ever say it again! It’s not that it’s wrong, it’s just that it dramatically understates the value of a liberal arts education and really misses the point. Being well-rounded isn’t a bad thing, but it just sounds so superficial. Liberal learning is meant to be liberating. It’s aim is to free you from the constraints of a single time or place. It’s meant to free you from only thinking about things the way they’ve always been done. It’s meant to free you to think for yourself, instead of depending on someone else to do it for you. All of this requires an exploration of different disciplines and different ways of asking and answering questions. The reason you end up being well-rounded is because you will study and learn in many different subject areas. But the goal isn’t to just accumulate a little bit of information from many different sources, the goal is put ideas and ways of thinking and habits of mind together in ways that will empower you to live a life of meaning, a life of purpose.

This liberal learning is a kind of journey. It takes time, and it takes effort. And as with any journey, it is greatly aided by the presence of an experienced guide. Guides do not - and cannot - take the journey for you, but they do walk with you. They can’t prevent you from taking some wrong turns, but because they’re experienced and have taken wrong turns themselves, they can help you learn from the mistakes and get back on the path. Your guides are sitting right here in caps and gowns. They are your teachers, your mentors, and in many cases, your friends. And
they are all here because they believe deeply in the importance and value of the journey, and want to share that journey with you.

We use - and you will hear - many words describing this journey of liberal learning. Words like mastery, engagement, and service, around which our new general education curriculum is fashioned, and which provide a context for thinking about connections between the courses you take. Academic Citizenship and the Big Question and finding a Voice - words that help explain the framework in which you develop the skills and attitudes and habits of mind that are central to engaged citizenship, to professional success, and to personal fulfillment. Goodness, Truth, Beauty and Harmony - words that come directly from the College seal - and describe a holistic education, of mind, body and spirit, and a shared mission committed to pursuing truth, to living lives tempered by beauty, to aspiring to goodness, and to nurturing harmony in our communities and our lives.

Why do we spend so much time and effort and use so many words in describing and living this journey? Why is it so important? Make no mistake, we believe that your economic success can be enhanced because of an education grounded in the liberal arts tradition. But your financial independence is just a part of a much bigger picture. Our democracy cannot flourish, economically or otherwise, in the absence of an educated citizenry. The challenges we face at the local, national and global levels require a holistic perspective and the products of liberal learning. We need to ask not just what can be done and how to do it, but also what should be done and how best to do it. The challenges we see around us, the ones that command our attention and fuel our worry, demand the education and attention of engaged citizens. This is the nature of the world we live in, the world you will be tasked with leading. So why do we care so much about what we do here? Why do we care so much about your success? Because the stakes are high and the rewards are great, and, maybe, we truly have been called for a moment such as this.

I read a nice essay by Cornell University’s director of IT policy, Tracy Mitrano, last week that captured pretty well the sentiments that most of us would want to share with our students at the start of a new academic year. And since this is the official start to the academic year, fresh with opportunity and full of possibility, it seems appropriate to share her words of advice and encouragement:
**Make it count.** A residential college experience like ours is a learning experience in many ways, both in and out of the classroom. Work hard, have fun. Stay on top of your courses and don’t wait until the last minute to write a paper or cram for a test. Try to imagine your work for the whole semester is a big pile of bricks that needs to be moved. If you wait until the very end of the semester to start to move the pile, you won’t be able to do it and you’ll break your back trying. If you move a few bricks at a time, though, a little bit every day, by the end of the semester the work is done.

**Try new things.** Don’t stay in your “comfort zone” - with friendships, academics or co-curricular activities. New experiences can change your life and open doors that you don’t even know exist.

**Be a good citizen.** Remember that you are a member of an academic community: Observe the rules including, and especially, those regarding Academic Integrity and our Code of Conduct. Act with integrity and respect.

**Think for yourself.** Develop personal autonomy and voice while living your life here.

Finally, and maybe most importantly: Be engaged and participate in this process. Although it is labeled college, this is the beginning of your adult life.

So you’ve been a very attentive and polite audience, and for that I thank you. Some of you, though, have probably been looking at your program and wondering why was this talk was titled “Practice?” I’ve already spoken over 1600 words, but until that last sentence, “practice” wasn’t one of them. You can probably imagine where I’m going, but bear with me for a minute. “Practice” can be used as a noun or a verb. As a verb, it means to **perform an activity or exercise a skill repeatedly or regularly in order to maintain or improve one's proficiency.** As a noun, it means **the actual application or use of an idea or method as opposed to theories about such application or use.**

Very few people are good at anything the first time they try it. This is especially true for things that are difficult or uncomfortable. And even if they are good the first time through, they can almost always get better. There aren’t many things more difficult or occasionally uncomfortable as becoming educated. It’s hard work and there are no shortcuts. Sometimes I wish I could just sit on my bike and get more fit or just imagine hitting a golf ball and improve my game. But it doesn’t work that way. I actually have to **do the thing** to get better at it - and no one can do it for
me. The same is true for this journey of liberal learning that we are embarking on together as a new academic year opens. Each of us must engage it directly and with perseverance if we are to get good or get better at it. We must perform, or exercise, the skills and habits of mind of educated people, of engaged citizens. We must practice. It will be hard, but one advantage of an academic community like ours is that we are here to help each other. And in everything we do, we ought to demonstrate the actual use of the ideas and methods we know to be so valuable. This is a best practice for living.

So my request of you is to reflect with great care this year on everything we do together in our academic community and employ “practice” as both a noun and a verb when it comes to your education.

Remember: practice makes perfect.

Thank you.