

## **Life is full of choices**

Keynote address by *Dr. Susan Harrison*

Alpha Lambda Delta & Phi Eta Sigma  
National Academic Honor Societies for First Year Students  
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Students, colleagues, parents, family and friends – what an exciting day this is in the lives of the 248 first year initiates! I remember my excitement in graduate school the day I was inducted into one of the nation's oldest honor societies, Phi Kappa Phi. It means just as much to me today to have the privilege of becoming an Honorary member of Alpha Lambda Delta and Phi Eta Sigma. To the sophomore executive board of students who selected me for this honor, I say thank you.

### **SCHOLARSHIP**

Initiates, it is because of the choices you made this year as freshmen that you are being recognized today for your academic excellence and for your scholarship. You choose to study at times when others played. You choose to actively engage in learning in class when others sat gazing off in the distance. You choose to face the challenges of difficult courses, when others dropped out.

A Chinese Proverb states that: A nation's treasure is in its scholars. (1)

You, as young freshmen, are our nation's treasures, our nation's current and future scholars.

I want to encourage you today, just as the Apostle Paul encouraged a young man named Timothy. Do not let anyone think less of you because you are young, make the right choices, be an example to all in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your integrity. (2)

As J.K. Rowling writes in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* – "It is our choices...that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." (3)

Since life is full of choices, you will have many more opportunities to show what you truly are.

My choice is to strive to maintain a high standard of excellence in all aspects of my teaching, my scholarship, and other forms of my work. That choice is based on my beliefs and my desire to follow the Apostle Paul's challenge to the Colossians: In "whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men." (4)

It is my choice, in whatever I do, to work at it with all my heart.

It is my choices, grounded in what I believe, that help define who I am.

It is your choices, grounded in what you believe, that will help define who you are.

It will be through your choice to stretch yourself, to reach out, to dig deeper into each subject, to search for the truth, and to engage in learning, that will help make you a great scholar and a great leader.

As John F. Kennedy was prepared to say in a speech to be given in Dallas the day of his assassination: "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other. " (5)

## LEADERSHIP

The web site for this society states that the outstanding academic achievement of members of this society combined with their leadership experience has led many members to greater leadership roles in student organizations, university committees and national student-at-large positions. (6)

Our 33<sup>rd</sup> president, Harry Truman said, "Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better." (7)

It is your choice whether or not to take advantage of the various leadership opportunities available to you and to change things for the better, to demonstrate leadership, rather than talk about it.

According to Harold Geneen, Chairman of ITT, "leadership is practiced not so much in words as in attitude and in actions. " (8)

Let me illustrate with a story allegedly based on truth. Sometime, close to a battlefield over 200 years ago, a man in civilian clothes rode past a small group of exhausted battle-weary soldiers digging an obviously important defensive position. The section leader, making no effort to help, was shouting orders, threatening punishment if the work was not completed within the hour.

"Why are you are not helping?" asked the stranger on horseback.

"I am in charge. The men do as I tell them," said the section leader, adding, "Help them yourself if you feel strongly about it."

To the section leader's surprise the stranger dismounted and helped the men until the job was finished.

Before leaving the stranger congratulated the men for their work, and approached the puzzled section leader.

"You should notify top command next time your rank prevents you from supporting your men - and I will provide a more permanent solution," said the stranger.

Up close, the section leader now recognized the stranger as General Washington; he also recognized the lesson he'd just been taught. (9)

Great leaders, through their attitude and actions, encourage others and show respect for all, regardless of age, rank, race, or beliefs.

Great leaders make the right choices; do the right things.

According to Peter Drucker, the founder of modern management, "management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things." (10)

In the story, George Washington chose to do the right thing.  
Our 1<sup>st</sup> President, George Washington, was a great leader.

I like The Message's version of the golden rule: "Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them." (11)

As future leaders you can choose to take the initiative; you can choose to do the right thing, and serve others – which brings us to the third focus of this society... service.

## SERVICE

As a member of this society, you will have many opportunities to work with and meet other outstanding students in chapter service projects.

Robert Collier, author of selfhelp books says: "The great thing is the start - to see an opportunity for service, and to start doing it, even though in the beginning you serve but a single customer - and him for nothing." (12)

Collier's statement reminds me of a story of a small boy walking along a beach at low tide, where countless thousands of small sea creatures, had been washed up. They were stranded and doomed to perish. A man watched as the boy picked up individual creatures and took them back into the water.

"I can see you're being very kind," said the watching man, "But there must be a million of them; it can't possibly make any difference."

Returning from the water's edge, the boy said, "It will for that one." (13)

Our 30<sup>th</sup> President, Calvin Coolidge, said, "No person was ever honored for what he received. Honor has been the reward for what he gave." (14)

Giving of one's self by seeing an opportunity for service, and doing it, even though you may serve but a single person, expecting nothing in return – is in itself, the great reward.

To be able to serve my students who struggle with mathematics and to watch the "light bulbs come on" as they understand difficult concepts for the first time is, for me, a great reward.

To be able to serve my university by working on committees, leading the University Senate, answering colleagues questions, researching policies, and developing more efficient procedures is, for me, a great honor.

It is my choice to serve – it is my choice to give wholeheartedly of my time and talents and serve with excellence.

I have found that when I choose to serve beyond what is expected of me, I reap rewards far greater than what I could have imagined.

## CLOSING

I close with one final story.

During Thomas Jefferson's presidency he and a group of travelers were crossing a river that had overflowed its banks. Each man crossed on horseback fighting for his life. A lone traveler watched the group traverse the treacherous river and then asked President Jefferson to take him across. The president agreed without hesitation, the man climbed on the President's horse, and the two made it safely to the other side of the river where somebody asked the man: "Why did you select the President to ask this favor?" The man was shocked, admitting he had no idea it was the President of the United States who had carried him safely across. "All I know," he said, "is that on some of your faces was written the answer 'No' and on some of them was the answer 'Yes.' His was a 'Yes' face." (15)

I challenge you to make the choice to have a "YES" face – to be a leader who others can turn to – to be a willing servant who others can reach out to – to be the one who makes the right choices.

Life IS FULL of choices.

I challenge you, our newest members, to take time to determine what you believe. Hold fast to those beliefs and use them to guide your choices that will ultimately help define who you are. I wish you nothing but the best. Thank you.

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