

Convocation Address

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“Thank you, Morgan for that gracious introduction. And thanks to all of our students, faculty and staff who put together today’s ceremony and our audience and special guests. And welcome to the class of 2022! It is my pleasure to be beginning my tenure here at Salisbury University just as you are, and probably with as much trepidation, anxiety and excitement.

As you get to know this campus, I think you will find that everyone here has a vested interest in helping you to be successful. So, do not hesitate to reach out, to ask questions and to offer your support to the other new students among you. This is a challenging time for all of us; the degree to which we get to know each other and assist each other will certainly make the journey easier and more fun!

As most of you know, today we will begin your exploration through a new student reflection following this ceremony. This is also a new exercise for us and we hope it will provide a valuable shared experience which allows you to get to know each other, engage with members of the campus community, and spur your creativity and imagination. Mostly, it’s an opportunity to listen carefully and learn

from the voices of others who may have a completely different set of beliefs and experiences from your own.

As we prepare for the new Fall 2018 semester, I have been giving some thought to an important question: **How do we know what we know?**

For help with this question, we can turn to the ancient philosophers. Aristotle and Plato regarded truth as experiential; in other words: seeing is believing. Plato believed that Absolute Truth was not observable directly, and that our reality is shaped by our observations of “shadows” cast by the light of Truth. Aristotle was a student of Plato, and he is widely regarded as the father of the modern scientific method. Aristotle believed that we can conduct “experiments” to come ever closer to discovering Truth, but that we can never see it completely.

Before modern technology, our experiential world was limited to the short distance covered by our five senses. In order to know anything that occurred over the horizon, we had to rely on others to tell us. This requires **trust**.

Forty-five years ago, I was sitting where you are sitting, just entering my first year of college at U.Va. My world was expanding rapidly by the popularization of television. Nevertheless, my generation had few authorities. The trusted authorities in my life consisted of my parents, my teachers and the news media. There were only three channels on TV; four if you could get PBS on UHF.

But in today's Internet Age, there are hundreds of channels on TV. There are thousands of news media outlets, and millions of voices on the Internet. The length of the news cycle is measured in minutes and seconds, the cost of mistakes or misrepresentation is close to zero, and the emergence of fake news as a way of generating advertising revenue should be a reminder that the messages we receive every day are not necessarily devoted to the pursuit of truth. They may instead be driven by the pursuit of commerce or even more nefarious motives such as social disruption.

How can we sort out the truth?

First, we must choose our authorities carefully. Make sure that getting the story right is part of their business model. Seek a variety of authentic sources that play to different audiences. Be mindful of conflicts of interest such as advertisers, donors, and political pressures.

Second, take a deep breath. Sometimes just thinking about something for a minute before repeating or retweeting it can reveal whether or not it passes the "smell test." Sometimes a more careful examination is required, because some of the most compelling lies contain the grain of truth that sucks us in emotionally.

Third, always be willing to consider an alternative viewpoint. Several months ago, I met a Russian man on an airplane. We struck up a conversation, and I asked him

about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. To my astonishment, he said that the Western accounts were a complete hoax. He said that the purported invasion NEVER HAPPENED.

For the first time, I realized that this was a reasonable conclusion given the sources of information this person had. My version of the truth was formed by Western journalism. But consider that neither of us had witnessed the event first-hand. We are all products of our information streams!

Finally, learn how to connect the dots. Know the difference between data, information and knowledge. Data are facts or statistics collected for reference or analysis. Information is a sequence of facts and data presented in a particular sequence for the purpose of learning something about something or someone. But knowledge is deeper. Knowledge is a practical or theoretical understanding of a subject gained through experience, education or discovery.

Evaluate new information in the context of what you already know to be true. Does it pass the smell test? How likely is it to be true given other known facts, motives, and historical context? Can it be corroborated independently by a trusted source?

Before the Information Age, we had the luxury of assuming that what we were told by authorities was the truth, and only had the obligation to look deeper if doubts were raised by another authority. Now there are few reliable authorities, and everyone has adverse motives and conflicts of interest. We have rapidly made the following progression involving **trust**:

First, there was Walter Cronkite. He was the anchor of the CBS Evening News for nearly 20 years in the 1960's and 70's. Walter Cronkite was widely regarded as the most trusted man in America. He ended every newscast by saying "...and that's the way it is." And you could take that to the bank.

Next, there was Ronald Reagan. Reagan popularized the phrase, "Trust, but verify." This was used mainly in the context of negotiating nuclear arms reduction talks. The idea was that you can take people at their word at first, but it is important to have independent verification that those people are living up to their promises. Interestingly, the phrase "Trust, but verify" comes from an old Russian proverb. It actually sounds better in Russian: "Devoryai, no prevoryai."

And finally, we have Vladimir Putin, who recently said, "Trust no one." At the recent Helsinki press conference, Putin responded to a reporter's question by saying, "As to who is to be believed, who is not to be believed, you can trust no one. Where did you get this idea that President Trump trusts me or I trust him?"

He defends the interests of the United States of America. I do defend the interests of the Russian Federation.”

Putin didn't mean that we literally should trust no one. Nobody can survive in today's complicated world without having at least a few trusted advisors. But I'm certain that he did mean “trust no one completely” or perhaps “be sure to understand the context and limitations of the trust that you invest in people.”

I believe that sometimes we have to be comfortable with ambiguity. Sometimes, we have to be content with NOT knowing everything, even when others think that they do. When confronted with people whose deeply held beliefs are diametrically opposed to our own, we sometimes risk standing toe-to-toe with them and shouting past each other. In these cases, my mother's advice is to look the other person in the eye and say, “You may be right.”

And this may be one of the toughest lessons to learn and employ: you do not always have to be right. You can agree to disagree or simply digest the information that others give and do your own reflection. In the end you may stick to your initial beliefs or change what you originally thought. But regardless of the outcome, you will have grown as an individual because you heard and considered another opinion; that alone will grow your perspective and make you more open for change and growth moving forward. You will have learned **empathy**.

As you begin your time at SU, you may feel overwhelmed by varying sources of information and opinions. It will be a critical part of your development to sort through those as you form your own belief system and get to know yourself better. And that's what this time in your life is all about. So, I urge you to be open and flexible, to take everything in and learn and grow every day. There will always be uncertainty in your life; but your efforts to seek out and grow knowledge will go a long way in diminishing any uncertainty you may feel. I wish you well at this exciting time and encourage you to make the most of every day at Salisbury University. Welcome and good luck!"