



Inaugural Address

Dr. Tim Borchers
38th President of West Liberty University
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The Power of Aspiration

As Prepared for Delivery

Exactly one year ago today, I responded to an email inviting me to campus to interview for the Presidency. I had done quite a bit of homework, so I knew you were the Hilltoppers, I knew what academic programs you offered, and I knew you had a pretty good basketball team.

I didn't know that the roads to campus were so curvy, that the deer eat everything in sight or that I would so quickly feel at home on the Hilltop.

I stand before you today proud to be your President and committed to working with you to provide the best possible education for our students.

Aristotle classified the type of speech I'm about to give as epideictic. Today we may call it ceremonial. Aristotle said that these speeches are concerned about the present, but that they recall the past and make guesses at the future (*On Rhetoric*).

An inauguration ceremony provides the perfect opportunity to reflect on the past, celebrate the present, and communicate a vision for the future.

With Gratitude

I must begin by offering my gratitude for your support over the past nine months.

I have enjoyed meeting so many community members who have been open to discussions and partnerships. And I think I've only paid for a couple of lunches since July.

I welcome today delegates from regional institutions.

The West Liberty faculty and staff have engaged in thoughtful conversations and provided meaningful feedback. I've appreciated their participation in important initiatives.

My Cabinet members have provided counsel, advice and quite a few laughs.

To the Board of Governors, thank you for your support and confidence in my leadership.

Our Foundation Board has provided leadership in raising funds to support the University and its mission. Thank you.

Whenever I meet an alum of West Liberty, I can see in their eyes the pride they have for the institution and the devotion they have for it. Welcome to all alums here today.

I've been inspired by our students and would like to acknowledge their attendance and support today. I offer a special thanks to the Resident Assistants for their help with the ceremony today and to the members of our band and choir for their performances today. Students, we are here for your success, but you inspire me every day.

Please take a moment to review your programs to review the names of all of those involved in this week's events, including a very hard-working Inauguration Committee.

In particular, I am so fortunate to work with Cyndi Galloway, Executive Assistant to the President. She is usually one step ahead of me and works so well with all of our stakeholders. Thank you, Cyndi.

I'm happy that several former colleagues have been able to join us today. I also have family members on hand including my parents and sister and Susanne's dad and his wife.

Our son, Oliver, has joined us today from Denver, where he is finishing graduate school.

Finally, to my wife Susanne, I offer my thanks and appreciation. Your support has been unwavering, your service selfless, and your commitment to West Liberty total and complete. I wouldn't be standing here today without your support. And thanks for painting the house door yellow.

Please join me in thanking all of these individuals and groups.

Aspirations and Hope

You may be wondering about the theme for this week and today's ceremony: The Power of Aspiration. Here's the backstory.

This fall, we launched a new marketing campaign. As part of the discovery process, our marketing firm presented several options. We shared these ideas with our students for their feedback so that we would choose the best idea. "Aspire to Greatness" was the overwhelming choice of our students. This concept resonated

with them and became the basis for our campaign. Perhaps you've seen some of our ads in your social media feeds.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines aspiration as "to want something very much or hope to achieve something or be successful."

This definition introduces a related term that I have often heard used to describe the sentiment on campus today. That word is "hope." I'll let the Psychology faculty debate whether hope is a cognitive or emotional construct. For this speech, I'm adopting the psychologist Charles Snyder's view that it is cognitive.

Snyder's "Hope Theory" (2002) explains that hope involves setting goals, making plans, or pathways, to achieve those goals, and having the agency, or the motivation and determination, to achieve them.

I think the theme of aspirations—and hope—captures this moment in time for West Liberty and today I'll offer some thoughts today on setting goals, charting pathways, and creating agency.

188 Years of History

On March 30, 1837—188 years ago last week—the Virginia Legislature—that's right, this institution is older than the state of West Virginia—chartered a school in West Liberty. West Liberty community leaders aspired to provide the same level of education as other communities, so they formed the West Liberty Academy.

Over the next 188 years, the school has progressed despite facing challenges from fires, lack of adequate water and electricity, global recessions, the Civil War and other wars throughout the world.

In fact, a debt of \$6,000 almost closed the institution in 1867, but the newly formed state of West Virginia purchased our school as part of developing a higher education system in the state, according to former Dean David Javersek (2009) in his historical account of the institution.

West Liberty would soon outgrow its original location and President John Shaw sought approval to acquire new land. When that failed, he purchased with his own funds 46 and a half acres at our current location (Reuter, 1963, p. 41). An appeal to the legislature comparing the appropriation West Liberty received to that of the other state schools resulted in \$70,000 for the university to purchase more land at its current site (and repay Shaw for his investment).

Two decades later, President Paul Elbin, who incredibly served for 35 years as President, set out to achieve national accreditation. In 1942, West Liberty achieved this status. Frank Reuter (1963) writes in his history of West Liberty that "Seven years of careful planning, thoughtful reorganization, and just plain hard work had borne fruit" (88).

During the 1940s and 50s, strategic planning, along with legislative support, allowed the campus to grow, both in its physical presence but also its academic programming.

In the 1980s, President Clyde Campbell knew we would need external funds to help support the mission, so he created a plan to form the West Liberty University Foundation. One of their first projects was to create the campus gates.

Thank you, President Campbell and thanks to the Foundation Board members here today.

Fifteen years ago, on May 3, 2009, West Liberty officially received university status and marked the occasion with fireworks, and more. And, this fall we launched our first doctoral program.

Today we write the next chapter in the story of West Liberty University.

As we do so, we are responding to the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nationally, we see reports that student learning has lagged, employees are experiencing burnout, and our country is divided as never before.

And if that's not enough the looming demographic cliff means that fewer traditional-aged college students will be available to attend our colleges and universities.

As we have for 188 years, we will meet these challenges and emerge as a stronger institution through planning and hard work.

Goals and Pathways

Like our students, West Liberty aspires to greatness. We have spent a great deal of time this year identifying institutional goals and charting pathways to achieve those goals.

Aspire 2030, our new strategic plan, is in the final approval stages. I want to share some of the work we have done and give you a sneak peek our progress by sharing the latest draft of our revised mission and vision.

West Liberty University is a public university with a rich history of providing students with a comprehensive education from undergraduate to graduate degrees. Through experiential learning and personalized support, we empower students toward scholarly exploration, creative expression, and economic opportunity.

We aspire to offer innovative, inclusive, and inspirational opportunities that prepare graduates to be leaders in their communities and professions.

Here are some of the ways we will achieve our mission and vision.

Access and Opportunity

West Liberty will provide access and opportunity for learners at all stages of their career. In January, we announced the Topper Free Tuition program. This program will provide scholarship funds to new students who are Pell eligible to help them manage their college costs.

On Tuesday, we will host an open house at the new Student Success Center in the Paul Elbin Library. The Center provides academic coaching, tutoring, career development services and much more to our students.

In West Virginia, fewer than 46 percent of high school graduates go on to college after high school. Expanding our online programs and offering micro-credentials will help serve those incumbent workers who later desire a college degree.

Experiential Learning

West Liberty will be a leader in experiential learning. George Kuh, the esteemed scholar of education, identified a set of what he called high impact practices that improve student learning (2008). He writes that “there is growing evidence that—when done well—some programs and activities appear to engage participants at levels that elevate their performance across multiple engagement and desired-outcomes measures such as persistence.”

West Liberty has long provided opportunities for our students to engage in hands-on learning. Our science students conduct sophisticated research. Our Topper Thrift store provides learning opportunities, but also much-needed clothing and apparel to our students and community members. Our arts students perform and create. Our teacher candidates engage in practica and student teaching.

We will expand our work in this area in the coming years. This fall, we are launching the first of what I hope will be several learning communities where students will take a series of classes together and engage in co-curricular activities. Our first community this fall will focus on sustainability.

We have also created The Aspire Fund through the Foundation to provide funding for students engaged in experiential learning. This fund will support student research, conference attendance, internships, and other activities where they will gain valuable experience.

Economic Opportunity

West Liberty will be a source of economic opportunity for our students and the region.

This fall, we received news that West Liberty ranks as the third best university in our region for social mobility. Providing an affordable education is a top priority of the University and we have worked to keep costs low for our students relative to the experience they receive.

The Appalachian Aquatic Center will support regional economic development activities by providing a safe haven for endangered species during construction projects. Thank you to Senator Manchin for his support of this project.

For our region, we will partner with community businesses to develop, promote, and support internships, apprenticeships, and entry-level career opportunities for our students in the community.

And we anticipate receiving final approval from the Higher Learning Commission later this month for our Aviation pilot training program which will be transformative for the Wheeling Ohio County Airport. Thank you to our County Commissioners and RED for your partnership in this work.

Our Most Valuable Resource: Our Employees

West Liberty University will be a Great College for which to work. Last month, our employees completed a survey that will provide us with important feedback upon which to improve their experience working here as well as provide us with national benchmarks. The national higher education media is replete with stories of employee burnout in the wake of the pandemic. We will work to address these challenges.

As a start, I'm pleased to announce that beginning next fall, we are launching a new leadership program for our faculty and staff. I invite our employees to apply for the program. Information will soon be available for doing so. This program will provide a year-long experience to learn more about the university, develop leadership skills, and gain professional development. We will create a cohort of participants from all parts of the university.

Agency, Inspiration and Motivation

With pathways and goals charted, we need to ensure that we have a sense of agency to achieve these goals. If I'm being honest, this is probably the most important element of achieving our aspirations. It requires that we enhance the aspects of our culture that will develop a strong sense of agency.

Walker and Soule in their 2017 Harvard Business Review article state that culture change can't be achieved through top-down mandate. Instead the role of leadership in an organization is to engage and mobilize stakeholders to institutionalize new cultural norms. I believe the virtues of this week's events and our new institutional

values could be the basis for developing a strong culture of achievement at West Liberty.

Your program includes upcoming events and I hope to see you at these events over the next few days.

We must use our **Imagination** and have a sense of **Wonder** to achieve our vision.

Our value of innovation reflects this spirit. WLU cultivates innovation among faculty, staff, and students. We believe in a forward-thinking mindset that embraces change as an opportunity for growth and improvement. Our commitment to innovation empowers our community to tackle complex challenges, drive meaningful progress, and shape the future.

Every discipline at our university has as the basis of its work a sense of imagination and wonder. We ask questions, test hypotheses, and venture into the unknown in the pursuit of knowledge.

We find new ways of working with students to support their success, their ability to pay for college, and their future goals.

To celebrate imagination and wonder, I invite you to join us on Sunday for the organ concert in the Interfaith Chapel and on Monday to take in the mystery and majesty of the solar eclipse.

We must cultivate **Wellness** in our students and employees.

Student and employee wellness is a topic of increasing interest. If we are to achieve our goals, we'll need to overcome increasingly higher levels of stress and embrace physical and mental wellness.

Our employee engagement committee has taken steps to increase opportunities for wellness on campus, including a new walking program.

On Saturday, we'll have a 5K fun run and walk sponsored by several student organizations.

And we will break ground on the Belmont Savings Bank Softball Complex at time and date yet to be determined. I appreciate the support of Todd Cover and his team to help promote wellness opportunities on campus.

We must create a strong **Community** that **Celebrates** success.

On a day like today, it is easy to come together and celebrate West Liberty. We must make a long-term commitment to living our value of community.

Our value of Community states that WLU fosters a caring community of diverse students, faculty, and staff who work together to nurture a sense of belonging in a safe, supportive, and respectful environment.

I want all members of our community to feel like they belong. I have spoken earlier about some actions we'll take to enhance our community. Celebrations will be a key part of creating a supportive community.

Today, I want to recognize our first two Employees of the Month: Wes Clemons and Sue Garrison. Thank you for your exceptional service to the University.

From our students, I'd like to recognize Ty McGear, who recently won his second national championship in wrestling and was named the Division II Wrestler of the Year this week.

On Monday evening, Rachel Price—one of our Harmonic Collective singers--performed the best student recital I have ever seen.

Next weekend, we celebrate the national championship of the 1964 Baseball team. Bob Kota from that team is here today.

Finally, we will ensure our **Legacy** and create **Lasting Impact**.

Our value of Excellence states that we set high standards for excellence through our commitment to promoting students' aspirations and intellectual development, and our constant pursuit of knowledge, evidenced in nationally recognized programs and certifications.

Living this value will transform students into successful alumni who will carry on the legacy of the West Liberty.

Our bicentennial will be here before we know it. West Liberty—first as an Academy, then as a Normal School, then as a State Teachers College, a State College, and now as a University offering a doctoral program—has stood the test of time.

I am so looking forward to hearing stories and reflections from Dr. Campbell and Dr. McCullough on Tuesday. I hope you can join us at 2 p.m. in the Kelly Theatre.

And if you are in town, join us that evening for an alumni reunion at Brew Keepers in the Centre Market in Wheeling.

I need your help to ensure the legacy of West Liberty.

The 8th annual Topper Day of Giving is Wednesday, April 10. Your contribution to the fund of your choice will help ensure that West Liberty continues to make a lasting impact on our students. Thanks to the Health Plan and the other sponsors for giving us a head start towards our goals.

As a special request, consider donating to the Aspire Fund to support student experiential learning.

An investment in West Liberty is an investment in our students and their futures and, to be quite honest, the future of the Ohio Valley and state of West Virginia.

Imagination, wonder, wellness, community, legacy and lasting impact. These are the virtues that will propel us towards our goals and plans.

Conclusion

West Liberty University has aspired to greatness for nearly 200 years. The “cowpath to culture” has always been an avenue to aspirations.

Through the thoughtful and strategic work of the institution’s leadership, we have had the persistence to pursue the pathways to achieve ambitious goals.

This week is not about me, but it is about West Liberty—our past, present and future.

What I have discussed here today are not my aspirations, but our aspirations.

Our success is not dependent on our individual efforts, but on our collective work to ensure the best possible experience for our students.

All of us in this room—employees, students,, community partners, elected officials, philanthropists, alumni—play a role in our continued success and we must work together.

Today, we face challenges due to changing demographics, pandemic after-effects, and financial constraints.

We will respond as Hilltoppers always have—by setting goals, charting a pathway for success and mustering the passion, determination, and persistence to achieve our goals. We have every reason to be hopeful for the future.

I pledge to work every day on behalf of our students, our employees, our alumni, and our community to achieve our Hilltop Aspirations.

Thank you for the honor and joy of serving as your president. I am truly grateful to have found a home on the Hilltop. Go Toppers!

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