

## **Welcome Remarks – Convocation (August 23, 2015) – Douglas Reinelt**

On behalf of the faculty, welcome to SMU! One hundred years ago, the first SMU class arrived on this campus in anticipation of a life-changing experience just like many of you today.

When I think back on some of my own life-changing experiences, there are three lessons that I have learned.

First, seek out persons that are different than you are. It will enrich your college experience. When I was a first-year student, I was given the choice of living in a dorm with students similar to me or living in another part of campus where there were international students and others that were involved in an innovative liberal arts program that had courses without grades (a popular program of that era). I chose the latter and was exposed to many different people, ideas and cultures that helped shape what kind of person I am today.

Second, don't be afraid to try the "improbable". When I was a graduate student at Caltech spending my days studying and doing research in applied mathematics, I heard the Caltech Men's Glee Club and thought that singing in a group might be a good break from my academic pursuits. Though I could read music from playing the trumpet, I knew nothing about singing or making harmony and really had no business auditioning. I soon discovered that the director believed that with lessons and practice he could teach anyone to sing well. I have enjoyed singing in choirs ever since.

Third, make the most of opportunities that come your way even though they may be ill-defined. After joining SMU as an assistant professor, a senior colleague recommended that I spend a summer at Sandia National Laboratories where he used to work. A few months before I was going to go, the group that I was planning to visit was disbanded by the lab. Even though I had no idea what I was going to do when I got there, I went anyway and was told to seek out my own collaborators. I ended up meeting a chemical engineer that became my research colleague for the next 15 years.

My last example combines the "improbable" with another ill-defined opportunity. Back in 2008, an SMU student told me that she wanted to sponsor and build a Habitat for Humanity house in another country with a small group of students and asked me to be the adult leader for the trip. Though it was improbable that she could raise \$15,000 and plan the trip in only eight months, I agreed even though I was not sure what was involved in being the adult leader. Not only did we build a house in Paraguay in the summer of 2009, we built another one in El Salvador in 2010, and another in Costa Rica in 2011. These three trips were some of my most meaningful experiences with SMU students.

In summary, my best advice to you is to seek out persons that are different than you are, don't be afraid to try and do things that seem improbable, and make the most of opportunities that come your way.

Welcome to SMU!