New Student Convocation
August 16, 2018

By Wanda M. Austin
President

It is both a privilege and an honor to stand on this stage, leading this celebration. We’re on a journey, you and I, and today it begins.

Just a few days ago, I thought I would be sitting over there, among my fellow trustees. But life is surprising and change is constant, pushing us forward, calling us to action. It is our choice whether we answer that call.

All of us here today — trustees, senior administrators, deans, faculty, and staff — are answering the call in our commitment to you, our students. We are committed to making sure the future at USC is marked by excellence, integrity, and compassion.

We are committed to helping you rise beyond your dreams. You are the leaders of the future. And all of us will be your role models and mentors.

I came to USC for my doctorate, and the USC Viterbi School of Engineering changed my life. The faculty and staff looked out for me, and the entire community pushed me to be my best. Where I stand today can be traced back to that support.

I know the road to becoming a Trojan is not an easy one. You’ve all worked hard, and some of you have traveled far to be here. You are special. Each of you has an amazing story to tell.

One member of the Class of 2022, who is from Mumbai, was so moved by what she read of the Rwandan Genocide that she took action. She traveled to the African country, where she researched the psychological and economic effects of the atrocities. She plans to return in December.

Another freshman from nearby Glendale is joining our Thornton School of Music after winning the 2017 “Essentially Ellington” contest for music composition and arrangement. He was flown to New York to work with Wynton Marsalis, and had his arrangement recorded by the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra.

I can tell this Class of 2022 is especially driven. You are the best of the best, and we congratulate you for all that you have accomplished so far.
Now, we know you chose us, but how did we choose you? We had more than 64,000 applications. And our acceptance rate was 12.9 percent, the lowest in our history.

So, what makes a Trojan? I'll give you three things. We looked at ambition, and whether that ambition is dedicated to leading a life of service and leadership. We looked at achievement outside the classroom. And we looked at character.

When Martin Luther King Jr. was an undergraduate, he wrote these prescient words: “Intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character — that is the goal of true education.”

Today, decades after he wrote those words, I can tell you it is precisely that kind of education that brings us together at convocation.

To the parents sitting out there, I only have praise. All of you put a priority on education, and your presence here is a powerful reinforcement of your love for your daughters and sons. You deserve a round of applause.

I think back to my own parents. They didn’t have money to spare, but they understood the value of education. They knew it would open doors for me.

But education did more than that. It gave me a passion for math, and later on, a passion for space exploration. It gave me a chance to make a difference in the world. It gave me hope for the future. I still have that hope, and I share that hope with you, our newest Trojans.

Now here comes the advice: Embrace change, and then drive that change. Work on your leadership skills, because we are all leaders right where we stand. And finally, learn to move from the comfortable and familiar, to discover new truths.

Be part of university life, whether it’s going to a football game or taking in a concert, play, or lecture through Visions and Voices. You may learn something about yourself that you didn’t know.

USC has been pivotal to my success, and it will be for you, as well. You’re part of the Trojan Family now.

As you know, our university has faced an especially challenging time over the past year. As we look forward, we will embrace the changes that make us stronger and enable us to flourish in the days, months, and years ahead.
I am thrilled that all of you are part of our exciting future. It is because of you, and those who come after you, that our university’s leadership is committed to bringing about change that will make our light shine brighter in both purpose and action.

Enjoy your time here, and make the most of it, because this kind of education is a gift that will last a lifetime. And always Fight On!