

Franklin College Presidential Inauguration  
Remarks by  
President Kerry N. Prather  
October 30, 2021

Chair Cangany, Past Chair Due, trustees, faculty and staff colleagues, students, alumni, fellow presidents and delegates, Mayor Barnett, Reverend Dr. James, family and friends:

Thank you all for joining us today to celebrate Franklin College, both the legacy of its esteemed past and the vision for its unlimited future.

I humbly accept this responsibility, blessed by the support of colleagues who are friends and still, after all these years, inspired by the work that goes on here and even more by the impressive results of that work.

An inaugural address is typically an opportunity for the president, a newcomer to the community, to introduce him or herself publicly for the first time. I trust you will forgive me for omitting that portion of my remarks.

Members of this community know me well. The successes we have shared over the past 21 months since I became president reflect the trust and camaraderie that we have developed over the many previous years of working together, focused on the best possible experience for our students and the best possible future for the institution.

You also know that, from beginning to present, the contributions I have sought to make at this wonderful place were never singular. Without question, the greatest reward of my work here and the greatest ingredient in whatever success that work has engendered, is the collective resolve, commitment and engagement of my family.

I did not say “support,” because that connotes a sideline role, peripheral to my efforts. Nothing could less accurately characterize their influence and our family’s relationship with Franklin College over the past 40 years.

I was blessed to fall in love with Cindy, who would not only become my trusted partner in all things personal, but would also join with me shoulder-to-shoulder in the pursuit of professional goals. Likewise, I

have invested myself in her very successful career as an educator, all while we shared the many joys of marriage and family.

I want to acknowledge as well the enthusiastic contributions, along with the patience and forbearance, of Katie and Robbie, throughout this exciting and chaotic journey. Your mother and I could not be more proud of you, including your status as Franklin College alumni.

I also want to recognize my sister, Lana, also a professional educator, who taught special needs children for 40 years. Thank you for being here.

And thank you to all of our extended family who have shared this weekend of celebration with us.

Beyond my family, I owe a special debt of gratitude to the three men who most directly prepared me for this role. Former presidents Bill Martin, Paul Marion and Jay Moseley not only welcomed me into their senior leadership teams, but also into their confidence and friendship.

They and many other colleagues too numerous to name have befriended and mentored me through the years. Any success I may have in this role also belongs to them.

Forty years is a long time to invest oneself professionally in the same organization. Early in my career here, the late Stewart “Red” Faught, a 32-year legend at Franklin College, cautioned me: “Be careful, young man, this place has a way of getting hold of you and not letting go.” My thought at the time, reflecting my youthful arrogance, was, “You may have gotten stuck here, but I’ve got bigger dreams.”

I surpassed Coach Faught’s 32 years awhile back, but not because of thwarted dreams. It simply became obvious to me and to our family that big dreams could not find a more nurturing and worthy home.

Now, admittedly, those dreams did not include this particular fork in the road. Nor did this phase of my career necessarily reflect a keen sense of timing.

When I attended the New President’s Institute of the Council for Independent Colleges last January, the programming focused almost

exclusively on the plethora of headwinds facing higher education, and especially our sector of it.

The challenges of COVID management, the forecast of increased competition, the unsustainability of increasing costs and tuition discounting, the impending demographic cliff reflecting a significant decline in the population of college-age students, and the growing public skepticism about the value of the liberal arts were all discussed in distressing detail.

More than one speaker observed, “This is the most challenging time in history to be president of a small private college.” I thought to myself, “Timing is everything.”

Fortunately, I was spending my evenings reading, “The History of Franklin College, The First 100 Years,” written in 1934 by history professor John Cady. I thought it was important that I have a grasp of the full legacy I was inheriting, and Dr. Cady’s work provided a fascinating look at the early days of the institution.

In it, I found some helpful perspective with the realization that most eras have included serious challenges for small private colleges and their presidents. And, in at least some respects, the job description of the president may not have evolved as much as we might imagine.

Back in 1838, four years after Franklin’s founding, the trustees were desperately trying to fill the presidency and without much success. The requirements for the position enunciated at that time seem uncannily consistent with those of today.

Henry Bradley, the keeper of the Baptist Tavern and a constituent member of the First Baptist Church in Indianapolis, wrote, “...the (president) must be of the temper to receive with mildness all sort of opposition and abuse, and still accept no excuse for refusing money for the support of the cause.”

I will accept that as paraphrase of the charge I have received today.

When I was approached by our Board leadership in early 2020, at a time of institutional crisis, many thoughts passed through my mind. The only one that didn’t was declining the request.

But it is important to say here today that my over-riding motivation was not wistful nostalgia or even, necessarily, a sense of duty. Rather, it was my fervent faith in the mission and future of Franklin College and its importance in the world.

I have stayed here for the same reasons so many others—scholar-professors, staffers, trustees—have made this their ultimate destination. The work that goes on here is distinctive and transformational. It is personally rewarding and meaningful because it impacts our students and the world in unique and significant ways.

Shortly after I became president, I spoke at a donor recognition dinner before a crowd of alumni and friends whose philanthropy helps make possible that distinctive student experience. That evening, I promised to lead Franklin College forward, while protecting its institutional soul, the unwavering character which has defined it since 1834.

It is that soul and that future I would like to talk about this afternoon.

The academic experience at Franklin since its inception has been grounded in the liberal arts, initially the classics in preparing students for the ministry. Over the years, advances in the curriculum have continued to honor the liberal arts tradition, even as innovation has led to new and exciting courses of study.

The liberal arts have historically been regarded as necessary education for a free society—the liberating pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. Over the years, the term has come to more specifically distinguish a wholistic education from more narrow, vocationally-oriented training.

Reflective of its ministerial heritage and largely of its historic student profile, Franklin’s approach to the liberal arts has tended toward the pragmatic more than the esoteric, purposely connecting for students the value of liberal education with the disparate and expansive needs of a fulfilling adult life and successful career.

This unique balance has allowed the world to be impacted by generations of Franklin graduates who chose professions like teaching, journalism, social services, medicine and law.

Along the way, those proud alumni have become not just contributors to society, but leaders at all civic and professional levels. The power of the

liberal arts lies in the ability to inspire curiosity, foster thoughtful inquiry, enable knowledgeable debate, and fuel collaboration—forging consensus when possible and finding compromise when necessary—to promote the common good.

To appreciate the importance of these principles today, one need only take a look at our polarized society, our dysfunctional politics, our myopic commercial media and toxic social media, and our increasingly fragile democracy. Few times in our nation’s history have cried out more urgently for **leaders** who can think logically, listen actively, speak constructively, debate respectfully and make decisions ethically.

Those leaders will continue to grow from institutions like Franklin College, who equip them, as the liberal arts tradition intends, for the freeing experience of understanding their world in its widest and deepest context, appreciating the strength and potential of its incredible diversity, and stepping forward to argue for equality of opportunity, a just society, and respect for one another and the planet we share.

We will remain true to that aspect of our institutional soul. As innovation arrives, as it must, it will enhance, not supplant, our commitment to the liberal arts.

There is also a unique aspect to the soul of Franklin College that one must experience to fully appreciate. It has remained constant through the ages, and it has never been more evident than in these most recent months as we confronted a host of challenges, including the worldwide pandemic.

From its days as a fledgling religious institute that teetered on the brink of insolvency, then endured and survived the ravages of civil and world war, the last pandemic of 1918, a great depression, eras of civil unrest, two devastating fires in 1985 that destroyed a huge portion of campus facilities, and now our most recent trials, Franklin College has demonstrated a dogged tenacity that speaks to its faith of mission and its strength of character.

Our students have consistently shown a persistence and grit that are reflective of their burning ambition. Many have been first-generation students willing to make any sacrifice necessary to make their families proud and to blaze a trail for younger generations to follow. They have

worked hard to get here and harder to succeed here. Their pursuit of excellence and their success in achieving it continue to inspire us all.

Our faculty and staff have similarly been steadfast in mission and expectations while creative and innovative in strategy. We are blessed with a uniquely entrepreneurial faculty, as evidenced by the successful revision of our curriculum just a couple years ago.

Faculty leadership and collaboration, through several years of planning and execution, created a genuinely engaged experience across the entire curriculum that has ignited enthusiasm among our students, invigorated colleagues to re-imagine teaching paradigms, and further heightened interest and investment from prospective students, alumni, friends and foundations.

While remaining true to our academic soul, we are delivering a 21<sup>st</sup> century experience for our students, one that requires their active engagement, guides their application of theory to practice, enhances their experience with in-depth research, and inspires lifelong learning.

Our faculty believes strongly in the academic roots of the institution, but they constantly consider the next areas of inquiry necessary to meet the needs of our students and the world they will serve. That has led us in recent years to add majors like data science and neuroscience, and to create our digital fluency initiative and the Center for Tech Innovation.

This unique trait of the Franklin College soul is reflected by a determination to work harder, dream bigger and accomplish more because we are called to do so by those who came before us and by those who will follow.

While the industry headwinds alliterated previously are real and serious, there remains a strong demand for the very special way we prepare students for their futures. In fact, the most recent forced experiment in a virtual alternative suggests that tomorrow's college students will be even more interested in the personal, engaged experience that only schools like Franklin can provide.

Fears of students retreating to their laptops for higher education appear to have been not only exaggerated but counterintuitive. Many high school students disengaged completely, and academic achievement

plummeted in response to the impersonal delivery of an experience best enabled by close, personal human interaction.

It may well be that the pandemic experience will actually provide a tailwind for small private colleges and the unique student experience only we can provide. I am encouraged by the renewed excitement and appreciation of our current students and the high school students who visit campus each day.

The future I see for Franklin College is actually the same one envisioned by my colleagues on the faculty and staff, our students, trustees and alumni. That shared vision is exciting and compelling.

The beautiful diversity within our campus will continue to grow. The institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion that inspired Franklin to become the first coed college in Indiana also enabled us this year to welcome the most diverse entering class in decades. That commitment will endure, and Franklin College will be a stronger, more vibrant community as a result.

Our talented faculty will continue to embrace new opportunities for preparing students to enjoy fulfilling lives and careers. And the indisputable evidence that the value of the Franklin College experience compounds itself over time will continue to be reflected in the success of our graduates and their impact on the world.

As we close in on our 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the soul of Franklin College continues to burn brightly. I am honored to sustain and nurture that soul while helping to position this great institution for a future that will demand and expect its very best.

I am inspired every day by the bright intellects and eager curiosity of our students. My optimism for the future is reflected in their open minds and welcoming hearts. We have the privilege of playing a critical role in this most pivotal period of their lives. We will seize the opportunity to prepare them well to lead and serve, so they can seize with confidence the opportunities which lie ahead of them throughout their lives.

Let us all commit to being at once faithful to our legacy and ambitious in our vision for the future of Franklin College. That is my pledge today. Thank you.

