

PRESIDENT ADVISES FRESHMEN ON JOURNEY THAT WILL LAST A LIFETIME

Peter Likins

Peter Likins became the eighteenth President of the University of Arizona in 1997. He is also a professor of engineering. This address was delivered at the Freshman Convocation in Centennial Hall on August 23, 1998. Other addresses are available on President Likins's website: <http://ali.opi.arizona.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Likins>

Friday night at the rally on the Mall **we** gave you a raucous welcome to The University of Arizona. **That was a night for fun.** 

But tonight is a solemn occasion, a **reminder** that college is **serious** business as well as **good healthy fun**. Probably you will play harder at The University of Arizona than you have ever played before, but you will work harder too, or you'll regret it. Friday night was for play. Tonight we begin to work. Make sure you know the difference, and learn to find room in your life for both.

Your job tonight is to listen attentively. **That won't be easy**, because this sermon can be **really boring**. But my job requires that I deliver a message to you tonight. Your job is to listen carefully and try to remember the message for at least six months. If you survive the first six months in good shape, **you'll probably be okay.**

We have already begun **together** a journey that will last a lifetime. Understand this: You may go to school here for only four years, but you will be altered by the **Wildcat experience** in ways that will change your life, and the lives of your children.

Among the most important lessons you'll learn together here is how to deal with freedom, and how to handle **responsibility**. Probably your biggest challenge in the next six months is learning to develop self-control and self-discipline, which will gradually replace parental discipline. Sometimes these lessons can be hard. You will discover, perhaps painfully, that there are consequences if you fail to meet the responsibilities that come with freedom. 

I want to **encourage** you to develop on this campus a community spirit, but at the same time **I** advise you to think your own thoughts before you plunge ahead, blindly following the gang wherever it may go. The years of peer pressure are properly the adolescent years, and young men and women in college are expected to make independent judgments and follow their own counsel individually. You will surely find that the independent spirit is valued here, and sheep get no respect.

I'd like to apply this lesson particularly to the use of alcohol and other drugs. Remember that the **laws of our land apply to you**, on campus or off. Think for yourself, and think smart. And believe me: losing control is never smart.

Sometimes students die from the abuse of alcohol and other drugs. More often they find themselves in court facing felony charges of rape or aggravated assault, and discover that they are legally responsible for their actions, drunk or sober. The result can be tragic.



I know that you've heard all this before, and if you're like most young people you probably don't really believe in your own mortality. I wish that I could make you understand with mere words that your life and your future career are too precious to risk losing "just for fun."



We take seriously at this University our responsibility to help you learn how to control yourself, but we can't take the place of your parents. In compensation for the absent parents of this freshman class, I ask you to accept a sacred obligation. I want you to assume responsibility, not only for yourselves, but for each other.



Despite the fact that you begin as strangers, I want you to treat your roommate like a brother or sister, and treat all of us here as your extended family. We are a family of many cultures, races and creeds, but we share a common bond at this University. We may belong to different clubs or different teams, different races or different residence halls, but we all belong to The University of Arizona, and we belong to each other.



As a simple first step, as you walk this campus you should make eye contact and acknowledge the humanity of the people you meet. You might even smile a little. Oh, what the hell . . . go for it . . . say "Hi." Take the initiative . . . that's the Arizona way.

And if your roommate or lab partner needs help, don't hang back. It is no longer acceptable to "do your own thing" without thinking about other people. Step in and offer a helping hand, or a sympathetic ear. You'll be amazed at how much good you can do and how deeply your kindness will be appreciated. The biggest benefit, however, will return to you, in the strength and confidence you feel when you carry your friends' burdens on your shoulders.



And you will need that strength and confidence, both at The University of Arizona and in the world that lies beyond the university experience. Our job is to develop your potential in all of its dimensions. We will test your strength in every way we can. Strength of intellect and of character are developed in the classrooms and the living groups on campus, and even your emotional health and physical strength will be challenged by the rigors of our recreational athletic programs, if not in the arena or on the playing fields of intercollegiate competition.

And if today you feel a little scared, then be assured that your reaction is a healthy one. You should reflect a moment if you're not excited by the significance of this day, by the magic of this moment. Something terribly important is about to begin.

You may be wondering if you can make it at The University of Arizona—if you can meet the Arizona challenge. And you should be sure of the answer: Of course you can! You have the intellectual capacity to succeed at this University. But one thing more is needed: you must believe in your own internal quality. Don't do anything to compromise it. Don't miss any opportunity to enhance it. And don't allow yourself to be destroyed by disappointments, setbacks, and small failures. These things will come to you, just as they came to every one of the successful people now arrayed before you in full academic splendor. We have all been college freshmen, and we know the terrors of that experience as well as the joys.

Just like all of you, I earned admission to a very competitive university, and discovered when I got there that all the successes of my high school years were pretty well matched by my classmates. I soon realized that success in college would have to be hard earned, with no guarantees. That lesson really came home to me one day in the first semester of my freshman year.

In my first quiz in calculus, I squeaked out an "A," although I was uncomfortable with the material. I got a "B" on my second quiz, still feeling uneasy. And then in the third and



last quiz before finals I got a big “F.” It was a new experience, and it scared the hell out of me. That same week I had a fight with my girl, and got beat up in practice in the wrestling room by a kid from Pennsylvania. My whole world fell apart, and it was not easy to put it together again. But I did. I got a “B” in the course, I married the girl, and I made the team. I did, and so can you.

So remember, you must expect the sky to fall, at least once, before the year is over. Your problem might be an English test, or a quarrel with a special friend, a bad pass in a basketball game or a missed goal in soccer. But the sky will fall, one way or the other. It always does.

Remember please, when you see that sky falling, that it's not really falling on you; don't take adversity too personally. We all drop the ball or miss the goal occasionally. The test of quality is the capacity to rise above defeat, to come back against the odds, and to pass this test you must learn that disappointments are a normal part of a successful life, and not a sign of personal failure. When your time comes, please remember that asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength! It takes wisdom and courage to ask for help when you need it. People feel good when you trust them enough to ask for help, and you should never hesitate.

And when the sky falls on you, try to keep a healthy sense of humor, and learn to laugh at your own mistakes. Work hard, but don't take yourself so seriously that you lose your perspective. Find time in your busy lives to relax together, young men and women as friends enduring together the pressures of the exam room and the boredom of the presidential oration. Enjoy yourselves and enjoy each other. Memories of the good life on campus will linger when every lecture is forgotten, including this one.

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