Inaugural Address

Inauguration address: The Value of Imagination
President Christina H. Paxson

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The College Green
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Chancellor Tisch, Vice Chancellor Vascellaro, members of the Corporation: Thank you for the trust you have placed in me. I have come to know many of you over the last seven months. I am impressed by your love for this institution; your respect for its history; and your confidence in its future. I look forward to working with you as we chart Brown's next 250 years.

I am grateful for the warm reception I have received from members of our student body, faculty and staff. You represent Brown's deep commitment to creating a "partnership of scholars" dedicated to the discovery, preservation and communication of knowledge. The members of this partnership are bound together by a love of learning and a passion for making a positive impact on the world. It is an honor to join you.

The remarks of Mayor Taveras, Governor Chafee and Senator Reed have special significance. Brown's distinctive culture and enduring values are derive from the history of Rhode Island as a place of intellectual freedom and religious tolerance. Your presence here today underscores the continued interdependence between Brown University and the community of which we are a proud member.

And to all of the Brown parents, alumni and friends, let me simply say, welcome.

When I asked Shirley Tilghman if she would represent the academy, I didn't know that she would soon be announcing the close of her long and successful presidency of Princeton University. Shirley has been a tremendously supportive mentor. She is joined here today by my friend and former colleague, Nan Keohane, president emerita of Wellesley and Duke, and our own Ruth Simmons, president emerita of Smith and Brown. The three of you have not just cracked a glass ceiling — you have shattered it. I and other women who will step into roles such as this are the beneficiaries. Thank you.

The purpose of a university's presidential inauguration is to celebrate the history of the institution and look forward to its future. To the new president, i helps put his or her role in the institution into context. This is especially true at a place like Brown, twelve years older than the United States of America.

This is an auspicious time for an inauguration; legend has it that it was in October of 1762, exactly 250 years ago, that the matter of establishing a Baptis college was raised at a meeting in Philadelphia. Things moved quickly. The first Corporation meeting was held in 1764. It included many leaders who would also help the United States to become a new nation. Even in its origins, Brown embodied vision and independence.

The idea for University Hall came, like me, from Princeton University — it was modeled after Nassau Hall. A Boston newspaper criticized the size of our first building, complaining that it was "sufficient to contain ten times the Number of Students that ever have, or ever will" be coming here. And yet the students came, drawn by Brown's broad humanism and by the excellence of its instruction. Standards were high from the start; an early rule required that no one speak to each other except in Latin on the College Green " a practice that, on a day like today, I am especially glad has gone by the wayside. A talented students found their way to this hilltop, the college prospered and grew, its destinies tied to the state and nation it was doing so much to shape. Women and African Americans were famously not a part of the student body in those early years. But students, alumni and faculty raised provocative questions, as they always have, about the prevailing social customs of the day. Then as now, Brown was a work in progress, ever evolving.

Our two and a half centuries are an extraordinary achievement. In my convocation address, I pointed out how small Brown was in its first year, when there was one student, and one member of the faculty, who happened also to be Brown's first president, James Manning. We have come a great distance since 1764, and yet in important ways we are rooted to the values on which Brown was founded. Our student/teacher ratio is no longer one to one, but the act of teaching remains central to Brown's purpose, and our faculty is the treasure of the University. You give daily new meaning to a goal articulated by another Brown president, Francis Wayland: "Let us never forget that the business of an instructor begins where the office of a book ends. It is the action of mind upon mind, exciting, awakening, showing by example the power of reasoning "¦ and rendering it impossible that the pupil shall not think

Brown may sit atop a steep hill; but this is no Ivory Tower. The charter of what was then Rhode Island College is a document of more than ordinary significance, proclaiming from the outset that this would be an institution dedicated to teaching in the vernacular as well as the classical languages and t protecting the freedoms of speech and religion that we should never take for granted. These values endure; they define us; they are mixed in with the bricks and mortar that you see about you.

Brown's growth, from its inception to today, reflects its ambitious mission "to serve the community, the nation and the world by discovering, communicating and preserving knowledge in a spirit of free inquiry, and by educating and preparing students to discharge the offices of life with usefulness and reputation."

Today, I would like to consider how that mission squares with some of the concerns we hear today about the value and purpose of higher education in America.

One warning: Although this topic can be viewed through many lenses, my own approach is shaped by my intellectual roots as an economist. I realize this may leave many of you concerned that this could be a very gloomy set of remarks. The textbook definition of economics — "the study of the allocation of scarce resources toward competing ends" — is anything but inspirational! I am not attracted to the field of economics because of its focus on scarcity, however, but because of the link between resource allocation and human well-being. Specifically, I am interested in how institutions shape the way that resources are stewarded and invested for the benefit of human welfare.

And what institutions are better positioned to do this than universities? The major purpose of a university is to invest in the service of the common good in scholarship that enlightens us; in discovery that helps us become healthier and more productive; and, perhaps most important, in the cultivation of creative and talented young people who will lead us. Yes, these investments take scarce resources — in the form of money, time, energy and dedication – but they yield returns that have a profound impact on people and societies.

But we face a puzzle. These noble aspirations of universities are challenged by a deep and growing skepticism about the value and future of higher education. We hear charges that American universities have gone off-track: Their costs are too high; they use hide-bound teaching methods; resources that could go to teaching are being siphoned off for research on arcane subjects; and students are studying poetry and postmodernism when they could be preparing for jobs.

These concerns are heightened by our current economic environment which is, in truth, still somewhat gloomy. We are in the midst of a slow recovery from a severe recession; there is still substantial instability in world financial markets and uncertainty about our country's economic future. That is especially true in Rhode Island, where state and local governments are struggling to provide services, and unemployment still exceeds 10 percent. It is not surprising that, at times like this, we question the value of our public and private institutions, including universities, especially those that appear to many to provide little immediate value.

This sense of unease about the value of universities is not new. On the kitchen wall of my new home is a framed poster from the cover of the Saturday Evening Post, published in 1900 — the end of a mild recession — that proclaims "Does a College Education Pay?" It contains articles by sitting college presidents and one former U.S. president, Grover Cleveland. I got a copy of the magazine from our library, and when I read through it I was not surprised to see that every one of the authors made a vigorous case for the value of a college degree. And the data bear them out. The best evidence we have suggests that the economic return to a year of college education was about 15 percent early in the 20th century, very close to what it is today. Even putting aside the non-monetary value of education — which I believe is considerable — a college degree was then, and is still today, an extremely good investment.

Still, concerns about the value of college education — and in particular liberal arts education — persisted. In 1939, at the point of transition from the Great Depression to World War II, Brown's 11th president, Henry Merritt Wriston, delivered a speech at Duke University in which he addressed the concerns about education that prevailed at the time. Wriston described the hardships of the long depression, and decried the resulting criticism of universities. "Because of an overly deep concern regarding economic factors, such as unemployment, there has been a tremendous drive against liberal education. We have been urged to put our principal emphasis on defensive measures, and to train our youth for jobs as the most essential step."

Wriston's scorn for preparing students for jobs could be taken as the ultimate illustration of the evils of the Ivory Tower: the view that universities such as Duke and Brown should continue to do what they have always done, blithely unconcerned with the trouble of the world around them.

But a full reading of Wriston's speech and his other writings reveals something quite different. In fact, he thought that the highest aspiration of a liberal arts education — the development of wisdom and perspective, the ability to draw well-informed judgments, and the cultivation of values — are of immense social value. His belief was that universities should not merely train students who can survive in the world as it is. Instead, they should educate students who will change the world for the better.

I endorse that belief wholeheartedly.

To be sure, we want our students to find fulfilling, challenging and, hopefully, remunerative jobs. That is a given; work is an essential element of self-respect. But we also want them to take on the job of making the world better — in big ways and small ways — in the ways that best express their own vision. From the schools of Fox Point and South Providence, right in our backyard, to the vast challenges confronting the world's financial and political systems, the answers to difficult questions should come from Brown University and its graduates.

I believe that much of the current criticism of higher education stems from a short-sighted misconception of its fundamental purpose and a lack of imagination about its potential. We are not in the business of producing widgets, in the form of standardized "career-ready" graduates. Instead, our aim is to invest in the long-term intellectual, creative and social capacity of human beings. If the men and women who come to Brown are to make a positive difference in the world over the course of their lives — lives that will extend well past Brown's 300th anniversary — they need more than specific skills or the mastery of discrete bodies of knowledge. Yes, I hope that our students get jobs shortly after completing their educations, and we do all we can to make that happen. But if our students are to be prepared for "lives of reputation and usefulness" in the 21st century, they must leave here with something much more nuanced but ultimately more valuable than the skills of a particular trade. Their ability to effect change will depend on the capacity to think analytically and creatively, to consider social problems from a diverse array of perspectives, and to understand how to navigate in an increasingly global and technologically driven world. And that is our role — to impart not just the curriculum of a particular course, but the underlying frame of intellectual curiosity, integrity and imaginative thought.

This tension, between immediate utility, on one hand, and the long-run benefit to society, on the other, also runs through discussions about the value of research. Again, these concerns are not new. In 1939, the same year that Wriston was defending liberal arts education, Abraham Flexner, the founding director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, published an essay in Harpers titled "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge." In it, he made the case that the most significant discoveries — those that were ultimately of the highest value to society — were made by "men and women who were driven not by the desire to be useful but merely the desire to satisfy their curiosity."

Flexner's essay underscores the idea that the enterprise of discovering, communicating and preserving knowledge is not amenable to a cookie cutter approach and may be impossible to value using standard cost-benefit criteria. The full value of scholarship is uncertain, difficult to measure, and may not be fully realized for decades or even centuries.

Consider the work of Stephen Thayer Olney, a 19th-century Rhode Island industrialist and avid amateur botanist, and Professor William Whitney Bailey who taught the first class on botany at Brown in 1877. Through their efforts, Brown became home to a rich collection of over 100,000 plant specimens

from Rhode Island and far-flung corners of the world. Olney and Bailey could not have dreamed that the collection of carefully preserved plants and fungi, pressed onto the pages of leather-bound books, could be digitized and made available to scholars and students across the globe. They could not have known that Brown's herbarium would be useful for the study of species extinction and climate change, a concept unknown at that time. They did their work simply because they were curious about plants, and they could imagine that the collection would be of value — in some undefined way — to people in the future. Thanks to them, their specimens are not dead at all, but alive with information for our generation and those yet to come.

Similar stories can be told about the research being done at Brown today. The investigation of the motion of bat's wings may seem like a flight of fancy, but might this work motivate designs for the next generation of aircraft? The study of traditional storytelling in ancient India might seem arcane, but perhaps insights into the power of storytelling will aid in the development of modern disease prevention programs? Spending money on the careful preservation of Mayan ruins may seem like a luxury, but can better knowledge of that long-gone society shape our understanding of the rise and fall of dynasties in modern times? Although the fruits of scholarship are uncertain, one thing is perfectly clear: If universities like Brown don't undertake this work, no one will. And the community, the nation and the world will be the poorer for it.

I believe ardently that Brown's unwavering mission is to invest in the future, by creating knowledge and cultivating human capital. But I want to conclude with two important points.

The first is that, although our mission has remained constant, the way we execute that mission has and must continue to change over time. In the comin years, we will experiment with the use and development of new technologies for education and research; strengthen and create new domestic and international academic collaborations; and rethink how we define our campus community in a world where "being connected" does not require physical proximity. When Margaret Mead visited Brown in 1959, she ventured her anthropological opinion that the capacity to change was becoming the most essential element of survival in the modern era. Her view was that change had become a constant, and that it was the specific purpose of education to instill a readiness for change. The spirit of independence and creativity that is so deep at Brown gives us strong protection against complacency. I am eager to join my new colleagues in imagining new and better ways to advance our mission.

My second point is that, although investing in the future means that we take the long view, we cannot ignore the current concerns of the world. In fact, I believe emphatically that confronting the problems of the world outside the Van Wickle Gates head-on makes our work stronger, our value tangible, and our mission directly relevant.

Yes, we aspire to create a community of scholars that can effect change. That community will be richer and stronger if its members are drawn from the widest possible range of socioeconomic groups. In this era of rising college costs and high income inequality, I want to renew our commitment to keepin Brown accessible to talented students from the United States and around the world, regardless of their ability to pay.

Yes, we aspire to educate students who will change the world for the better. Students will not become inspired to lead lives of service solely through thei classroom experiences. Instead, the desire for service is cultivated through direct engagement with community partners as nearby as Hope High School, and as distant as health clinics in rural China. This year, as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Swearer Center for Public Service, I want to renew our commitment to the idea of engaged scholarship that permeates Brown.

Yes, we aspire to serve the community, the nation and the world. And we recognize that our success is intertwined with the fortunes of our local community, just as it has been for the last 250 years. My hope is that Brown's investments in education and research in the coming years will create plentiful opportunities for growth, through thoughtful collaborations with the great public and private institutions of Providence and Rhode Island. Now on the eve of Brown's 250th anniversary, I believe it is an especially appropriate time to renew our partnership with our city and state.

These commitments — to keep Brown accessible, to engage in public service, and to build productive partnerships with our neighbors — will ensure that Brown continues to flourish in a way that is consistent with the high purpose of our founding.

We are here for a reason. We are gathered on this green because a handful of visionaries called for a better way of teaching. Rhode Island needed a college and the Baptists needed a seminary, but there was more to it than that. From the beginning, this institution has stood for the ideal that the status quo can be, and must be, improved upon — including the status quo of the institution itself. Our original seal depicted King George III, an image that became something of a liability during the American Revolution. Our current seal, designed in the time of President Wayland, serves our needs better. The Latin motto, In Deo Speramus, or "In God We Hope," pays quiet tribute to the state of Rhode Island and its simple motto, Hope. The four open books may become anachronistic in an age when books are no longer fixed, printed objects — but they will always stand for Brown's openness to the world. And the rising sun, peeking above the books, reminds us that this is an institution perpetually involved in the business of renewing itself.

On this radiant day, full of hope, enlightenment, and yes, sunshine, let us imagine the future, mindful of the original charter's language, that we are eternally " "forming the rising Generation" to lives of "usefulness & reputation." And to more than a little excitement, too.

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