

Comments of David Fithian
January 13, 2020
Clark University

Thank you all very much! Thank you for being here on this busy first day of the semester and thank you for such a warm greeting, which is so characteristic of Clark.

I am absolutely thrilled to be here and deeply honored to have been asked to lead this remarkable institution that, three decades ago, changed my life.

Of the many emotions flooding over me in this moment, gratitude is foremost among them.

Let me start then by thanking Ross Gillman, Esther Jones, and David Angel for those very kind and generous words of introduction.

I got to know Ross and Esther through the search process in which they—and all the members of the search committee—distinguished themselves as exceptionally devoted and compelling ambassadors for Clark.

It was profoundly evident that the trustees, faculty, staff, and the student on the search committee care deeply about this place and its future. I thank the committee, not least for selecting me, but also because had the process reached a different conclusion, I would nevertheless have felt deeply respected as a candidate and proud of how my alma mater so carefully undertook what is a very challenging, extensive, and sensitive task.

Let me also express my gratitude to Clark's Board of Trustees for the confidence it has shown in me by its unanimous vote.

I was so pleased to be able to meet nearly half of the Trustees as part of the search and to see first-hand their deep respect and appreciation for David Angel and his administration along with their steadfast commitment to the best possible future for Clark. I look forward to meeting even more of the Trustees very soon and to working with the board as a whole when I formally take up this role this summer. In exchange for its confidence in me, I pledge to the Board but also to the faculty, staff, students, and alumni that I will work every day to the best of my ability to make our University as broadly excellent, as fully inclusive, as deeply impactful, as fiscally strong, and as greatly admired as it can be. I will be true to the values of Clark, faithful to its mission, and respectful of its history, even as we will have to evolve—perhaps more quickly than ever before—to navigate the changing landscape of higher education.

To David Angel, I thank you for so quickly reaching out after the Board's vote to congratulate me, to welcome me back, and to so readily offer any assistance you or your office could provide. You

arrived at Clark as a faculty member the year I graduated, which means your influence on and contributions to Clark span more than three decades. I simply cannot know today all of the reasons I will come to be immensely grateful to you. But I know I will be—and likely often. I can see and I have heard much this past fall about the great strength of Clark’s position today that your leadership has secured. While it clearly falls to other people on other occasions to recognize and celebrate all you’ve done for Clark, allow me to applaud you today for all I will have to work with and build upon starting July 1.

I am also very grateful to the staff, some of whom I have yet to meet, who worked through the holidays to plan for and prepare today’s announcement. Thank you.

University of Chicago President Bob Zimmer is a remarkable leader from whom I have learned a great deal, and to whom I am also grateful. He has not only been a tremendous mentor and role model, but a good friend. That I feel confident that I can and will serve Clark well, is due in very large measure to my work with Bob. For those of you who may know Clark’s early history well, there is something of a score to be settled between Clark and the University of Chicago. I won’t tell more of that story today, but it would be fitting for me to steal—I mean use!—as much as I can from what I learned in Chicago to benefit Clark.

Finally, I’m deeply grateful to my family. My husband, Michael Rodriguez, with whom I have flourished over the past 25 years, is here with me today. He has been an inspiration to me in so many ways and unfailing in his support of anything I may want to do, including this new adventure. Toward the end of the search process, I suggested to Ross that the best thing about hiring me would be that the Clark community would also get Michael. And I know you’ll find very soon that I am right about that.

In addition to gratitude, I am also feeling a tremendous sense of anticipation.

I have spent all of my professional life essentially as a student of higher education. Starting with my graduate training at Yale and continuing with my work at Harvard and at the University of Chicago, I have had a front row seat to observing, figuring out, and contributing to what really good universities do really well. However, it was my experience at Clark that first made me curious about how colleges and universities work. Now, I’m eager to give back—to contribute in any and every way I can to helping Clark thrive.

To be sure, I am not saying that I have all of the answers. But I do think I know many of the questions we should be asking and exploring together.

How, for example, can a great undergraduate college best be at the heart of everything we do as a research university?

Investments in undergraduate education can pay powerful dividends for the institution as a whole. This includes investments in the curriculum, in extra-curricular activities and residential life, in campus enhancements and amenities, in support services for students, including career programs, and in a broad set of experiential learning opportunities.

Rigorous academic programs, up-to-date facilities, and robust services for undergraduates also benefit graduate and professional students. Having excellent undergraduates to work with—as Clark does—attracts the most promising and accomplished graduate students whose training as prospective teachers is enhanced by such quality.

Further, the excellence of undergraduate and graduate students helps to retain and attract the very best teacher-scholars.

How can a great research university with a great college at its center make the most of the accomplished and dedicated faculty and staff who define its every success? The best universities recognize—as I know Clark does—that faculty and staff, together with students, are the lifeblood of the place. From my own experience, I know that Clark has long had great faculty and staff and we need to ensure that we keep it that way.

How can a great university make the most of its excellent graduate and professional school programs—the very things that essentially make a university different from a college? Clark, as our nation’s first graduate-only institution, clearly has programs of great historic strength and an excellent record of placing its graduates. How might we best invest in these areas in order to make them preeminent and should we further develop other strong Ph.D. programs? Looking ahead, how do we think about professional education and the needs of a changing work force? What about executive education programs and continuing education? Again, how can we build on and leverage—for the greatest impact and for the truest service to our mission—Clark’s distinctive features and strengths?

Great universities reflect the world for which they are preparing their students to be successful and engaged citizens. They not only embrace diversity and inclusion as a fundamental value, but work to ensure they actually are diverse and inclusive communities in reality. Diversity—and the diversity of perspectives that comes with it—contributes in essential ways to providing students with the most compelling, most empowering education. Great universities embrace free expression and invite and encourage lively and civil discussion and debate. Are we doing all we can in these areas and, if not, how might we do better?

Our best universities, particularly those in urban settings, are being better neighbors by partnering with community leaders and investing in education, job training, and other programs as well as area amenities that benefit residents and university community-members alike. Faculty and students are increasingly working with local residents and community groups to apply their knowledge and learning to help address social problems in direct ways. Clark has unquestionably

been a good neighbor as part of the City of Worcester, but knowing the deep level of care we have for our home city and this partnership, what more can or should we do?

Great universities not only reflect the world and engage in it locally but are increasingly active in the world more broadly. Clark has long been attractive to students from around the world. Clark faculty do research and collaborate with others around the globe, as do many graduate students. And undergraduates have exciting study abroad opportunities. But should we be a more global university and, if so, what does that actually mean?

Great universities are increasingly exploring new types of partnerships with cultural, civic, and commercial organizations, as well as with other universities. What might such opportunities be for Clark and how would they support and enhance our mission?

Finally, great universities engage their alumni in multiple ways and foster lifelong connections. As an alum myself, I realize this is and must be a two-way street, and I would like to explore what more we can do to keep our alumni even more actively engaged and to inspire them to stay close to and involved in the life of their alma mater.

I look forward to exploring these and so many other questions, big and small, with you starting this summer. While great universities have many things in common, they are not all the same and don't need to be. Individual universities must embrace their own identities, leverage their own distinctive strengths, and be true to their own cultures and values. As the competitive landscape of higher education grows more so, a university like Clark will prosper precisely because of its distinctive set of characteristics and because of the remarkable people, like all of you, who believe in it.

I thank you for the privilege of this day and express the hope that you will join me in embracing the opportunities and engaging the challenges ahead.

I am thrilled and honored to be standing here today having been chosen Clark's 10th president. Together, inspired and enabled by the tremendous progress of the last ten years—indeed across the entire life of our University—let us carry forward the excellence, the impact, the story, and the possibilities that lift us, because this is, we are, Clark University!