

# **SERVING THE GREATER GOOD: THE MORAL IMPERATIVE FOR A COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEM**

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CONVOCATION SPEECH

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I stand before you today as the Servant Leader of a college whose mission is to change lives for the better, in a society that yearns for the knowledge that leads to a better life.

If America is to retain its stature as a great nation, we must assure that everyone is afforded an equal chance to achieve a quality education. Without an educated populace, democracy cannot survive. It is essential that we understand that our destiny is tied to the destiny of every child who enters our school system. Educating the populace is not a political question, it is a moral imperative.

The world we knew in the twentieth century no longer exists, and the principles upon which it was founded will no longer serve the twenty-first century. We must bring forth a new perspective and vision based on the rapidly changing demographics of our society, and the realities of a global and highly political economy.

A few years ago I proposed a bold idea – that community colleges could and should offer baccalaureate degrees. The concept was controversial and the object of doubt and ridicule. As Schopenhauer said, all new truths go through three stages. The first is ridicule, the second is violent opposition and the third is acceptance as self-evident. Today, half of Florida's community colleges, as well as those in sixteen other states, offer baccalaureate degrees. Thanks to those of you who believed in the idea, it is now widely accepted as a means of expanding access and improving success for thousands of students who would otherwise find higher education unavailable to them.

Today I want to propose an even bolder concept, one which has as its purpose the development of an education system which will serve as a model for breaking the cycle of generational poverty that diminishes us all, as individuals, families and communities.

How often have you heard the statement, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care"? Let me say it another way. People don't care what is in your head until they know what is in your heart.

I want to share with you this morning some thoughts from my heart and ask you to become a member of a special club, the Edison Heart Club. First, let me explain its purpose and what it stands for.

As plainly and simply as I can say it, the Heart Club's members believe in changing lives for the better. They want to inspire hope. They embrace life with enthusiasm. They speak openly from the heart, listen compassionately with the heart, and act decisively from the heart. They understand that, in order to change lives for the better, we as educators must teach not only knowledge but wisdom, not only truth but

integrity, character and trust. We must demonstrate our commitment to our students, our faith in them, and our abiding desire to help them, guide them, reason with them and support them.

The Heart Club is a union of pioneers with a driving passion for making a positive difference in the lives of those they serve. The Heart Club is meant for those who have a genuine belief that, regardless of job title or rank, we are here to serve others, *from the heart*. Our duties may include simply giving directions to a building or guiding someone to financial aid, or explaining how to solve a math problem or write a better paragraph. Or listening with sincere sympathy to a student who has lost a parent, or suffered from an abusive spouse, or feels lost and alone.

The Heart Club is for those who understand servant leadership and practice it in their daily lives. Each one of you is a leader, although you may not think of yourself as such. Simply defined, a leader is someone who attracts followers. It may be one follower, or millions. When, in the course of doing your job, you take the time to explain to someone how to meet a need, you are leading that person to a solution. If you help a student reach a new level of understanding, you lead. If, through your role as an admissions advisor, you explain the registration process to a struggling student, you lead.

We need a band of leaders who will follow Ralph Waldo Emerson's advice to "Go not where the path may lead. Go where there is no path and leave a trail." By following Emerson, we become leaders, leaders in search of followers who will themselves become leaders as the journey carries us toward the achievement of this ambitious and worthy goal, the creation of an entirely new education system.

Emerson's advice is meant for those with courage, optimism, vision -- and the *passion* to follow their dreams. At every turn along the way, we will rely on the knowledge and skill of each person on the team. Each one of us will become both a follower and a leader as we work together to forge this grand vision, sharing advice and counsel and benefiting from our collective insights.

The Edison Education System will be a pioneering system under one comprehensive philosophy, which will provide a unified, seamless pathway for learning from pre-kindergarten through the baccalaureate degree. Since there is no path to follow, we'll rely on your spirit of adventure and creative enthusiasm to pursue it, develop it and achieve it. My purpose today is not to describe the system to you or explain how it will be funded and managed. That will evolve from your ideas, guidance and counsel. My purpose today is to appeal to your emotional intelligence, to your heart, and to ask you to join me as charter members of the Edison Heart Club.

Here in Southwest Florida there are thousands of people, young and old, who hunger for a better life. The education which you can provide will open the doors of opportunity for them. Do you have the heart to hand them the key? The heart key will be our symbol.

If you have a genuine passion for helping others, join me in building something of lasting value. Become a member of the Edison Heart Club and give me your bond of commitment to the Edison Education System. Help us think through the challenges. Help us define and develop the organizational structure. Bring us your ideas, reactions and questions. Contribute with your head, your heart, and your hands as we design a system which will make dreams come true and change lives for the better.

Thank you.