

Inaugural Address
Krista Newkirk, 10th President of Converse College
April 21, 2017

Members of the Board of Trustees, former Presidents of Converse College, public officials, distinguished delegates of colleges and universities, members of the Converse community, colleagues, friends, and family, I'm honored by your presence. It is with humility, joy, and hope that I accept the leadership of this great college. I appreciate the trust of the Board of Trustees, the faculty and staff, the alumnae and students, and the community.

I would like to begin by recognizing and thanking the delegates who represent 54 colleges and universities. Your presence is an affirmation of Converse and of the collegiality and support between our institutions.

I am also delighted to welcome back all four of Converse College's living former presidents: Betsy Fleming, Nancy Gray, Sandra Thomas, and Ellen Hall. We appreciate your leadership, your wisdom, and your role in building the strong foundation that enables Converse to be successful today. Thank you also for your guidance and support when I have reached out to you.

The imprint of the Converse community is on every aspect of this beautiful celebration - from the music composed especially for the inauguration by Professor Scott Robbins, to the debut of the Converse Mace that was designed and crafted by Professor Greg Mueller, to the Presidential Medallion that was handmade by alumna Mary Helen Dalton of the Class of 1946. I am most appreciative of being welcomed with these personal and professional expressions of talent and of your love for Converse.

The journey for me to this moment has been a long one with many twists and unexpected turns. It is a journey that would be impossible without the love, support, mentorship, and guidance of many people. While I could

not begin to list all who have touched my life in profound ways, I would like to share and thank a few.

My parents, who have passed away, set an example and expectation for me that I struggle every day to meet. They were people of profound faith, deep generosity, and incredible work ethic. Because they expected so much of me and convinced me that I could accomplish it, I have expected much of myself and have worked hard to make them proud.

My two older brothers who are here today, Kiff and Kody Newkirk, have encouraged and supported me through both good times and years of struggle. They both faced the unfair responsibility at a young age to step up and act as the men of the household, and as both brothers and sometimes father figures to me. They are outstanding men of whom our parents would be proud.

My dear husband, Lewis Glenn, started as a good friend and confidante and grew to be the love of my life. Thank you for your unwavering support, your humor, the example you set for our sons, and let's be honest, your amazing patience. And, finally, my two sons, Conrad and Holden. As wonderful as today is, it pales in comparison to the day I first met each of you and to the joy you give me every single day. The greatest honor of my life is to be your mother and my greatest hope is that I can instill in you a deep sense of being loved, worthy, and capable.

Beyond my family, I have had the privilege to observe and to be mentored by several extraordinary leaders and colleagues at UNC Charlotte. For over 4 years, I served as Chief of Staff to Chancellor Phil Dubois, a gifted leader in higher education. Through his tutelage, I gained invaluable lessons on leadership and the detailed operations of a large university. Chancellor Dubois will tell you that he was mentored by Chancellor Jim Woodward, another truly gifted leader. I had the good fortune to work for both, and am a better person for it. I also had the pleasure of working for David Broome, General Counsel for UNC Charlotte and learned much

from his brilliant legal mind and his caring and compassionate management. Finally, I had powerful examples of women leaders in Judy Rose, Director of Intercollegiate Athletics, and Dr. Joan Lorden, Provost – both of whom have accomplished much with grace, intelligence, charisma and perseverance.

I am also honored to have here today my high school music teacher, Starla Taylor. Like all truly great teachers, Mrs. Taylor inspired, encouraged and challenged me, while helping me to put my teenage troubles into perspective. And as long as she agrees to never share my high school photographs, she is welcome at Converse any time.

At Converse, I have been fortunate to have the support of the Chair of our Board of Trustees, Kim Kent. I am positive Kim did not know what she had signed up for when she agreed to help onboard a new president, but I have appreciated her guidance and friendship throughout the process. I accepted this position in large part because I knew I would get to work arm-in-arm with her, and would continue to have the guidance of former Board chair Ben Wall, and the mentorship of Life Trustee Bill Barnet. I appreciate your support.

The Future of Converse College

Now, with my personal comments aside, let me be honest with you. Today is not about me. As one senior, distinguished, and long-serving Converse faculty member reminded me when he first met me, “college presidents come and go and they really make no difference to me. They are just expensive temporary help.” And, in a real way, he is right – although I hope to be more than temporary. Today is about Converse College, the long and important role it has played in the lives of young women, and its future in continuing to provide an educational experience that transforms young people and serves to better our community.

Converse was founded in 1889, and in its 128-year-history, it has faced many challenges. We are in a time of great change for higher education,

and of political, civil and economic unrest. How does Converse College continue to be relevant and to thrive in an age when we see many small colleges struggle and some close, and many women's colleges change their mission or merge? How will Converse equip its students for a future where technology is developing at an unprecedented pace? Where more data has been created in the last two years than in the entire previous history of the human race? How will it meet the needs of Generation Z – a generation that makes up 25% percent of our population and is the first generation “to be born into a world where every physical aspect has a digital equivalent”ⁱ? For them, the real and virtual worlds overlap. They have never known a world without Wi-Fi and they have grown up as the generation of DIY (do it yourself)ⁱⁱ – where they use online resources to figure out how to do anything they want. They are fiercely independent, while being dependent on the internet and social media. They are on their devices 24-hours a day, connected and accessible.

This generation has seen and felt the effects of the great recession, so they have a practical nature and approach to education;ⁱⁱⁱ they are also the most entrepreneurial generation;^{iv} they have seen the boundless potential for powerful innovators; and they understand the value of shared economies such as Uber and Airbnb^v. They are the ultimate multi-taskers who work on three devices at once and who do not expect a 9-to-5 job where they walk away from work and disconnect.

They expect to work many different jobs in their lifetime, change careers, and perhaps retrain themselves along the way – but they expect to do so instantly and through their phones.

So, how does a small, residential, women's liberal arts college grow and succeed in the face of these challenges?

The Converse College Ideal

We will do this by returning to the guidance of our founder, Dexter Edgar Converse who, when he founded this college in 1889, penned this ideal:

“I desire that the instruction and influence of Converse College be always such that the students may be enabled to see clearly, decide wisely, and to act justly; that they may learn to love God and **humanity**, and be faithful to **truth** and **duty**, so their influence may be characterized by **purity** and **power**.”

Converse College often and rightly focuses on the values of: seeing clearly, deciding wisely, and acting justly. But, today, I would like to focus on another part of Mr. Converse’s statement, asserting that true leaders show a love for humanity, and are faithful to truth and duty, so their influence may be pure and powerful. Our future is firmly rooted in these principles. They are our lodestar and will continue to create a powerful launch pad for our students to accomplish great things.

Truth

The first principle, truth, compels Converse to remain true to its uniquely powerful environment for developing the talents and leadership of women. Converse focuses in a very personal way on her students. In my time here, I have heard a remarkably consistent refrain from faculty, staff, alumnae, and most importantly, our students. Each highlighted the powerful and positive transformation that occurs here due to the care and concern with which students are treated at Converse.

We must remain true to our goal of providing the highest quality liberal arts education for students, which prepares them not just for the jobs of today, but also for jobs that have not yet been invented. We equip them to be flexible and adaptable with skills of written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, computation and research, critical and analytical thinking, international and historic perspective, ethical judgment, and the application of knowledge to real world settings.

When we combine this strong liberal arts education with specialized and technical knowledge, we create the “T-shaped” individuals we hear from

industry that they need. These are employees who have not only the expansive liberal arts background and skills to identify issues in a broad and global context, but also a deep understanding of a specialized and technical area, allowing them to use that technical knowledge to better understand, analyze and apply solutions to broader issues, and communicate those solutions to others. Converse College already offers strong programs in biology, chemistry, mathematics, biochemistry, and medical technology, as well as tracks in genetic counseling, pre-pharmacy, and other areas. We must look for ways to expand our STEM programs and to provide our students with opportunities in these fields by leveraging the power of a liberal arts education.

We must also deepen our commitment to our graduate programs, adding educational components that meet the needs of our community and region, and we must create a more engaging graduate student experience so that they too feel as if they have truly been a part of the Converse community.

We must continue to provide strong programs in music and art. When I first visited Converse, I heard about the strength of its music program, its status as a Steinway institution and its strong theater program. But, it wasn't until I attended my first music performance, the faculty talent show with my teenage son who turned to me and mouthed, "wow" when he heard Chris Vaneman play the flute, that I began to truly appreciate the program we have. My admiration has grown with each music and theater performance I have attended. The strength of our program has also been recognized internationally, and we recently signed several agreements with Chinese universities who wish to send graduate students and symphony members to Converse to receive their master's degrees and graduate diplomas in music performance.

Finally, we must make sure students in our region and in targeted markets know the truth about Converse and how wonderful it is so that they will consider us as a viable option for their college home.

Duty

Mr. Converse's second principle is duty. In order to cultivate a sense of duty within our students, we must expand opportunities for them to engage in the community through experiential learning and service. These experiences complement the theoretical learning in the classroom to provide necessary epiphanies for students as they begin to apply their knowledge for the betterment of our world.

We have already started this important work by removing hurdles that prevented students from accepting internships, by providing financing for their internship travels, and by creating paid internships on campus related to their fields of study.

Converse has an important duty, as well, to serve this region. Converse was founded by, and has been sustained by, community support over many years, and we will meet our obligation to this region by broadening our connections with local businesses and industry to develop the workforce they need, and by helping them retain talent in the Upstate to contribute to the region's economic development. For it is through this economic development that we bring opportunities and prosperity for the next generation. As W. E. B. Du Bois said, "Education and work are the levers to uplift a people."^{vi}

Converse will continue to be an institution that is accessible and affordable. Converse made a bold commitment to this a few years ago with the tuition reset, and that commitment has been good for students and for the financial stability of the college. We will continue to make the Converse experience accessible to capable and talented women, including those who may think a college education is out of reach.

Humanity

It is imperative that we develop in our students a strong sense of humanity – the third principle. In this time of political, economic, religious, racial, moral, and ethnic strife, marked by conflict and polarization, this close-knit

Converse family must set an example and instill in its students compassion, love, kindness and empathy for others, including those who are different from them.

Converse's new Quality Enhancement Plan, which introduces students to, and engages them in experiences with, people from different cultures, backgrounds, identities, and beliefs, is a good start. It is by these experiences, where students see past their differences to the core humanity of a person, that they will grow and expand their horizons to embrace their collective humanity.

Purity and Power

The final principles are purity and power. Converse has the wonderful, exciting, and challenging responsibility of helping its students discover their power – and then to teach them how to harness it and use it in ways that embrace the other principles. We do this by fostering an environment where students feel free to speak up and speak out, where they are encouraged to take on leadership roles, where they live by the honor code and instill in themselves and each other strong ethics, and where they gain the confidence to try new experiences and to lean into their discomfort.

As a women's college, we know that we have a disproportionately high impact on our students and their willingness and confidence to take on leadership roles. In the United States, only 2% of female college graduates attend women's colleges; yet 20% of women in Congress, and 30% of rising women in corporate America, graduated from women's colleges.^{vii} These studies also show women's colleges produce a higher proportion of entrepreneurs. We will continue to encourage our students to take on leadership roles and will connect them with our alumnae who have become powerful leaders in their own right so that they may inspire and mentor them.

To meet all of these challenges and commitments, Converse must strategically plan its future. We started that work this fall with the

development of an academic strategic plan. The work on this plan continues and its goals and objectives will form the basis for the strategic plan of the whole College. This plan will ensure that the College remains relevant in this technological age, that it provides programs students desire and businesses need, and that it adequately prepares students.

As this academic year began, Converse welcomed our largest incoming class in 27 years of 300 new students, including 83 student athletes. These students were academically impressive – 20% of them were in the top 10% of their class. We will grow enrollment again this fall for Converse must strategically grow both its undergraduate and graduate student enrollment to continue to succeed in the future.

Finally, we empower Converse to move forward by continuing to build our division of Institutional Advancement, including our alumnae relations and communications departments. The work in this area will set the stage for us to launch a capital campaign. By increasing the College's endowment, we will provide new opportunities to our students and increase the influence of the College.

Together a Strong Future

In conclusion, the future for Converse is bright. As a community of scholars, where students and faculty pursue excellence and collaborate in the search for truth, Converse cultivates in its students academic excellence, personal honor, confidence, a sense of duty to contribute to the betterment of humanity and community, and the ability to influence in a powerful and ethical manner.

We are able to provide these experiences through the expertise and dedication of our faculty and staff. Our faculty are incredibly talented and devoted individuals who teach in innovative and engaging ways. They reach out to students and care about their success both in and out of the classroom. Our accomplished staff take extraordinary measures to help students and to encourage them. Our faculty and staff are the linchpin to

the success of our students, and thus our success and we must invest and support them.

I wish you could see what I see as I look out at this gathering of students, friends, faculty, staff, alumnae, and community members. As I look at all of you, I am grateful and privileged to know that I have your support and your partnership as we work together to chart the future of Converse College. The spirit of Converse, of connection, support, and sisterhood, is the tie that binds us together - and we know that we are better and stronger together than we are alone. I cherish the trust you have bestowed on me as Converse College's 10th president, and I welcome and encourage your involvement and help in building our future.

Thank you.

ⁱ Trapp, Roger, The Next Generation of Workers Seeks Good Jobs and Private Offices, *Forbes*, March 22, 2017, accessed April 6, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rogertrapp/2017/03/22/the-next-generation-of-workers-seeks-good-jobs-and-private-offices/#51f0f6ec3479>.

ⁱⁱ Trapp.

ⁱⁱⁱ Trapp.

^{iv} Lagorio-Chafkin, Christine, The Most Entrepreneurial Generation Yet, *Inc.*, June 19, 2014, accessed April 6, 2017, <https://www.inc.com/christine-lagorio/entrepreneurial-generation-z.html>.

^v Trapp.

^{vi} Du Bois, W.E.B., *The Talented Tenth*, The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day (New York, 1903), accessed April 14, 2018, <http://glc.yale.edu/talented-tenth-excerpts>.

^{vii} Hennessey, Rachel, What's In a Women's College?, *Forbes*, February 6, 2013, accessed April 14, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelhennessey/2013/02/06/whats-in-a-womens-college/#72b2e3247379>.