Let’s Begin!

Good morning Boston University Class of 2009!

This morning you sit together as a class for the very first time. You are seated just down Commonwealth Avenue from historic Nickerson Field — the site where the Boston Braves baseball team played. After these proceedings, I hope you will go to Nickerson field to participate in SPLASH, an informal rush for extra-curricular activities at BU. But as you will grow to understand, Nickerson field today is not only a sports field; it is the place where you will graduate from this university. Each May a long line forms and enters Nickerson field. The line is of BU graduates who have accomplished what they began on an autumn day, just like today.

Today you start your march toward this goal. You have started the next stage of what has been an outstanding educational career. To arrive here today, you have accomplished a great deal; through your intellect, drive and perseverance you have gained admission to one of the great private universities in America. In front of you, like a winding road, stretch tremendous opportunities that you may take and experiences that you can have. The education you accumulate and the experiences you have will last a lifetime. They will define your college experience and set you on the path of your professional and personal life. You are here today to matriculate — to enroll or begin this great educational journey. Are you ready to begin?

I am too! You and I have more in common than you might guess. I am matriculating with you. I have the honor to be asked to serve Boston University as its President and I just started last Thursday. I do have the advantage of having spent a large part of the summer studying my assignment, moving up and down Commonwealth Avenue learning everything I can about this marvelous academic community.

I have learned much more about what I already knew at a superficial level; that Boston University — its faculty, staff, students and programs — is one of the most exciting and dynamic universities in America. I, too, am ready to go!

You are about to start one of the most important phases of your life. It is hard to imagine that there will be another four-year period when you will have easy access to such an array of educational, cultural and social opportunities. These are just waiting for your initiative. You will be faced over and over again with what the comic-book character and intellectual icon, Pogo Possum, described as “insurmountable opportunities”. These opportunities will be what you make of them. It will be up to you.

What kinds of choices do you have in front of you? How do you recognize the choices and develop some sense of the priorities? I will try to give you some context for thinking about these questions. But before I do, I thought it might be good that we know a little bit about the
history of Boston University where we will collectively spend the lion’s share of our life in the coming years. Here are some very brief observations about your university.

As is true of so many of the great private universities in this country, Boston University started as a Methodist seminary. Founded in 1839, it was initially located in Newbury, Vermont. The seminary first moved to Concord, New Hampshire and finally to Boston in 1867 where, two-years later it formed the core of Boston University. William Fairfield Warren, the founding president, had a vision for a very novel institution that combined the undergraduate education of a New England college and the new model for professional and graduate education that was emerging from German universities. Warren envisioned a university where students would be educated without regard to their sex, race or religion.

Boston University was a radical university. For example, from its opening, all its programs were open to women. There were never quotas for Jewish students or African Americans. Martin Luther King Jr. studied here in the late 1950’s. At that time, nearly half of this country’s doctoral degrees earned by African-American students in religion and philosophy were awarded by Boston University. BU also awarded the first Ph.D. earned by a woman in 1877; our school of medicine became the first university to train woman doctors.

The concept of diversity is not new to Boston University. I am committed to BU continuing to be known as a campus where diversity flourishes.

The campus you see today is a far cry from the original set of buildings that the university occupied in and around Beacon Hill. As the university grew, the campus spread across Boston, with the School of Medicine located in the South End, where it remains today, adjacent to the Boston Medical Center and joined by the Schools of Dentistry and Public Health. The College of Liberal Arts — the precursor to our present College of Arts and Sciences — relocated to Back Bay. It was after World War One that the decision was made to build a new central campus along the Charles River. The first building was completed in 1939 and the move was completed in the early 60’s. The river provides one of the great iconic locations for higher education in the world, with the multiple universities spread along its banks. There is more intellectual energy and more students in the Charles River basin than in many countries.

There is a challenge with our location; the geography of a long and slender campus, bordered by the river and Storrow Drive on the north and Commonwealth Avenue on the South. Such is the plight of an urban campus and the cost of opportunity for space such as the “BU Beach”. We will all get our exercise walking from the student village to Kenmore Square.

Today, Boston University has a continually changing, modern campus spread along the Charles River and representing the old and the new of Boston. Consider student housing in the new high-rise suite-style dormitory at 10 Buick Street and in the small, intimate brown stones alone Bay State Road. New athletic facilities have been built, like the Track and Tennis Center where we are today, and the Agganis Arena and the Student Recreation and Fitness Center. I hope you will use these facilities, as well as the bike and running path along the river, to exercise
and stay healthy. These habits will be as important to you throughout your life as the intellectual
discipline you will develop in your studies.

Boston University is a modern research university and our faculty members have a dual
mission. In addition to delivering excellent undergraduate programs to you, our faculty members
work to maintain leading-edge research and scholarship in their disciplines, and, many times, to
work together with graduate and under-graduate students to define new inter-disciplinary
research frontiers. Boston University is dedicated to the dual mission of excellence in teaching
and research.

The research mission is most clearly visible on campus through the presence of the large
buildings in the science and engineering complex. For example, the new Life Science and
Engineering Building, which opened last spring, added 180,000 square feet of laboratory, office
and conference space to this effort. This facility is at the vanguard of inter-disciplinary thinking
because space in the building is organized by areas of research interest rather than by traditional
academic departments.

Today, Boston University is one of the premier urban research universities in the world.
The quality of this university is no better defined than by the quality of our faculty. Our faculty
represents the breadth and depth of the intellectual disciplines and is committed to the balance of
teaching and research. We are very fortunate to have a large gathering of faculty at today’s
ceremony. [WOULD THE FACULTY PLEASE RISE?] I’d like our entering students to
recognize your future teachers and mentors with a warm round of applause. [THANK YOU.]

The faculty and teaching staff are a resource for you. It is up to you to make the
connections. My advice is that you take advantage of opportunities to work closely with your
teachers. Make it a goal that when you leave BU, you will have faculty members that know
you — it is a good idea for future references, if not for any other reason!

One wonderful way to accomplish this goal is to become involved in the scholarly and
research enterprise. The Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program, or UROP, is organized
to give undergraduates opportunities to participate in faculty-mentored research and scholarship
across all disciplines and throughout the calendar year. There are research projects available that
range from History to Religion, Economics, Computer Science, Humanities and Biomedical
Engineering. These are options open to you.

Boston University prides itself on the tradition of a liberal education for all our
undergraduates, coupled with a wonderful set of opportunities for undergraduate professional
education. BU offers over 250 undergraduate and graduate programs giving a broad and rich
background in humanities, arts, social science and natural science and professional education in
music, visual arts, engineering, management, education, rehabilitation sciences and
communications, to name just a few of our programs. Few universities offer such a vast array of
educational opportunities.

For example, the College of Arts and Sciences at BU offers an education steeped in the
traditions of self-discovery and evaluation for the transfer of knowledge in humanities, the
natural sciences and social sciences. The programs of CAS are sponsored by 23 departments and interdisciplinary degree programs. It is the intellectual breadth that you develop at BU and that you nurture going forward that will make your life intellectually rich and rewarding. Hopefully, your education at BU will give you context for weighing contemporary thought against classical principles; the historical background to more effectively join in a political debate; a basis for understanding the accomplishments, future potential and risks associated with science and technology in our lives; and, supply you with a set of social-economic principles to guide your career and your analysis of the world. I know these are lofty educational aspirations for you to contemplate today. As you can imagine, these goals are so easily buried in the weekly and nightly churn of paper writing, reading assignments and problem sets. But these goals are well worth thinking about today as you plot the road you will travel.

As you begin, you will see all these choices unfold in front of you and you will have to manage them. The choices appear in terms of classes you will take from the vast array available, and also extracurricular activities in which you decide to join, starting with Splash, for example, this afternoon. The daunting task is making these choices. Hopefully, you will find a consistency of purpose about why you are here, where you want to go, and the type of person you want to be.

**What goals would I suggest to you?** I have two specific suggestions. First, make it a goal to grow in multiple dimensions. (Well, maybe not your waste line…) Make it a goal to take advantage of BU and its setting in the great city of Boston. For example, you can develop great cultural appreciation by taking advantage of the wealth of galleries, plays, museums, concerts and lectures on campus and in Boston. Don’t graduate from BU and have someone ask you the location of the Huntington Theater and have to say, “I don’t know”!

Second, push yourself to reach as high as possible in your studies. A university is a meritocracy; where you come from and what your parent’s income level is do not matter. What matters is your performance in classes and special projects. Make it a goal to do your best - to excel to the highest level possible.

There will be things to cheer about at BU. You can revel in the athletics on campus and in Boston. I hope you will support the Terrier teams, including the legendary men’s hockey team. One of Boston’s most exciting annual sporting events is the Beanpot tournament, where Harvard, Boston College, Northeastern and Boston University vie for hockey bragging rights in town. Boston University has had the lock on this event: we have won the Beanpot Tournament 26 of the 53 times it has been held, including 11 of the last 15 years!

There are many other wonderful sporting events that make Boston a very special place, like the Head of the Charles Regatta next month and the Boston Marathon on Patriot’s Day in April. And there always are professional sports. The last four years would suggest that the New England Patriots are the first professional football dynasty of this century. And you will be going to school in the shadow of Fenway Park. There is no better place in America to watch America’s pastime and no better status than to be a Red Sox fan. Many of you don’t know it yet, but you will leave Boston as Red Sox fans. Of course, this choice is up to you!
There are many other choices you will face that are deeply personal and sometimes very difficult. Over and over again, you will have to balance your personal health and well being with the pressures from your studies and from social and extra-curricular activities. The rest you get, eating regularly and well, and exercising are all essential to your functioning up to your capacity and to your long-term. Boston University has put in place wonderful facilities for you. Believe it or not, our dining halls are great, even according to student surveys! The fitness and recreation center and other athletic facilities give you the opportunities to participate in a myriad of activities; again, the choice is up to you. There are bad habits, namely alcohol and drug abuses that carry serious risks to your health and that can adversely affect your continued status as a student at BU. I know that you have heard these warnings throughout orientation, but I want to repeat that we take these abuses very seriously. We have your best interest at heart in doing so. If you feel you or a friend has or is developing a problem with drugs or alcohol seek help immediately from a member of the faculty or administration. We are here for you.

I hope my remarks have given you some ideas about how to approach college life and how to set your expectations for the next four years. The choices are indeed up to you. Your primary responsibility is neither to us, nor to your parents, your professors or teaching assistants. It is up to you.

You have the extraordinary privilege and opportunity to study in and be a member of a great educational and cultural community. Your status as a student in this community gives you an enormous amount of freedom for you to design your college education. Boston University has the faculty, staff, programs and facilities to help you succeed. All over the world, there are thousands, actually millions, of young adults, like you, yearning for this opportunity. The next four years will shape how you compete with these people in the global economy that will operate during your life.

This fall there will also be some special visiting students in our community. The terrible disaster in the Gulf States caused by Hurricane Katrina has displaced an enormous number of university students. We have opened the doors of Boston University to undergraduate students from Tulane University for the fall semester so that they can continue their studies with a minimum of disruption. I ask you and all BU upper-classmen to extend the warmth of the BU community to our friends from Tulane. Show them that we understand the terrible storm they have endured and that our academic community will be a warm safe harbor until their university is open and operating again.

Now please think about why you are here and what you want to accomplish. Think about the opportunities you have in front of you and the others who would love to be in this room with you. You have accomplished much in a very, very short time, but there is much left to do. As the dying character played by Tom Hanks in the Movie “Saving Private Ryan” so aptly put it: “…it is up to you to Earn It.” (?) Earn the honor of being an outstanding graduate of Boston University.

Now let’s Go! Thank you.