



OGLETHORPE

UNIVERSITY

Inaugural Address by Dr. Kathryn McClymond

18th President of Oglethorpe University

September 20, 2024

Thank you, Tammy, members of the Board of Trustees, Oglethorpe faculty, staff, and students, community leaders, dear friends, and my extraordinary family.

As I started thinking about today, I remembered a moment from my childhood. Growing up, I attended a large public high school, and I was deeply involved in theater. The theater class took a trip to New York City to see shows on Broadway, and my mother came with us as a chaperone. At one point she brought a close friend named Rob and me to a theater to take us to a musical we had both been dying to see. The theater only had one ticket left. My mother gave the ticket to my friend, and she and I didn't attend. I don't remember what we did instead – I DO know I wasn't very happy at the time – but mostly I remember her words to me: "You," she said, "will have lots of opportunities to see theater – I can guarantee that. But I don't know for sure that Rob will have that opportunity, so I'm going to make sure he gets that opportunity now." My friend, Rob, pursued a career in the theater, and I like to think that my mother's actions in that moment played a small part in his professional path.

I say frequently that higher education is a noble calling, a generous profession. Individuals who are bright and capable deliberately choose to pour their knowledge, passion, energy, and caring into other people's children. They deliberately choose to make life-changing opportunities available to complete strangers. Like my mother – who was a college professor and department chair herself – they assure opportunity for others. I have spent over 25 years in higher education because I believe that a life spent that way, a life dedicated to assuring opportunities for others, is the most meaningful life I could lead. At this moment in my career –

and at this moment in local, national, and global history – I can't imagine a better place to do this work than at Oglethorpe University.

Oglethorpe – as everyone in this room knows – is a special place. Our mission statement says, “Atlanta’s Oglethorpe University is committed to teaching excellence in an inclusive learning environment.” But every university, of course, talks about excellence. So, what’s so special about Oglethorpe? What brought me to Oglethorpe, and what compels me to serve now as its president, is Oglethorpe’s distinctive insight into the nature of “excellence” in higher education. First, at Oglethorpe, we understand that excellence develops one student at a time. It is a deeply personal experience. Academic excellence is nurtured and blossoms uniquely in each individual student. This is time- and labor-intensive, and we don’t graduate the tens of thousands of students each year that other institutions graduate. For us, that’s a good thing. We know that a personalized experience, with deep community-wide investment in each individual student, is life-changing.

Second, at Oglethorpe we understand that excellence comes in all shapes and sizes, informed by distinct personality types, passions, and experiences. It requires us to be a student-ready university. Rather than asking each student to arrive college-ready in a singular, cookie-cutter way, we accept the challenge to take each student as they are and prepare them for the future they can’t even imagine yet. At Oglethorpe, you can be truly, fully successful while being truly, fully, authentically yourself. Every student belongs here, and we continue to learn with each generation how to open our welcoming arms just a little bit wider, so excellence is available to all. This celebration of each student’s individuality has been part of our DNA for generations. Our “Core” program begins with a required course entitled “Narratives of the Self.” While the course requires students to read about other people’s lives, that’s only the beginning. Our Core 101 class is a clarion call to new freshmen to be the authors of their *own* life stories. Contemporary culture pressures students to choose a role that fits in an already-established worldview, and then frames the college experience as something that prepares the student to fit into that world. Our Core program, beginning with Core 101, upends this experience. It puts the individual human at the forefront, as the architect of their own world, the author of their own story. We empower students to take a posture of self-determination, envisioning the world they

want to create and taking their rightful place as the author of their own life narrative, rather than becoming a minor character in someone else's storyline. Oglethorpe's graduates write their own unique life stories.

Finally, at Oglethorpe we understand that excellence is meant to be put into action to benefit the community, not just an individual. Remember, our mission statement begins with the phrase "Atlanta's Oglethorpe University." We were founded in 1835, and since 1915 we have been on this campus, an anchor to a thriving community that has grown up around us. Throughout its history, Oglethorpe leaders have shaped Atlanta. For example, our first woman Board Chair, Ms. Belle Turner Lynch, also founded and then served as president and as a Board member of the Atlanta Alzheimer's Association, served on the Board of Directors of the Atlanta Speech School, and led a community effort to support historic preservation that ultimately led to the formation of the Buckhead Heritage Society. Most significantly, our alumni have helped make Atlanta what it is today. I think of Francis Bemis, former writer for the *Atlanta Constitution* and the *Atlanta Journal* and publicist for the Woman's Club of Atlanta; Tim Tassopoulos, former President and COO of Chik-fil-A and Chair of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Metro Atlanta; of Cody Partin, recently appointed President of the Cox Family Office; of Representative Dar'shun Kendrick and Representative Ruwa Romman, representing House Districts 95 and 97 respectively in the Georgia House of Representatives; of the Honorable Christopher J. McFadden, a Judge serving on the Georgia Court of Appeals since 2011. I could go on and on. Atlanta as we know it today does not exist without Oglethorpe. Excellence at Oglethorpe means impact, especially impact in Atlanta and across Georgia.

Excellence that is nurtured one student at a time, excellence that is true to oneself, and excellence that has impact. This is the promise of Oglethorpe, and the world has never needed that promise more than at this moment in history. We live in a tumultuous world right now. Cultural, business, and governmental leaders need sharp minds, open hearts, and rolled-up sleeves. Our local, state, and national communities in particular face challenges and opportunities. We live in a politically, socially, racially, and economically divided country, and Georgia reflects that. We also inherit a powerful civic and moral legacy, and we still bear the scars of social division while we build toward a better future. We face housing challenges,

increasing economic disparities, and social upheaval, with no overnight solutions in sight. At the same time, Atlanta is poised for opportunity. For the 10th year in a row, Georgia has been recognized as the best state in the country for business. Recent polling indicates that Atlanta is the 4th most popular city in the country for new college graduates to move to. As of today, Atlanta ranks #2 for sound stage space in the United States, and we are attracting tech, manufacturing, and data center business at a rapid clip. The Atlanta Opera has been recognized as one of the top 10 opera companies in the United States and is in the midst of a multi-year production of Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, never before offered in the Southeast. And in 2026, Atlanta will be on the international stage, hosting the FIFA World Cup. The world is knocking on Atlanta's doors. I believe that every university has a civic responsibility to produce the workforce necessary to drive our economic, cultural, and civic growth, but Oglethorpe has a higher calling. Oglethorpe is called to be a force for holistic leadership in Atlanta and Georgia. Where will the innovative leaders for business growth come from? I say, from Oglethorpe. Where will the civic leadership for social change come from? Where will the creative leadership for film, theater, music, and athletics come from? Again, I say from Oglethorpe. Over 80% of Oglethorpe students come from Georgia and over 80% of our graduates stay in Georgia. Oglethorpe embraces today's challenges and will do its part to produce the globally informed and locally dedicated leadership force that Atlanta needs to thrive.

Oglethorpe was founded almost 200 years ago. In the years to come we will steward the "DNA" of our community – an abiding commitment to academic excellence and a personalized experience for every student – with a keen awareness of the historical moment we inhabit, an openness to drawing on cutting edge pedagogical strategies to support student academic and personal success, and a commitment to teaching students how to apply their subject matter expertise for the greater good, not just their own gain. My focus over the coming years will be to serve Atlanta, Georgia, and the Southeast well by serving our students well. We will do this by maintaining our commitment to the traditional liberal arts and empowering our students with "new" liberal arts skills: digital fluency, climate literacy, intercultural competence, and high stakes/high conflict leadership skills. Our investment in them is an investment in Atlanta's future, Georgia's future, and our national and global fellowship. My vision is that when we celebrate our 200th anniversary in 2035, Oglethorpe will be rightfully recognized as Atlanta's premier

undergraduate learning experience. “Atlanta’s” because we embrace our history and position in this amazing city, informed by a global perspective while committed to this city and state; and “undergraduate” because we are committed to transforming lives at that critical developmental moment when students take ownership of their adult lives.

I won’t lie: to provide the environment that fosters students’ success isn’t easy. The work of higher education faces tough headwinds these days, especially when we want to make a college degree available at an affordable cost to families. Creating opportunities for others involves hard, sustained work, work that our dedicated faculty, staff, alumni, and Board of Trustees members contribute daily, often in unseen ways. But can you imagine anything more meaningful than dedicating your life to the growth of the next generation? For me, this is the secret gift of Oglethorpe. Our motto, “Make a life, make a living, make a difference” is usually interpreted as a challenge to our students. But I hear it more broadly. “Make a life, make a living, make a difference” is an invitation to *all* of us here today. Oglethorpe invites *all* of us to participate in this audacious act of generosity that is higher education, the offering of opportunity to complete strangers.

I look back on that afternoon, decades ago, when my mother created an opportunity for one teen-aged boy. She did that intentionally. But she also created another opportunity unintentionally, one for *me*, by including me in her act of generosity. She gave me a glimpse of what it means to live a life considering others and putting that consideration into action. I am honored today to join the generations of Oglethorpe faculty, staff, alumni, and presidents who have chosen to leave a legacy of generosity. Thank you for this privilege.