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Growing with Confidence
St. Augustine*

Greetings,

Every time I come to this campus I have to comment on the way in which you have managed to retain green spaces and preserve the magnificent samaan trees when there is such pressure from student numbers. There is always the hustle and bustle of a living, vibrant institution, and I am sure visitors are taken and sometimes surprised by an environment which is far removed from the traditional image of sleepy academia.

Graduation days are special days for us, and I often reflect on why we have these ceremonies and observe these rituals. There is of course tradition, but the tradition serves a purpose. There was a matriculation ceremony when you graduands were inducted into the University, but that was a private ceremony. This ceremony is intentionally a public one and has, I think, several functions. First, it marks a significant rite of passage and all important rites of passage should involve more than just the individual. The public has a role, not only because some individuals in it have supported you directly, but also because you are a product of a public decision to invest in higher education as a pillar of national development. As with every important rite of passage, there is a celebration here—a celebration of achievement and this is sweeter when it is shared. I believe that the ritual is also of seminal importance to parents and significant others who take understandable pride in seeing their relatives participate in the ceremony. Also for you the graduands, this is perhaps the last time you will gather as a group and congratulate yourselves on how special you are because you are indeed special.

You are special because you will forever bear the mark of the Pelican. You are special because you are a special product of this University and this large and growing Campus—there are over 18,000 students registered. About sixteen and a half thousand are from Trinidad and Tobago, but let us note that there are students from every one of the University's contributing countries and students from 39 other countries—from Canada to Argentina and from the United States of America to China and Japan. 3341 students have been awarded degrees this year and 670 of these are graduate degrees. The Social Sciences provide the largest number of graduates followed by Humanities and Education

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and Science and Agriculture. I must congratulate those of you who obtained First Class Honors degrees-6% of the total. These results are also a tribute to the Faculty, who I know take much pride in your accomplishments and advancement. Over the past 10 years, this campus has produced just over 23,000 graduates and even though some have undoubtedly left, this has to be an impressive contribution to the human capital of the Caribbean. The male female ratio has been remarkably consistent with about two-thirds of the students enrolled and graduating being female. The only Faculty in which males predominate is engineering. Perhaps I should say-so far!

The growth of this Campus has been due in large measure to the generosity of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. I must say thanks for its support to the University in general and to this campus in particular. It is that support that allows this Campus to grow with confidence. It is clear that the Government by its investment in tertiary education does not think of it as merely the cap on the traditional educational pyramid, but as one of the pillars of its development. In this context, I wish to note the steady increase in the numbers of law students enrolled and the remarkable increase in the number of qualified applicants-this year over 1000, and I wish to record our gratitude to the government of Trinidad and Tobago for providing the land and resources for the establishment of a South Campus in Penal/Debe for the Faculty of Law. At the formal dedication of this South Campus earlier this year I noted that 51 years ago when the St. Augustine Campus was established, the then Prime Minister, Dr. Eric Williams noted that the campus would not be complete without the teaching of law. We have visions of a model, modern Campus which is very student-centered, which will be green, well endowed with the technology for connectedness and will be a genuine commons of learning. I wish to think that our relation with the government in this and in other matters is a partnership with a shared common vision for this enterprise.

I am sure that over the past month you have heard much of the life of Dr. Williams as the 100th anniversary of his birth was on September 25th. You owe much to him. I am sure you have been told of his speech at Independence when he gave equality of opportunity for all in education as one of the components of the democracy he wished for Trinidad and Tobago. You graduands are a product of that equality of education. I recall vividly hearing him in 1963 when he spoke at the first graduation ceremony of the independent University of the West Indies when he questioned the initial narrow conceptualization of the University and saw it spreading much more widely. He would have been proud of the 44,000 students spread over the Caribbean. His charge to the graduands that evening has salience for you even now. He said that the first responsibility of the graduates was to their alma mater and they should undertake to keep it strong. He also enjoined them to read and to continue to engage in scholarship whatever their chosen calling later in life. I trust that those of you who are fascinated with the reach of technology will recall his message that was I one of 73 taken by Apollo 11 to the moon "It is our fervent hope for mankind that while we gain the moon, we shall not lose the world".

One of the most significant events in the life of the Campus during this year was its accreditation by the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago. The objective of

the accreditation is to carry out a quality assurance process in which services and operations of educational institutions or programs are evaluated by an external body to determine if applicable standards are met. Every good university goes through lengthy processes of planning and evaluation-the University as a whole is now in the process of developing its new 5-year Strategic Plan. Evaluation is not only of its staff, but also of its programs and there is also evaluation on the basis of its students. But from time to time it is important to have others evaluate us. I was therefore pleased to note the results of the evaluation by the Council. This involved a very arduous process of self-study followed by a critical external review and report. The evaluation naturally indicated some areas that needed to be strengthened and I was particularly interested in the recommendation that there needed to be greater effort to let our publics know more about what we do. But I wish, particularly for the benefit of the public audience to cite 2 of the paragraphs of the evaluation report.

UWI St. Augustine is a high quality institution with administrative leadership, faculty, staff and academic programmes to educate students and prepare them for careers in many fields and to serve many different constituencies. Through a variety of programmes and disciplines, the boundaries of knowledge are extended through both applied and theoretical research. As with many public institutions of higher learning today, UWI St. Augustine faces financial limitations due to international economic contraction. The institution has attempted to blunt the negative impact of this through a variety of strategies and tactics supported by exercising prudent fiscal management of its available resources.

And

Ensuring high quality learning of its students while managing the exceptional enrollment growth on campus over the past seven years is a noteworthy achievement. The St. Augustine campus community can be deservedly proud of this accomplishment. This achievement reflects the strength and commitment of the Faculties and staff as well as the leadership of the campus and institution.

I think we should congratulate the Principal and his staff for that recognition of their achievement. It is partly the results of this process that allows me to say that there is indeed growth with confidence. Our other Campuses are going through the process of accreditation by the relevant national bodies. While we have been very committed to quality assurance for some time and have had experience of program, faculty and campus accreditations, perhaps the time is coming for us to think of an institutional accreditation of the University as a whole.

I noted the increase in the number of graduate students and that this has been mainly in the taught master's programs. It is healthy to see the number, especially of our own graduates upgrading their theoretical and practical knowledge. These tend to be

older and more settled students who are aiming to apply new skills to their area of work and represent a very important contribution of the University to national effort. Much as I value the increase in this area, I must urge that similar attention be paid to increasing the number of research degrees. This is a field from which Universities harvest the successors to the current academics.

I admit that there are always problems inherent in any relatively young and growing University trying to expand its research base. On the one hand there is the acceptance and responsibility of research as an essential responsibility and function of the academic institution to increase the store of new knowledge. On the other hand there is the often quoted demand that the intellectual output of the University should be related to the solution of immediate national needs. This is a tension as old as universities themselves-with one extreme view of knowledge being useful for its own sake and the other a strictly utilitarian view. Obviously the answer is somewhere between these two positions. While a University cannot ignore the country's immediate development needs, it has a responsibility to make deposits into the knowledge bank that supports human progress. We are fortunate that our governments see and accept that intermediate position and many of our research projects are funded by the government itself.

Another reason for rejecting the purely utilitarian view is that it is often used to denigrate the input from the social sciences. That view does not acknowledge that some of the most fundamental questions about ourselves can only be answered by the joint efforts of various disciplines.

I take the example of climate change and the germane issue of the problem of our Caribbean Sea. Everyone here has heard of climate change and some of you have heard or read or seen the possible apocalyptic scenarios that might arise-how our very lives and existence in our island states could be threatened by climate change, and we wonder what can be done about it. It is clear that the acceptance of the data and the decision to change do not lie exclusively in the domain of the physical sciences. There is a major role for the social sciences. Why are there believers and doubters? Why do well meaning people draw different inferences from the data? Why is there public nonchalance about the preservation of our Caribbean sea? The answer lies in part in the findings from history, psychology, sociology, political science, communications and cognate disciplines.

The Accreditation Report referred to the ability of the Campus to change and it is a feature of all organisms that they must adapt and change or they die. One of the major changes about to take place relates to Agriculture. This Campus inherited a rich tradition of research and practice in Agriculture and that Faculty was once the pride and joy of our University. For a series of reasons interest waned, and I believe that was a reflection of the lack of public interest and not academic problems. But the situation is changing or has changed and there is a proposal that the marriage between Agriculture and Science is indeed to be put asunder and a separate Faculty of Food and Agriculture be created. I must thank Dr. Chelston Brathwaite for his work over this.

The problem with Caribbean agriculture has been noted at the highest political levels. In 2002 President Jagdeo of Guyana proposed to the Caribbean Heads of Government Conference that the Region should build on its past efforts to develop a Common Agricultural Policy. In January 2005, his proposal was formally dubbed the “Jagdeo Initiative” – “Strengthening Agriculture for Sustainable Development”. The Initiative is a “strategy for removing constraints to the development of agriculture in the Caribbean and builds upon past regional efforts to develop a Common Agricultural Policy, and identifies ten key binding constraints faced by the sector”. One of the constraints is the lack of skilled human resources and the solution proposed is the upgrading and integration of curriculum and training at all levels. It is expected that the new Faculty, along with other institutions in the Caribbean will go a long way to supplying the needed research as well as the human resources.

The Principal has pointed out to me the need for expansion of Medical Sciences. Some of our nationals are being sent abroad for example to Cuba for training and there is a shortage of all categories of health personnel. He noted especially the need to expand dental training. The problem of retention of nurses is a chronic one, as in all the areas of health workforce management there is a fundamental problem. It is only where there is cooperation or identity among the four areas-planning, training, deployment and follow up that there can be certainty about stability of the health workforce and this does not occur anywhere in the Caribbean.

The Campus has been fortunate in mobilizing funding from a wide range of partners. Prominent among these is a grant for \$US 1 million to the Faculty of Science and Agriculture for a Project for Ecosystem Services; TT\$3.6 Million from the Ministry of Health to the Faculty of Social Sciences for costing of the Health services and EURO 5.0 million from the EU ARIAL project for Caribbean wide support and strengthening of Local Government Associations. I thank them all.

I must also note here that our Principal, Professor Sankat and our Vice-Chancellor Professor Nigel Harris have both been awarded the Cacique Crown of Honor by Guyana-the third highest national honor. We should congratulate them warmly.

Finally, let me thank the parents, friends and other loved ones who have come to this graduation ceremony. I thank you for having entrusted him or her to us, and I hope you are pleased with what has been achieved. I know you will agree with me that he or she is not the same person who entered the University, and I hope that change has been for the better. I thank you also because experience as a parent has taught me that it calls for a partnership to get through this period, and I must congratulate you on getting them to stay the course. I hope I can persuade you that this is not the end of their learning and graduation from here means passage to a phase in which much of the knowledge will come through self instruction and I trust you will continue to support them through that phase as well.

And to you alumni to be, I say good luck and may you continue to show your Pelican Pride. It is said that students may come and students may go; faculty may come

and faculty may go, but alumni remain forever. Let me entreat with you not only to remain passively, but to be active in your local alumni association. In large measure our continued success depends on you and much of our brand is in your hands!

Go well!