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Residence Hall Association Awards Remarks

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• Good evening. Thank you all for being here on this warm spring day, and thank you so much for inviting me to be part of your celebration.

• I'm delighted to be part of an event designed to honor the "best of the best" among those who support our residence hall infrastructure. I firmly believe that at our University, we get it right when it comes to student development. You are the proof of that.

**Good opportunities come from good leadership**

• Your success here happened because you saw and recognized opportunities for leadership and turned them into experiences that are now part of who you are and what you have to offer. Those opportunities were carefully developed by people who care deeply about your development. A significant part of our success as a University is due to the leadership of our student affairs and residence life staff members.

• One person in particular is an advocate for everything we do to help students grow academically, socially, culturally and spiritually. Vice President Diane Anderson is an advocate for you on a 24/7 basis. I can't tell you how many times and in how many settings, she has quietly reminded all of our University leadership that 80 percent of our students' time is spent outside the classroom--and, for many students, the majority of that out-of-classroom time is spent in residence halls.

• You--our residence life staff and student leaders--represent a part of higher education that is critical to the learning experience. Even more important, you
enable us to provide an important and lasting connection--a person-to-person human bonding experience that is all too rare and growing more rare every day.

**Residence life sets the stage**

• If you have any doubts, just look back at your own introduction to college life--whether it was two years ago or 20. I'm willing to bet your memories of a transformational experience begin with residence hall life--move-in, meeting your roommates, eating together in the dining halls and attending floor and hall activities.

• What happened in the residence halls set the stage for your academic transformation. What happened in the residence hall helped you identify the members of your tribe--your campus family. And what happened in the residence halls built your personal bank of memories and impressions and made you the person you are today.

• You learned to live together, respect differences, resolve conflicts, build cohesive teams and most important learn who you are. You've learned about tolerance and you've developed the expectation that every individual in your hall community should be held in high esteem and be held accountable as well. You've learned what habits of personality serve you well in social settings and which ones you need to work on. You learned what your leadership strengths are and you learned to recognize leadership strengths and weaknesses in others.

**I speak from experience**

• I speak from experience. I was a young student from a fairly insular Midwest community--a place called Pinckneyville, Il.--my world was literally transformed by the opportunity to study on a diverse campus that welcomed students from all over the state and nation and from around the globe. I learned quickly that there were
people in the world with remarkably different backgrounds and world views. They were all around me--in class, walking on campus and in my residence and dining hall. Opportunities to live and work with diverse students like you set the stage when I began my studies at Northern Illinois University.

• Not only did I learn to live and adjust to those facts, I also learned from those diverse people. We were all immersed together in a world that took difference for granted--viewed differences as the norm, part of the educational equation.

• Some of you may have heard me talk as well about my experiences working in the residence hall system--in the dining hall. (Story about working and learning important life lessons from the ladies in the kitchen.)

• All of those experiences altered my world view and left me with important lessons about diversity and teamwork and community living. They can be summed up in two broad statements.

  1) Every single person on a great university campus is responsible for the student experience and the knowledge and worldview our students and alumni take with them. It doesn't matter if you're a cook, a groundskeeper, a custodian, a programmer, a clerk or an architect. Everyone plays a vital role.

  2) Every person from every background deserves to be treated with the utmost respect, civility and kindness.

• These are lessons that became part of my core commitment as an educator and a citizen. Because I now have the privilege of leading this great university, I have the privilege of helping to build an environment in which future generations have the same opportunities I had.
How will virtual universities change opportunity

• But now, I think those opportunities are about to become more rare. Our challenge moving forward will be to find ways to impart those same experiences in an era in which many expect higher education to change dramatically. I often hear people suggest that the days of "bricks and mortar" campuses are ending. Technology, some point out, will allow our students to be part of a virtual campus, and they will never have to physically live and work on campus. That would be a profound loss.

• We're already seeing a change as students come to us as older, more mature individuals who have spent their first two years of degree work at community colleges. But they still recognize the value of that on-campus living experience. They want that experience of living in a diverse community. They want to broaden their experiences and learn to live and work in a global marketplace--that's something that will always be tough acquire online.

• Moving forward, we're working to take the best of the on-campus living experience to new levels by offering students transitional opportunities. In our new campus apartment complex Western View, for instance, we're responding to the fact that students want to live on campus, but older students need more privacy and independence. It's a careful balancing act.

Personal contact in a digital age

• There's one more aspect to life on campus that requires careful balance as technological changes lead to lifestyle changes. This is one area in which campus living has a definitive edge.
• We’re in an age of digital connection. Our students increasingly prefer to communicate with others without seeing or talking to them. We live in a time when:
  • Text messages are preferred over phone conversations. (In 2009, 47 billion text messages were sent worldwide.)
  • Feuds begin online over misunderstood email rants
  • Facebook is the way we share carefully edited parts of our lives with our friends.
  • Social media is the means by which revolutions are launched.

All of those facts reflect one core principle. There is no face-to-face contact involved. An important skill set is being lost--the ability to connect one-on-one with another human being. Personal communication is about things like eye contact, body language and gestures. People can only use words with texting and Facebook.

• You are part of a system, a tradition, in which personal connections are the norm--they're at the heart of communication. While you may text your roommate during the day, at some point the two of you have to come face to face to face. Your families may be the only other humans with whom you have had that intense personal contact--and they are text message contacts now.

Closing
• As residence hall leaders, your job has been and remains, helping your fellow students navigate, enjoy and benefit from such personal connections--and to do so in a way that allows them to build the lifelong memories and relationships that will color their overall view of life as a Bronco.
• What you do every day increases our reputation as a "heads up" campus, where everything we do is all about making sure individuals reach their full potential as students and human beings.

• Thank you for all that you do. Your honors this evening are so well deserved because your leadership is integral to success--our students' success and our success as a university.

Thank you.

(About 12 minutes as written)