



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

**Our College, Our Community, Our Future**  
**Dr. Jermaine F. Williams: Inaugural Speech**  
**October 19, 2022**

Thank you to the Board of Trustees for their vision. I am deeply appreciative of your trust in me to fulfill this role and your unwavering support. Thank you to the faculty and staff for their support and collaboration, and to the students whose futures inspire our work. I also want to acknowledge many of our community members here today, whose partnerships make us who we are: fellow academic leaders, elected officials, leaders of businesses and nonprofits, and generous donors. I am grateful for your energy and your commitment to making the College an economic, intellectual, and cultural anchor in Montgomery County. I also want to acknowledge the planners of these spectacular inaugural events: The Board of Trustees, the Office of Advancement and Community Engagement, the Presidential Transition Advisory Committee, the many representatives from each campus and Workforce Development and Continuing Education. And, of course, a special shout out to MCTV. So many people have worked diligently to bring these inaugural events to fruition, culminating with today's ceremony. I am excited and humbled by the celebrations around this transition that focuses on Our College, Our Community, Our Future.

On a personal note, I want to thank my wonderful spouse, Maggie, and two energetic sons, Jackson and Malcolm, whose support fortifies my own journey. Maggie, whose professional name is also Dr. Williams, is persistently encouraging and uplifting, while also challenging me—as an academic herself. It is her partnership that allows me to undertake this role, while also being a husband and father. As any of you with children in your lives know, they are the lights of your life: Providing purpose and meaning for which there is no comparison. At the same time, they create situations like unscheduled trips to the emergency room... like a few weeks ago when our oldest broke two bones in his left arm and his wrist; and when our youngest needed stitches above his left eye. That said, the four of us are settled here in Montgomery County. We have purchased our forever home and our sons are enrolled in a Montgomery County public school. We spent the summer together exploring this vibrant, diverse area, which is one of the things that drew us here.

Speaking of family, I do want to mention my parents, whose confidence inspired and empowered me over many years. My parents taught my brother and I about hard work, persistence, and humility. These lessons have served me well in my adult life, particularly in the College journey that my mother never had an opportunity to experience, and my father did not pursue until late in life.

That I am stepping into this leadership role at an institution that serves so many students with backgrounds like my own is a powerful driver for me. I have never forgotten the challenge of being a first-generation college student. While I was grateful for the opportunities I was given, I also experienced some gaps that many of my classmates filled so easily: Being able to pay for college, knowing how to plan a class schedule, attending a professor's office hours, and planning for a professional life. Having walked through those challenges, the support that we must provide to first generation students—actually, to all students—is quite vivid to me.

Thankfully, I had the support of my older brother. His knowledge, encouragement, protection, and love have impacted me more than I can say. And, in this moment today, I am also thankful to have the support of several family members and friends who traveled here to celebrate Our College, Our Community, and Our Future.

As I look forward to this first complete year at Montgomery College, I am energized by this celebration and others on the campuses last week. At the core, these events point to the success of an extraordinary institution. A College with depth and breadth. A history of commitment to access, service, and equity. A fulcrum of economic and social mobility that is vital at this moment. That is why we are here today, to uplift the College's principles and envision the transformation that will fuel it. As we look, together, into our shared future, progress is founded upon several components:

- Enhancing individual economic and social mobility, and intergenerational advancement;
- Helping all communities prosper by increasing household incomes, decreasing gaps in income by population, and reducing the poverty rate;
- Creating opportunities for all residents to succeed in careers of interest and passion;
- Making the College a hub for identifying and engaging local residents, increasing educational attainment, and producing talent that fuels the economy;
- Finally, inspiring students to engage actively in our society and contribute to the public good.

These are the elements of a just and equitable future toward which we all strive.

Our future is one that must include post-completion success—especially in these uncertain economic times. The essential purpose of our institution—empowering students to change their lives—must include preparation for the job market and for professional realms. These are often structured by unspoken networks of social contacts and economic advantage. While we work diligently on equity and inclusion inside our college, the unequal landscape that awaits students after they leave, is something for which we must prepare them. Completing a college credential is one important step. Securing a job in one's field that earns a family-sustaining wage, is another. Becoming an individual who is fully engaged in our society is yet another step. Part of the College's continuing focus on student success must be the experience beyond college completion. To get there, we have to start at the beginning.

At one time the College was known as Montgomery Junior College—in 1946 when it first welcomed 175 students. Evening classes were held so working students could attend—most of them veterans—for whom the GI Bill was a bridge to civilian life. Training and education were also powerful workforce development tools for the recovering nation. In fact, the entire network of community colleges begun at the turn of the twentieth century experienced an enormous growth in enrollment as people returned from World War II. The unique, local needs of communities in the post-war era were amplified. Certain people in local neighborhoods, schools, and governments were newly recognized as assets in economic recovery and the rebuilding of community structures.

The nation turned to the community college system as an anchor and an antidote to the disruption created by the war—and it responded with vigor. Community colleges strengthened a faltering work force, providing affordable alternatives to education paths that were out of reach for so many.

It was not a perfect system, of course. Remember how I said, 'certain people'? While African Americans were theoretically eligible for the GI Bill, segregation laws excluded them from many schools. Montgomery College was no exception. Economic mobility was not a reality for most people of color.

It was not until the 1960s that Montgomery College's classrooms began to embody the diversity of the nation. Today our diversity is our strength. Furthermore, the College espouses and enacts a profound commitment to equity and inclusion. It permeates our classrooms, our scholarship, and our partnerships with industry and community organizations.

That these values are so robust at the College is a credit to the culture of the county, where equity and social justice are pursued through relationships and policy decisions. Our partners in local and state government, and in the network of non-profits, are essential allies who fortify this ecosystem and ensure its impact. Montgomery College is surrounded by businesses and neighbors who understand that building strong communities means investing in everyone; empowering everyone; and creating equitable conditions that allow everyone to excel.

Our college is poised—as it was at another historic era — to meet the community's needs in a vulnerable moment. We all know the realities which have made this moment a challenging one— inflation, unfilled jobs, mismatched skills for existing jobs, continued racial and institutional discrimination, and the pandemic's unpredictable turns. These challenges have exacerbated income disparities. They have frozen, and in some cases, retrenched economic and social mobility. Yet, this is also a moment with unique potential for higher education.

Many social and cultural paradigms that we thought were immutable have been dismantled: We have been able to jettison the limitations we thought were baked into in-person learning. In addition to more online learning options, students can access crucial support such as tutoring, library services, and counseling and advising online. Many of our communities have responded to racial and economic injustices with new solutions and more diverse strategies than we have seen in recent times. Democratic instability has forced us to discipline rhetoric that is divisive and communities that are hateful.

So, how do we leverage these changes to our advantage? How do we put engaged students on the talent pipeline to economic and social mobility? How do we create social transformation?

We must build on several unexpected trends. We see a shift in hiring that can benefit those with certificates and badges in well paid areas like computer science, information technology, biotechnology and health sciences. We see policies evolving about family sustaining wages and loan forgiveness that existed only in the margins a few years ago. We see new awareness of how inequities are sustained through generations by the rigidity of social capital, by the segregation of neighborhoods and schools, and by insufficient support for first generation college students. Beyond just awareness, the discourse and action around racial and social justice, opportunity, and equity have taken some profound steps forward. Even the democratic instability which we have experienced has re-invigorated many in our society.

We are a society that values people and their potential. We are also a nation that depends upon communities—and institutions—that are centered around shared values: equity and inclusion; opportunity and advancement; fairness and social justice. I know that most of you in this audience share those principles. You are already helping to create engaged students and move them on to the talent pipeline toward economic and social mobility.

Today, I will ask us to look for even more ways we can engage—and challenge the College and each other to do our best to keep students first—in how we serve them and advance their educational journeys. I ask you to hold the College to the highest standard you can imagine for innovation,

effectiveness, and equity. Challenge us to build that talent pipeline that serves businesses and communities. Tell us where we can accelerate our work to engage students and how we can partner more creatively. Help us nurture a climate of care, trust, and social justice—components that the last several years have shown us are critical to progress. Let's build the coalitions that create social transformation.

Montgomery College has so many successes to celebrate. Our excellent faculty and staff are deeply committed to our students and to each other. This was evident before the pandemic and illuminated even further over the past few years. The College's faculty and staff went to extraordinary lengths to serve all students at the height of the pandemic—delivering food, laptops, tutoring, and mental health support, even as they managed their own families' challenges. Faculty and staff equitably met the needs of students that grew out of unprecedented conditions because that's who they are. Their dedication to students is really a commitment to the community.

I have a unique appreciation for this level of commitment and impact in my current role. I know that I stand on the shoulders of leaders who came before me. I recognize several individuals who have had extraordinary impacts at the College, and for whom we will always be grateful. Our work now is to build on the successes we have inherited and identify new ones. I know I can rely on the College's faculty and staff to bring their talents and creativity to this venture. Montgomery College needs each of you to extend our impact even further.

Together we can change society in the ways that matter most: reducing poverty, increasing economic and social mobility, and producing students who are ambitious and deeply engaged in society. As we prepare students for post completion success, we need mentors and local business leaders to meet us there—to amplify the impact we already have. As we bring more innovation and technology into our classrooms, we need direction from small business owners, industry leaders, and economists about what kinds of job skills are needed.

As we engage our diverse communities across the county—some of whom may not know about the College's offerings—we need people whose social and cultural capital link us to the right groups and helps us create a college-going culture for all. Everyone has a role to play in the advancement of our county, and the College is eager to connect and partner at all levels. These points of connection can lead all students to the talent pipeline of economic and social mobility: in other words, to true transformation.

On that note, I want to ask you to join me for a moment. As we embark on this journey together, we may need to imagine new roles for ourselves and create additional strategies for our work. In order to take stock of where we are, let's look around and see who is with us and committed to this journey: Please stand for a moment if you are helping to transform student lives by teaching at Montgomery College.

Please stand if you have taken a class at Montgomery College.

Please stand if you graduated from Montgomery College.

You may see yourself in more than one group here, so don't get too comfortable.

Please stand if you are an academic partner to the College—USG, MCPS, a transfer institution or a fellow community college.

Please stand if you have advanced the College’s funding through roles in county, state, or the federal government.

Please stand if you have donated to the College’s transformational programs with scholarships, emergency aid, building support, or other funds.

Please stand if your work in business, industry, community partnerships, or research intersects with the College’s students, faculty or staff.

Finally, please stand if you have been a part of collaborations with the College—I cannot list them all but here is what comes to mind: The IgnITe Hub, Montgomery Can Code, Achieving the Promise Academy, Community Engagement Centers, ACES, culturally competent teaching for MCPS, or others.

Well, if this crowd is any indication of how many partners the College has, then the potential for our impact is extraordinary. One of the things about ‘extraordinary,’ though, is that it must be measured. That is part of the College’s commitment to those we serve. Some of you have heard me talk this year about ‘data-informed decisions’ and I am committed to that process. We must create goals that are quantifiable and implement processes to reach them.

I believe, for example, that we can achieve several bold metrics of student success over the next 10 years:

- First, that we nurture a pervasive College-going culture in the County by ensuring all residents are meaningfully connected to the College by seventh grade.
- Second, that 100 percent of the College’s credit and non-credit offerings will be mapped to a credential of economic, social, and community impact.
- Third, that we more than double the percentage of MCPS students who attend Montgomery College.
- Fourth: That 50 percent of MC students, regardless of background, complete a credential of economic, social, and community impact. That means more than doubling the completion rate for most of our student populations.
- Finally, that we decrease unemployment and underemployment in the County by 50 percent.

These goals embody the change we seek. They will empower more individuals to change their lives and lead to social transformation.

This transformation will require sustained effort, repurposing resources, and imagination. We will need to refresh the College’s strategic plan, which was created before the pandemic. We will need leaders who are visionary and partners who are eager to empower the people in our communities who are most in need. Transforming access and opportunity will be our shared mission as we work to reduce income disparity and create equitable communities.

As I conclude, I would like to share a personal story about my father, whose middle name lives on in my middle initial, which I use in deference to him. He worked for decades in a variety of jobs including mechanic, cook, apartment maintenance, truck driver, and a host of other roles. He was a hard worker;

a man who learned new skills everyday—many times, while on the job. He was also a black man from the south who found his way north, like millions of other black people in America during the Great Migration. He married a white woman from the north. So, he knew the implicit and explicit racism that can infiltrate schools and neighborhoods, and impact professional success. With that knowledge, he asked questions, engaged people, and worked to hold society accountable— always searching for a more just society than the one in which he grew up. Public education in his day failed him. When he graduated from high school, he was illiterate.

I share this background because my father had reasons to be disappointed, frustrated and angry: But he understood that one can pursue opportunity even if you have to create it yourself. He eventually earned a bachelor's degree and two masters' degrees. He accomplished this through perseverance and a supportive community who cared, especially his wife...my mother. His life experiences were much like many of our students today who are low-income, first-generation, underrepresented in their desired profession, immigrants, or otherwise marginalized by the structures of our society. They have passion, intellect and ambition, but they need equitable access and an infrastructure of policies that focus on the unique needs each of our students brings with them—forging toward dismantling injustices for certain groups and advancing all in our society. It is up to us, as leaders, to interrogate and redefine the inequitable structures that create life-altering and generation-impacting roadblocks. We need to ensure that we look at ourselves to create the conditions that will see our students excel. That my father earned advanced degrees is a credit to him and the small community that supported him much later in his life. I often think, though, about what he could have accomplished in a more equitable and just society.

I see that vision here at the College and in Montgomery County. The desire for a more equitable and just society: Graduates who use their education and training to improve the lives of those who follow. Economic and social mobility leading to intergenerational progress and a reduction in wealth disparities. I believe that my father would look out at this sea of collaborators and appreciate that our whole is much greater than the sum of our parts. I believe he would feel the hopefulness that grows from genuine investment of treasure and time and energy—and the trust that is cultivated in communities where these flourish. Communities like ours—that seek true transformation.

So, transformation is a broad idea, but what will it look like? It will include changes in systems that will fundamentally nurture the college-going culture in the County. It will improve the ability of anyone who wants a credential of economic value, to get an MC experience—that is access. It will include deeper collaboration across internal divisions to create processes that best serve students. It will mean consistently student-centered strategies to keep people engaged, advancing and achieving their goals—that is completion. It will include investments in new technologies, enhancements of processes, and streamlining of support systems that truly change outcomes. Deep coalitions with business, industry, non-profits, and community organizations. Students who finish a degree or certificate will find jobs that can sustain a family. That is post-completion success. All of our students will be contributing members of their communities. Their credentials will benefit them, of course, but equally important: They will have community and social value. Our students will be empowered to share their talents and achievements.

This is our collective work. This is what transformation looks like. I invite you all to participate. I ask that we hold each other accountable. And I challenge you—from whatever role you are in—to be the change you want to see. I will bring my exhilaration for this role. And I will meet you there with a personal passion for social justice and an ambitious vision of achievement—as together, we build, Our College, Our Community, Our Future. Thank you.