Ladies and Gentlemen of the Board of Trustees, Distinguished Members of the Platform Party, Esteemed Colleagues on the Illinois College Faculty, our Wonderful Students and Staff, Members of the Surrounding Community, and Dear Friends and Family (who are with us from as far away as Florida and California—with a large contingent from the great State of Minnesota): I thank you with all my heart for joining us on this day for the inauguration of Illinois College’s 13th President.

A special thank you to the presidents and other delegates here representing our sister colleges and universities, institutions that collectively, in their richness and variety, have made American higher education the world’s unrivaled leader.

I have been on the Illinois College Campus a bit more than ten months. Each day here I have counted myself blessed that you, friends in the Illinois College community, have entrusted me with the honor and privilege of using whatever talents and experience I acquired over the years to help the College continue to move ever onward. I stand in awe when I reflect on the fact that my predecessors in office include persons such as Edward Beecher, the College’s first president, and Julian Sturtevant, its first teacher and second president. In their footsteps and those of the other ten presidents and the interims who have prepared the way, especially most recently, Presidents Vernon Caine, Donald Mundinger, Richard Pfau and just last year Dr. Martha Church, who is with us today, in their shadow no humility is false. I am daily aware that in their times and in their various ways, each of these presidents gave their all to ensure that Illinois College thrived, and, in a few distressing times, that the College survived.

Since the past is prologue to the future, any comments on the future of Illinois College calls for a look back at some highlights in its history. Illinois College was founded in 1829 by a young band of Congregational and Presbyterian divines organized as the Illinois Association at Yale College for the purpose of bringing learning and religion to the then Western frontier of our nation. In partnership with local Presbyterian clergy and laymen, they established a free-standing residential liberal arts college on the model of Yale College in New England.

The College’s Eastern founders envisioned an institution that would play a key role in preserving the democratic and enlightened character of our nation by bringing the benefits of Christian learning to a region that they believed was destined to become the population and economic center of the expanding United States.

As testimony to the founders’ high aspirations, a number of early Illinois College students, faculty and trustees went on to play important roles in the founding or early leadership of eight other fine present-day colleges including Grinnell, Washburn, Blackburn, Lake Forest, Centre, as well as Illinois Wesleyan University. One of Illinois College’s most distinguished early faculty members, Jonathan Baldwin Turner, was also a persuasive advocate for public education at all levels. Turner is widely credited with being the intellectual and moral father of our nation’s great land-grant universities.
As did many American colleges in their infancy, Illinois College at first struggled for economic survival. Not unlike college presidents of today, one of President Beecher’s principal tasks was to gain financial support or “subscriptions” for his young college. It was not unusual for him to be gone months and sometimes a year at a time while, as we might put it, “beating the bushes” out East, especially in Boston and New York, to raise funds.

Among the challenges that the new College in Illinois faced was a hesitancy by the almost equally young state legislature to grant the College its chosen name. A young state representative named Abraham Lincoln cast his vote in support of the College’s successful fight to adopt the name of its home state. Perhaps because of the important role Illinois College played in the life of the State of Illinois and its strong identification with the people of the State, the College never sought to change the name which it fought so hard to acquire.

The antebellum and Civil War eras provided yet further tests of the College’s character and brought additional threats to its survival. These threats included the spectacular fire that burned the College’s main building in 1852, a dire event that almost closed the College. During this time, Illinois College revealed the nature of its character in the strong anti-slavery stance which had been shared by influential members of the College’s faculty from its inception.

Indeed, President Beecher wrote the platform of the Illinois State Anti-Slavery Society. Beecher also helped his friend, Elijah Lovejoy, guard his printing press in Alton the night before Lovejoy was murdered by a mob for producing an anti-slavery newspaper. Records indicate that some Illinois College students were charged by local grand juries with helping runaway slaves escape; and, Professor Turner received repeated death threats from pro-slavery groups, including a letter warning that “a little poison, or hemp around your neck, or a messenger of lead, or a bowie knife . . . .” would soon end his anti-slavery sedition.

With regard to the student experience in those days, Abraham Lincoln’s long-time law partner, William Herndon, reported that his pro-slavery father withdrew him from the College to spare him from the campus poison of Abolitionism. The father, it turns out, was too late; his son was already converted. Meanwhile, much of the local press, including the Illinois State Register of Springfield, attacked the College’s faculty and presidents with regularity in their editorial columns. Presidents Beecher and Sturtevant, as well as Professor Turner, were subject to especially vitriolic attacks on their integrity and patriotism. The State Register charged that these so-called “hypocritical villains” sought money from the very community they wished to destroy. “Higher-Lawism,” the newspaper asserted, led to the cancer of abolitionism. Readers were warned not to “contribute one dollar to this institution” that was dedicated to undermining morality and the social fabric of the nation.

Although many pro-slavery families had already withdrawn their sons from the College before the Civil War broke out, with the advent of war the College was nearly emptied both of students and faculty who volunteered to fight, although it never closed. While most donned uniforms of Blue (hence, the College’s mascot name of Blueboys), some students also fought on the rebel side. Indeed, there were times when Illinois College classmates, and even brothers, were fighting on opposing sides of the Civil War.

The toll suffered by the College because of moral and religious principles embraced by its leaders was considerable. Nonetheless, this did not prevent the College from becoming the major educator of many Illinois State leaders in the days from its founding in 1829 through the Civil War and
beyond. Its very first graduate, Richard Yates, served as the Civil War Governor of Illinois—a tenure preceded by his service in the U.S. House of Representatives and followed by a term in the U.S. Senate.

Like so many colleges in the 19th through the mid-20th Century, Illinois College experienced cycles of both economic stability and reversals. Throughout, an unusually gifted faculty produced a prodigious number of successful graduates, including some 20 members of the U.S. Congress, governors of Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, and the Dakota Territory, and educated such well-known personages as three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan and explorer John Wesley Powell.

I believe that a consistent theme as we review the history of Illinois College well might be summarized as “Called To Lead: Committed To Serve.” At the opening of classes on January 4, 1830, Julian Sturtevant famously declared that the Yale Seven and local people had established here “a fountain in the wilderness at which future generations will drink.” The institutional self-understanding implicit in Sturtevant’s striking metaphor is one that guided Illinois College for the following 175 years. The College would indeed go on to nourish many generations of its students for lives of leadership and service.

A distinctive feature of the enduring educational vision of Illinois College, one perhaps rooted in its origins, in the coming together of New England intellectuals of the cloth with frontier men of the earth, is the creative tension in that vision. I have in mind what some might perceive as a tension between a commitment to develop the minds, characters, and moral sensibilities of students through a steeping in the traditional liberal arts juxtaposed with a desire to prepare leaders for such practical professions as law, medicine, education, the ministry, business, and public affairs.

Education at Illinois College always has been viewed as a profoundly moral enterprise, one intended to serve the public good, and the College’s teachers have assumed that a liberal education stressing ethical values and character formation was also the best professional preparation. The uncommonly large number of distinguished doctors, lawyers, educators, business leaders, and statesmen who have gone forth from Illinois College bears witness to the value of this educational vision. At one time recently, the presidents of the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association were both Illinois College graduates.

Inaugural comments are one of the few societally approved venues for hubris, under the guise of presidential vision. So please permit me to set aside our usual institutional modesty so that I might remind us that Illinois College has “led the way” with a number of educational firsts in our State. These include the establishment of the first college building, the first higher education courses, the first laboratory science courses in 1830, the first college graduating class, even if modest in size at two, and the first, albeit short-lived, medical school. With regard to the early medical school situated in the attic of Beecher Hall, the story persists that this medical school’s early demise was connected to President Beecher’s discovery that more than one person resting in the College cemetery at the foot of the hill was later found raised to the third floor of Beecher Hall for the sake of science. The official position, of course, was that there just weren’t enough students interested in medicine in the 1840s to justify continuing the medical school. But even without a medical school, Illinois College educated numerous medical researchers and other distinguished scientists. One might also note that soon after it celebrated its own centennial, a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa was established at Illinois College as a testimony to its excellence in the liberal arts.
Suffice it to say that the College’s current aspiration “to excel in producing liberally educated graduates who will serve society as leaders in the various learned professions” is consistent with its past. It does not seem to be undue pride to say that IF there is, as we might all agree, a need for broadly educated leaders in any age, and in all professions, then there is a need for institutions with Illinois College’s sense of calling today and tomorrow.

As Illinois College pursues its future, the guiding theme of “called to lead; committed to serve,” will continue to find expression throughout its programs. Illinois College will not be alone in affirming the special value of a liberal arts education as preparation for lives of leadership and service in many fields nor in its commitment to excellence. Rather, it is good to know that Illinois College shares these characteristics with other fine colleges, a number of which are represented here this afternoon.

Perhaps, the College is also not alone in holding that a liberal arts education is especially well suited for the work of the moral development of students. In the study of history, of literature, of philosophy, of the fine arts, and of the sciences—to mention only a few of the traditional liberal arts fields—our students encounter humankind wrestling with truth and falsehood, with justice and malice, and with good and evil. In exploring the thoughts, emotions, and actions of others—even in fictional surrogates—our students can begin to recognize what is worth seeking and defending and what should be avoided and fought. The College believes, along with ancient philosopher, Plato, that “those who are rightly educated generally become good people.”

Recently, Illinois College has begun making a series of bold strokes, most initiated by the Faculty and the Board, toward forging an exciting future guided by an educational vision that can be traced to the College’s very early days.

In addition to continuing its focus on the liberal arts, on moral education, and on preparation for leadership, what developments can we expect to see at Illinois College in the near future that will further its quest to educate students for fulfilling lives of leadership and service? Let me suggest a few.

Within five years, the College should reach its next plateau of approximately 1150-1200 students and some 90-100 faculty. Campus life will become even more residential, with 80% of Illinois College students living in college-owned residence halls before the end of the current decade. With these changes in campus demographics will come new classrooms, new labs, and added residence halls that will help to ensure that our students will have a high quality educational experience within and outside the classroom.

Many of the students not living in residence halls will be studying abroad as we encourage our students to gain an international perspective on leadership and service. By the end of the current decade, we hope that all Illinois College students will have the opportunity to study abroad some time during their undergraduate careers.

The College will reaffirm its commitment to serve the people of Illinois by helping educate future generations of the State’s leaders. A large number of Illinois College students will undoubtedly still be drawn from the small towns and farms in our region to ensure that these young people, too, gain the benefits of a fine liberal arts education.
Because leadership and service in the 21st Century demands it, science literacy will characterize all Illinois College graduates. The College already has a graduation requirement of “two-science courses with labs;” and the new Parker Science Center is a further step in re-establishing strong science education as a hallmark of this College’s curriculum.

Since a liberal arts education best retains its relevance for contemporary life when provided in a setting that mirrors the kind of global and intercultural society in which our students are called to lead and which Illinois College is committed to serve, the student, faculty and staff profile of the College will increasingly reflect the growing ethnic, cultural, and economic diversity of Illinois and surrounding states.

We look to the fine faculty of Illinois College to further develop signature academic programs that will be widely recognized far beyond the College. The new first-year experience program, which we call IC Connections, is one candidate for such distinctiveness, as perhaps is Breakaway, an innovative approach to internships to off-campus study opportunities. The College’s new general education program, with its implicit communication-across-the- curriculum feature, is positioned to become another hallmark of Illinois College.

The great traditions of oratory and written eloquence that have been a part of Illinois College from its early years will be further developed in both the formal and the informal curriculums of the College. The emphasis on the art of rhetoric, always central to education at the College and evident in its surviving literary societies (one of which counts Abraham Lincoln as an honorary member), will continue to enrich the lives of its students as they prepare to step into roles of leadership and service in their communities.

Furthermore, Illinois College is firmly committed to providing our students research experiences across the curriculum. Student-faculty research opportunities are being expanded on the conviction that an important way of learning to lead and to serve is by doing, especially through student research done under the tutelage of committed teachers and scholars.
I want to stress that the initiatives I have just recited are ones that Illinois College faculty have themselves envisioned and implemented.

I am excited also by the prospect of additional courses and programs that center on antebellum Illinois and Civil War America. Illinois College’s location in the heart of the Land of Lincoln and its important role in the anti-slavery movement, the Underground Railroad, and the Civil War, as well as its ties to Abraham Lincoln and other leaders of the era, suggest this would be a natural curricular emphasis for the College.

As the Civil War and the period leading up to it take a place of parity with the Revolutionary War era in the definition of the American experience, the heritage and location of Illinois College strongly suggest that the College can help us to better understand and appreciate that experience. While the College would not presume to have a unique perspective on this defining period in American history, Illinois College’s contributions to understanding it hold the further promise of distinction in scholarship, teaching and learning.

Even as Illinois College gains national recognition for excellence in distinctive academic programs, the College will renew its focus on the local community of which it has been an integral part for 175 years. With full recognition that its future is closely tied to the future of greater Jacksonville, Illinois
College is dedicated to serving the community in which it resides. The College wishes to be a force for local economic development, a growing resource for cultural and educational enrichment, and a locus of extensive community service. The strong commitment to civic engagement on the part of its students and staff is but one indication that the College is dedicated to being more than just a passive good neighbor.

In closing, I wish to thank the members of the Illinois College family for the warmth with which Loreli and I have been received and for the confidence you have placed in me. And Loreli, who has graciously followed me to six other colleges and now has so enthusiastically embraced Illinois College – I do not know how to adequately thank you for a life of loving partnership in service to education. To the Illinois College community, I pledge that all my energy and whatever talents I may have will be directed to helping Illinois College realize the aspirations I have found in place here. I am deeply honored and profoundly humbled by the trust you have placed in me to lead this great College. Please know that like the exemplary presidents who have preceded me, I, too, am committed to serve and help realize the full potential of this historic and noble institution. And most especially to my faculty colleagues, I cannot promise you an easy road—and you have not asked for that. Rather, with your good will and drawing upon your hard work, and your many talents—I pledge to you that together we will ensure that your collective dream for our students and our college will be realized. In the talent and commitment of all the people of Illinois College lies our strength, our promise, and our best hope.

May God grant wisdom to each of us in this worthy endeavor and continue to richly bless Illinois College.