

President R. May Lee
Inaugural Remarks
Olin College of Engineering
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One of the students asked me last week why I waited a year before doing this particular event. And I told them that I needed a year to really learn and understand Olin, and to really imagine the purpose of an inauguration. I just want to say that it was about the community. Today, for me, represents the exact reason why I'm here. I wanted it to happen with the Class of 2006, with our students who I see here today, our illustrious faculty, our family, friends, and parents. And of course, my family and friends. It was worth waiting for the year, but for one thing.

I did read a lot about inaugurations, going back to one thousand years. Ask me later about the mace. But today is a moment to celebrate our institution and the people at its core. Inaugurations in higher ed usually begin with the brain and the intellect. But today I want to begin with the heart.

As many of you know, we lost a cherished member of our Olin family earlier this summer. Bill Norden sat on the Olin Foundation Board and was central to the decision to spend its resources creating this college. With Larry Milas, he became a Founding Member and chaired our Board for almost a decade. He relished the risk the Foundation took and the message it sent the world at large. Beyond Olin, he gave the same care to New York's firefighters and to preserving their memory and their work, as well as his family. He asked for excellence, from himself and from everyone around him. And he paired it with humility and humanity. Bill was always just a boy from Brooklyn. And he always wore these Olin socks to every board meeting that he came to. My only regret in waiting a year is that Bill couldn't be here with us. To celebrate this moment, I would like to dedicate today's ceremony to Bill, to his family — his daughter Melissa is with us today — and to the legacy he leaves us of doing something big. Can we please have a moment of silence to honor Bill?

As an institution, Olin's DNA contains genetic strains of human-centered design, project-based learning, and student-led learning most importantly of all. Twenty years ago, it was said, and I quote, that Olin "was conceived as perhaps the most ambitious experiment in engineering education in the past several decades". Bill's insistence on excellence is reflected in our founding precepts, as is the culture of innovation. Most importantly, Olin made an explicit choice to be different from other institutions of higher education.

It decided that engineers were more than technicians, and mathematical solutions only tell part of the story. Our curriculum has classes called ModSim, PIE, QEA and CD as opposed to Linear Algebra, Multi-variable calculus, and Differential Equations. For Olin, it is a badge of honor to be non-conforming, not for the sake of being different. Rather, when we differ, it is in service of finding the best question to ask and answer. We choose our path even knowing it diverges from the "norm". Embracing change and difference requires another characteristic which Olin (and Oliners) possess in abundance: resilience.

As I reflect on my own journey to Olin, I like to think I share a similar spirit. Beneficiaries of the Kennedy Administration's decision to admit Chinese refugees, my parents carried me from Hong Kong to this country. Our first home was in Detroit, at Hancock and 6th, an all-African American neighborhood, the only place that new immigrants could afford and the only place that landlords would rent to.

For my parents, it was culture shock. To me, it was just home - sleeping in a cardboard box as a makeshift crib (set in a dresser drawer to avoid the cockroaches). My babysitter, Bernice, walked me around and introduced me to the neighborhood. We swapped lunches - she loved my mother's Chinese cooking and I loved whatever I found in her brown bag. Peanut butter and jelly was the favorite. We left that neighborhood, it turns out, shortly before what became known as the Detroit Rebellion of 1967 destroyed our neighborhood. It was then the largest civil disturbance in 20th century America, the result of decades of entrenched segregation.

Our new neighborhood, a few miles away and predominantly white, wasn't nearly so welcoming. This was the height of the Vietnam War and our neighbors had sons and husbands fighting overseas. Every day at school was a challenge - name-calling and fisticuffs, for me and my siblings. Even teachers who bullied and tried to stop me from progressing. And yet, we persevered. Some neighbors were friendly and we made friends, as children often do.

My parents were learning, too. My mom stood up and spoke up for us when it was important -- even when it ran contrary to everything she understood as good manners. And my father, upon learning my favorite fifth grade teacher was not offered a return contract, decided we should walk the neighborhood with a petition. This, from a man who experienced extreme wealth, extreme poverty, starvation, a civil war and a world war all before he was 14 years old. Nothing in his life experience would have led him to think individual agency could make a difference.

Reflecting on those experiences, I see what my parents modeled: that speaking up matters; and that what one person does makes a difference in this world. Along with my own curiosity and, admittedly, a lot of stubbornness, these values have been my guideposts ever since.

For example, I wanted to study philosophy in college. My father wanted me to study engineering because I could get a job. I said no, philosophy's better. He said, no, no tuition if you don't study engineering. So we did a little compromise: I studied economics in addition to whatever he called the "nonsense" that I was interested in. I understand now that if Olin had existed then, I would have become a philosopher engineer. Instead, I absorbed my father's engineering mindset, my mother's architectural sense of space and systems thinking as I meandered through what others here have described as my "career."

Driven by a simple desire to do new things, I bounced from Peking University to NYU Law, to criminal defense work, to the New York Fed, to Goldman Sachs. I tried entrepreneurship. Then Merrill Lynch, in 2008, which was its own education. Only after that did my life in higher education begin, and this is where I have found my purpose.

My mentor, John Sexton, then President of NYU, gave me the opportunity to make NYU Shanghai a reality. I witnessed intellectual curiosity, humility, and confidence without arrogance in action, and I saw how true shared governance could work. At the time, many pegged our efforts in Shanghai as "doomed to fail" and yet we stayed the course, convinced of its value to the world of higher ed and to global well-being.

The willingness to choose an unusual path is what ties me to Olin. It brings me to Epictetus - a Stoic philosopher born into slavery in the Roman Empire, who wrote in his Discourses 1.2 how might a person preserve their proper character in every situation? He wanted to be the purple thread, that small part which is bright and makes the rest of the white threads appear graceful and beautiful. **Olin is the purple thread in the white cloth that is higher-ed.** We exist to try things larger institutions cannot, and we

strive to share what we learn. **The point of the purple thread is always to bring attention to the beauty of the rest of the cloth.**

And so now the question Epictetus might ask us is "how shall we still be purple?" With the value of higher education in question, it is more important now than ever before for Olin to embrace its role as a lab for higher education. While many commencement speakers this year were booed for mentioning these two letters - AI, I believe we must address how Olin evolves to account for this technology.

At Olin, we have these approaches in mind: graduating AI-forward and self-directed students; cultivating engineering entrepreneurs; forming a new partner class focused on learning and teaching with AI; and ensuring affordability for all students again.

First, we are confident our human-first approach to engineering provides our students with the competencies to thrive with AI. And I want to be clear about what I do NOT mean: this is not a full-throated defense of AI. But rather, a recognition that we must embrace this technology. It has arrived, and our students must be equipped to ask the right questions, with the discernment and judgment to work with AI – or not – as they decide. **They will be AI-forward.** I'm delighted that our faculty and students are already discussing and experimenting with how we might incorporate AI in and out of our classrooms.

To ensure our students' continued success, while we continue to talk about project-based learning, I have observed over the year that our faculty has evolved our DNA beyond project-based learning to what I call phenomenon-based learning. Where learning is driven by real-world phenomena rather than prescribed project outputs.

Instead of asking students to build a particular thing, like a solar panel, phenomenon-based learning starts with the questions that our faculty ask, a real-world event or observation. "Why did the city's power grid fail yesterday?"

The walls between science, math, history, technology, and policy disappear here at Olin as students investigate how the world really works, with faculty guiding the way. Students go about determining their own paths of inquiry, their own learning, and their own actionable solutions. This approach builds what Jon Stolk would call the students' intrinsic motivations to learn, a core principle of our education. In this way, our students become **self-directed and applied problem-solvers.**

Second, among the many things that distinguish Olin engineers from others and perhaps the most important for the future, is that we graduate **engineering entrepreneurs.**

For years, some in Silicon Valley have said that higher-ed is a waste of time—that a founder does better skipping college. The newest headline is this week's launch of the Horowitz Andreessen Academy. A fact about a targeted intake of 50 students, but not a fact about real education. I do not contest Silicon Valley's success, but I am claiming back two things: the work of educating people, and a definition of entrepreneurship older than Silicon Valley's.

There is no doubt Silicon Valley represents one (and a critical) form of entrepreneurship - the formation of a for-profit company that has raised capital. In fact, the origin of the word comes from the French "entreprendre" meaning to undertake. The core entrepreneurial mindset – questioning assumptions, asking the right questions, making decisions with incomplete data, and taking risk – has substantial

overlap with what we call critical thinking. Instead of owning what we do best, over time, higher education has ceded the narrative to Silicon Valley.

My point: entrepreneurship is not merely starting a business, but the drive to solve problems across every domain. Higher education cultivates this as a core mindset and capability: assessing and taking risks are all skills critical to being an entrepreneur.

An example - Larry Milas and Bill Norden. They raised no money and they founded no company, but they did risk the entirety of the foundation's assets on the formation of Olin to produce different engineers and to change engineering education. Rick Miller left an established career to make this bet as Olin's founding President. Are they not entrepreneurs?

Our students begin learning this mindset in their first year, in a course called Design Nature. We ask them to look to nature and build a mechanism that hops. Some hop a little. Some hop high and far. And others do not hop at all. But this class is about the process, and there is no shame in a hopper that does not hop. We call that learning. Silicon Valley calls that failure.

We intend to elevate the entrepreneurship already innate to Olin as an inclusive concept, and to build multiple paths for students to pursue new ventures. We have one entrepreneur-in-residence who has already arrived and another scheduled to arrive on campus later this fall. They come from the nonprofit, finance, international development and technology sectors. They're here to support our aspiring entrepreneur from their first year onward. They will widen our network of mentors, work alongside our students, and bring other founders to campus. Alumni, parents, friends of Olin: we are counting on all of you — as fellow mentors and as partners.

We will invest in students whose ideas address climate change, affordable housing, or global hunger. They will prototype and iterate in class, then test their work in the world, while finishing an engineering degree. That is no easy feat, but that is what Oliners do. Our students arrive with a mission to change the world for the better, and we will be relentless in improving their odds of being able to do so.

Third, we intend and are planning to admit an Olin 2.0 partner class. Twenty-five years ago we admitted a small group of students before a campus or a curriculum existed. The new partner class will spend a year exploring what learning looks like with AI. And perhaps three months with no AI or technology at all. How do faculty guide students to learn with AI rather than circumvent learning? What happens to the role of faculty — and can AI open access to engineering for students from less-privileged backgrounds? And in keeping with our mission to transform engineering education, we will share what we learn: with our own faculty and colleagues here, with our students, and with colleagues at other colleges.

Finally, Olin addressed the accessibility and affordability question of higher-ed at its inception. Higher-education has provided generations of Americans with upward mobility and continues to do so. We remain committed to returning to our roots of providing substantial scholarships. It is not a short or easy path, but it is our founding precept and something that I am personally committed to doing.

We do this work because it matters. Our faculty and staff accompany and guide our students on their journey to adulthood and responsible citizenship with unflinching passion every day. That gift belongs to every student who earns a place here — not simply those who can pay for it.

The future of the purple thread and the white cloth is bright. And purple, as it turns out, has been with me all along. It is the school color of NYU where I began my career in higher-ed. And it is the color created by combining the red of RPI, my prior home, and the blue of Olin.

If my decisions have taken me to unexpected places, they also brought me to Olin and this extraordinary community. All you have to do is look around this room and go up to the Voices of Olin on the second floor, created by Daniel Rosenberg, to see just what storytellers we really are and what community we have created here.

And so I end where most people start. To the presidents, provosts, and delegates who have traveled here from other institutions: a thread is only visible because of the cloth around it. Thank you for coming, and for the work you do for the next generation.

I want to thank Olin's Board of Trustees for entrusting me with steering this institution. Thank you to all of the colleagues, to the friends who have mentored and guided me over the years. No one does this alone, and I am particularly grateful to all the women who have been there along the way, encouraging me – the architects, the engineers, the lawyers, the scientists, the educators. And to those who keep me healthy and grounded — my doctors, my trainers — I treasure you and am deeply grateful that you make me do those deadlifts twice a week.

Finally, I want to recognize my family who have always supported and loved me – my sister and my brother, who's here today, my sister-in-law, brother-in-law, and nephews; my mother, the queen bee, who joins us today. And, of course, my husband John who has been on this journey with me every step of the way; our daughter Gemma who suffered through countless “boring meetings” while her mother was trying to make these things happen. And our dog, Momilani, who offers me a lesson in patience and listening every day. Lastly, some of you know we lost my father earlier this year. If he were here, I imagine he would be silently guffawing at this outfit and, at the same time, perhaps giving a small smile and nod because he would be proud of my family and me.

To the Olin community - thank you for welcoming and co-creating our purple thread with me. I am humbled by this opportunity. Let's go: Do. Something. Big. Together.
Thank you.