

TAFT

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HEADMASTER

HEADMASTER'S WELCOME
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I welcome all of you parents and students to the school and to this beautiful space, on a day filled with trepidation and optimism, anxiety and hope, expectation and promise. And how much you bring this school as new students! You come from 30 countries and 30 states, you have written remarkable records at your previous schools, and you have an astonishing diversity of experiences. Today you begin a new chapter. And parents: you are taking one of those steps in life you will never forget. For all of you, this is at once a beginning and an ending. Mark my words: you will soon look at the diploma and wonder, “Where did the time go?”

Your two most important days at Taft—today and graduation—take place in this quad of brick, grass and sky; and so it is a space that is rich with symbolism. Think for a moment about space and how here at Taft, our mission to educate the whole student is made possible by the design of our campus. In almost no time at all, you students will come to feel the significance of Bingham Auditorium, where we gather as an entire school four days a week; the Main Hall, that artery that pulses through the heart of campus, which brings us all close together; the pond, where so much of our life revolves; or the newly completed Moorhead building, where we will gather for sit-down dinners and informal meals. The spaces at Taft have been crafted carefully by visionary architects with three important objectives: first, to create a beautiful aesthetic experience for all; second, to enhance learning of all kinds; and third, to encourage the contact between all members of the community. And it is this last point that may be most obvious and perhaps accounts for you choosing Taft. Taft is a place that brings us all together, the friction leading to warmth. It is impossible to teach here if you are not excited about rubbing elbows with students, formally and informally, at every hour of the day; if you do not thrill with finding teaching moments that occur day and night and in all corners of the campus. It is impossible to be a Taft student and not come to know teachers well and peers even better, to feel you are part of a singular community. You will stop feeling like a new student very quickly. This is a warm, friendly, and spirited place. We work hard, but we have a lot fun, too.

Successful communities in the end, though, are built not on foundations of brick, but on values and beliefs that endure forever, are larger than anyone of us, and shape all we do. There is no mistaking what is foundational here, and I might suggest five core values:

First, Taft is a school that values service. The school motto, Not to be Served, but to Serve, is rich with Biblical and well as secular implications and etched in wood and stone. It is school where students serve this community in a wide variety of ways, and where we reach out and serve the larger world as well. Our graduates lead by carrying this belief with them.

Second, Taft is a place that deeply values the respect for others. In a community as close as this one, it is critical that students who come from a wide variety of perspectives and backgrounds respect each other. This is not to say that we are a school that does not have fiercely contested intellectual opinions. Quite the reverse. But, it is a place that demands that we treat each other not just with “tolerance,” a grudging word if there ever was one, but with respect and kindness. It is not complicated: Treat others as you yourself would like to be treated. We will not tolerate meanness, petty cruelty, or bullying; and it is the students, not some set of rules, who in the end embody this.

Third, Taft is a place where we value resilience in the face of disappointment. This is not an easy school, but it is one where if you persevere, you will do fine. Talent means something, but effort means more. Perseverance at Taft is absolutely vital, for if this is the challenging school you sought, you will not succeed in every thing you do. This is normal, and learning how to pick yourself up and recommit is something we hope you will gain here. It is how you will grow, become stronger, and achieve more than you knew possible.

Fourth, this is a school that values excellence. We do not apologize for our high standards, especially in the classroom. Our teachers ask for a lot, they stretch their students beyond their comfort zones, they offer feedback on weaknesses to help improvement—and they do this over and over and at a fast pace. We believe that each of you is capable of achieving impressive things, and the bar is set at excellence.

And finally, Taft is a place that deeply values honor and integrity. It is difficult to escape this lesson. New students at Taft are often struck by how much honesty is valued in all areas of school life, and students serve as stewards of this legacy.

None of what I said will sound unusual. I suspect I have described the values of your families, and they certainly are those of a successful democratic nation as well. You would not want anything other from the school than what I described. Now, these being the central values of the school, can I offer any advice for new students?

Sure I can, and my words are hardly complicated. Here is what I think you should do: Take chances, try new things, and meet people different than you. Be positive, since no one likes a whiner. Work hard, be resilient and get back up when disappointment knocks you down. Eat well, get enough sleep, keep a neat room, do your homework, use free time prudently, dress neatly, and follow the rules. And last, be nice.

That's about it. Simple advice. You probably heard versions of it from your parents.

Now, it's not as easy giving you parents advice; I can hardly visit much less inhabit the recesses of your hearts. But I know this is a day filled with conflicting feelings, a day of excruciating hope and anxiety, and you might even be thinking, "What am I doing?" You have done the right thing. You have entrusted your child to a school filled with opportunities and staffed by the most caring and committed faculty imaginable. I cannot guarantee that your son or daughter will succeed in everything he or she does, but I can guarantee that you are leaving your child at a school with a faculty that is very present, teachers who will bring the whole of themselves to this work, men and women who are compassionate and passionate and almost insanely committed. You have done the right thing.

So what advice could I possibly give?

Don't panic when your child suffers setbacks. They will have setbacks. You know they will. You sent them here because you knew that this would be a challenging school, and while your heart aches when you see your son or daughter in distress, disappointment, or sadness, another part

of you knows how important that is for them to mature. You may get an email or call: “Mom, I’m flunking out. Dad, no one likes me here. Mom, I can’t believe the coach cut me. Dad, Spanish II is way too hard.” Tape the words “Don’t Panic!” over your computer screen. Taft is a place where your sons and daughters will learn by falling down and then getting back up. And teenagers are amazingly resilient and adaptive: it’s incredible what a good night’s sleep or a meal with some friends will do. See this process as natural, inevitable, and healthy.

When your son or daughter faces a problem, try to witness it rather than solve it. Here you might tape the following message over your screen or phone to ask your child: “This is your problem; how are you solving it?” Psychological research shows that children feel a greater sense of control and self-esteem if adults have allowed or forced them to act independently. Resist the temptation to call to have the problem solved. Students learn valuable lessons when they have to figure out what to do if they have lost their backpack, slept through class, or missed the bus. We do not pad every sharp corner, and we are not going to call you every time your son or daughter struggles, falls short, or makes a mistake. These are the things that mark a normal, healthy development, especially at a demanding school.

Finally, be prepared to watch your son’s or daughter’s career to unfold in unexpected ways. Every year I remind us of my favorite image: that of the child as a seed packet without a label. You have planted your child in new soil here, and who knows what confluence of climate, sunlight, and nutrient will lead to them blossoming. It’s scary, to be sure. How many of you parents are wondering, “What will he become? What will she succeed in here?” But in our most joyous moments, we just marvel in watching our children grow in directions we never foresaw.

Having said all this, one of the things I love about this job is the close relationships that develop between parents and teachers—you will know what I mean at graduation. You have just joined the Taft family. I hope you will visit a lot, at games and concerts and productions; and I am so looking forward to getting to know you during this journey. You will hear from the school in many ways, from the impromptu calls from an adviser to an email from the dean of students to the end of semester packet. We put the student at the center of a network of empathic and committed adults, and each student will have a handful of classroom teachers and other important adults ranging from dormitory head, adviser, dean, coach, director of the play—and all will challenge, support, advise and teach.

Who might you turn to when you have specific concerns?

Perhaps the two most important figures, especially for you in these early days, will be the class dean and adviser. My hope is that you have had the opportunity to meet your child’s class dean already, and the class dean is perhaps the most important figure here. The class dean is charged with overseeing the whole of your child’s life at Taft: the academic, extracurricular, athletic, and personal. Parents, of course, would turn to the class dean for any host of reasons; and indeed that would most likely be your first call—if some event or change has occurred in your home or family life, if he or she seems to be struggling in some serious way, if you want a large “macro” view on how he or she is doing.

In addition, we assign each new student a temporary adviser. We do this to ensure that in the first few weeks of school you immediately will have an adult who will get to know you and help you as you adjust to Taft. At the end of three weeks, students all choose their own advisers for the year. We believe it is absolutely critical that you have this choice, and you will have the option of keeping the adviser you have or choosing someone new. For what its worth, every year about half the students choose to remain with their temporary adviser and the other half choose someone else, perhaps a coach they have come to know or a teacher they know from class or the dorm.

These two figures, dean and adviser, are at the front of the group of teachers who will work with your child.

So, let me introduce some of these critical figures at the school who will be important to you as you begin life here. They will watch carefully over the students' careers this year and communicate with you whenever they have significant concerns. I would note, for what it is worth, the great depth of experience represented by this group: there's some 200 years of teaching on this stage.

These men and women embody all that is Taft: a school of smart, dedicated, passionate faculty who are life-long learners, who have chosen to live among the students they teach, and who feel called to a vocation that is beautiful and sacred. I speak for them in saying this: I recognize the gravity that comes with the fact that you have trusted us with your child. I know that when you turn the car and drive off in a few minutes, you will be doing something you know is right and yet is also terribly difficult. Have faith—in Taft, in your child, in the love, courage and hope you have given as parents. In this spirit of faith, I welcome you to Taft.

Finally, the most important person today is the head monitor, Jake Cohen. Taft has countless ways students can lead, and perhaps the most important leaders are the school monitors, the 12 seniors elected by the school. They carry enormous responsibility in planning student events, but they are more: I ask them to carry themselves with the highest order of moral and intellectual conduct, to serve as exemplars in all ways, and to counsel me in many school matters. Leading this group is Jake Cohen, a student of extraordinary scholarship, one of our most talented and certainly our funniest actor, and a stalwart and principled leader.