Christopher D. Burner ’80, Head of School
Convocation
The Chapel

I would like to welcome everyone to the new school year at Western Reserve Academy. I hope you have had an enjoyable summer.

Now, I look forward to beginning classes and all the other activities of the new school year.

For those new to the school, we will gather each Monday and Friday in this Chapel for Morning Meeting, as well as other times for speeches and other events. Morning Meeting is a time for us to learn about school activities, results of competitions, clubs, weekend activities and about the seniors as they make senior speeches. I believe you will find these meetings are an educational and meaningful part of your experiences at Reserve. Morning Meeting will be led by our student body leadership, Erik Gross and Cole Howard. We will also sing the alma mater at some Morning Meetings. Let’s begin for those new to the community, to learn the alma mater today. I call upon a group of musicians to lead us in the alma mater.

After a week of practices and orientation at Camp Wise for freshmen, we now turn to the core of our experiences at Reserve, classes. Of course the other activities will continue, but tomorrow morning you will follow your schedule and meet your teachers as well as classmates.

As I consider our returning students, new students and faculty, I note the range and diversity of backgrounds, experiences and even geography represented in this Chapel. Here we have students from 25 states and 13 countries, we have faculty from Europe, Taiwan, Morocco, and even from far-flung locations in America such as Georgia, Alabama and even Cape Cod. We combine all of these backgrounds for, what I believe, is a compelling and educational community.

While you will certainly learn much in class and other areas, I would also propose that you will learn and be influenced by each other – in lasting and enduring ways. This is an important part of your experience here.

For those of you who were here last spring, you may remember I referred to a recent book by Professor Angela Duckworth called *Grit – The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, a book about characteristics that lead to success. The book also discussed how we learned and embodied grit. Near the end of the book Professor Duckworth makes an observation that I believe is particularly important for this community, as we consider our various backgrounds, diversity and experiences.

Professor Duckworth says the following:

“Whether we realize it or not, the culture in which we live, and with which we identify, powerfully shapes just about every aspect of our being. By culture, I don’t mean the geographic or political boundaries that divide one people from another as much as the invisible psychological boundaries separating us from them.”
At its core, a culture is defined by the shared norms and values of a group of people. In other words, a distinct culture exists any time a group of people are in consensus about how we do things around here and why. As for how the rest of the world operates, the sharper the contrast, the stronger the bonds among those of what psychologists call the “in group”…”

She goes on to say:

“The bottom line on culture and grit is: If you want to be grittier, find a gritty culture and join it. If you’re a leader, and you want people in your organization to be grittier, create a gritty culture.”

As Professor Duckworth explains, we have many shared norms or values, some are deep, lasting norms that will lead to success and happiness in your continued education and personal life.

These include: honesty, integrity, loyalty, ensuring your work is your own, compassion and others.

We hope this school, and your classmates, exhibit and strengthen these characteristics.

Some norms are perhaps more basic such as: do not walk on the grass, pick up after yourself, show courtesy to others and even be a good friend.

As Professor Duckworth explains, I believe we see grit – determination throughout our community each day. We have created an environment, a school over generations and many years of collected values, characteristics, rules and even a curriculum and other requirements that lead to the development of grit and long-lasting features.

I believe we see grit – determination – throughout our community each day.

We saw it last week in athletic practices. Some of you, and perhaps many of you, certainly struggled through each practice – running around the cross country course, holding bags at football practice and even trying to strike a volleyball among the many activities.

Your struggles and hard work will increase tomorrow. You will begin to conjugate verbs, decline nouns, conduct new experiments and perhaps even try to dance. All of these activities will stretch and challenge you but you will be surrounded by others who are being challenged in similar ways.

And so, in response to Duckworth’s challenge when she says “if you want to be grittier find a gritty culture and join it,” I would suggest you have come to the right place. You simply need to consider your classmates and become involved in all the school activities.

Nonetheless, I would also suggest, as I consider this community and school, I see other important characteristics such as joy, comradery, spirit, participation and support of others.
As we begin the school year we acknowledge the challenges and characteristics that will lead to great success and education.

Also, I would call upon the senior class, and all students, to consider a community that includes characteristics such as compassion, support of each other, joy and happiness in our daily activities.

In short, I hope for an enjoyable and rewarding school year for all of you in this Chapel. Please accept my best wishes for success and happiness this year.