Good afternoon. It is a great pleasure to welcome new families into the Rice family. Greetings to all joining us today who played a role in raising our newest group of students, in fact Rice University’s centennial class: parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters and friends.

First, I want to assure the families who are not from the Gulf region that Houston does have seasons. In fact, you have experienced both of them. We call them indoors and outdoors.

You come from a great variety of experiences: from small towns and large cities; from as close as a few blocks away to as far as Australia. From Accokeek, Maryland to Zhengzhou, China; from Ackerly, Texas, population 219, to Tokyo, Japan, with a metropolitan population of perhaps 35,000,000. Honolulu, Hawaii, to Manchester, Massachusetts; from Jonkoping, Sweden, to Tauranga, New Zealand. Some of you are part of large, closely knit extended families, and some single mothers or fathers raising children on your own. Some of you enjoy lives of great privilege, and some of you aren’t always sure you will make it until the next paycheck. Some of you
are democrats, some republicans, and some won’t confess to being either.
Some of you are leaving your only child with us today, and others have a
half dozen more at home. Some of you are dropping off the third generation
of Rice students in your family, and some of you are dropping off the first
person in your family to get a college education. Some of you couldn’t be
happier, some of you are on the verge of tears, and most of you are probably
both.

But I will bet we will all agree on one thing: your children who are
beginning at Rice today are remarkable people, and they owe a great deal of
that to you.

In today’s world, families have become more complex, and our
children depend on a variety of people to support and encourage them. So
when I refer to your children today, I hope you will understand it in an
inclusive way, to include as the case may be your grandchild, stepchild,
godchild, niece, nephew, brother, or sister. And when I refer to parents, you
will understand it to include grandparents, foster parents, and indeed all
those who may have had a continuing and important role in the raising of the
young men and women we welcome to Rice today.
This is an important moment for all of you. When I read the program, and saw those three stark words at the end of the lunch description—"Families Say Goodbye", it gave me pause, and indeed nearly brought tears to my eyes. Now it could be worse. A few years ago I was in Sparta, Greece. In ancient Sparta boys were separated from their families at the age of seven to begin their military training. So at least you have had a few more years, and Rice, I assure you, and as you have probably observed for yourself, is not so Spartan as Sparta.

I actually could make this speech, and all the speeches to parents of entering freshmen very short. In the end it all boils down to: “Don’t worry, don’t cry.”

For those of you feeling sad, we urge you to look at the bright side. For example, one person said “setting a good example for children takes all the fun out of middle age.” If the child you are dropping off today is your last or only, you can now have more fun. Some of you may already be thinking that you can now turn your child’s room into the home theater you always wanted. But of course your child will be returning home. As the comedian Art Buchwald said: “There isn't a child who has gone out into the brave new world who eventually doesn't return to the old homestead carrying a bundle of dirty clothes.”
Now I confess that I can’t speak much from my own experience about this kind of separation. My family is also here on campus today, but my children are still three and six years away from the college experience, and will be at home with me tonight. And I can barely remember that time, now over three decades ago, when I was dropped off at college by my parents. For some of your children, this will be their first extended time away from home. I had already spent half a year away from home in the 10th grade in Germany, but still, that sensation of being deposited at my college was new. For one thing, in Germany I was living with another family. At college I wasn’t sure who, if anyone, would take an interest in my wellbeing. I was, it seemed, on my own.

That is undoubtedly an important part of the college experience, that chance to grow in self-reliance and independence. But here at Rice, as you have probably already observed in dropping off your family member, we immediately welcome our students into a new family. They are assigned upper class advisors, some of whom were screaming their welcome and calling your child by name as you drove up today. Around five hundred Rice students have given up a week of their summers to take on the task of orienting the new students—your family members. Think about that. In a small university like Rice, that level of involvement and commitment is
amazing. And the competition for this privilege is intense—only about half of the students who apply are selected.

Here at Rice, our new students are not a faceless part of a large undergraduate or even small undergraduate student body. Instead, they are assigned from the beginning to one of our residential colleges, the places where you just enjoyed lunch. In fact, they are one of only about a hundred new students assigned to their new home, and before they even get there, many of their fellow students already know their names, and something about them. And they are not welcomed as junior members in some sort of fraternity or sorority ritual. Rather they are welcomed as a slightly younger sister or brother. This morning, many O-week advisers proudly introduced their “freshman” to me in just that spirit—a spirit of affection and responsibility.

Your children are here because they are already young women and men of remarkable accomplishment. Why have they chosen to come to Rice? Presumably because they saw here opportunity—opportunity to learn, to grow, to take the next step in becoming contributors to our world. And they will do so in perhaps the best environment in the country, as Rice for three years in a row has been ranked number one in the country for the
quality of undergraduate student life, and this past year of course also ranked first for happiness. They will take advantage of our diversity, for we have consistently ranked in the top few in the country in race and class interaction. And they will have the opportunity to do all this at one of the most exciting times in our history as we celebrate our centennial in just two months.

You are lending us your young family member. This relationship is not just for your benefit or ours, but for the young person you are entrusting to us. Even putting any tuition aside, we benefit from the presence of your child, and are excited to have him or her as part of our community.

Indeed, I want to speak about something everyone tells me never to mention, especially on the first day here. Most of you will spend a great deal of money to send your child here. And even though Rice has been singled out as the best value in private higher education today, we understand the sacrifice and commitment you are making to send your child here, especially in these challenging times, and we are grateful for that. But I want you to know that we too are investing in your child. Indeed, if we determined that only half of the money we spend at Rice went to undergraduate education and everything that is needed to support the special
experience we provide at Rice, it would mean that Rice is making an investment in your child equal to or more than our full tuition. Thus both you and we have an investment in your child’s future. This is not an investment solely for your benefit, our benefit, or even your child’s benefit. We are a non-profit institution, and we make these large investments in these incredibly talented young people because we believe it will serve our society and our world. Your children’s futures will be great and rewarding, but they will be so because they too are making contributions.

We will return your child changed, perhaps even changed in ways you don’t like. That is not your responsibility, or even our responsibility, but it is the process of becoming educated adult members of our society, who will make their own choices, who will grow in response to their education and the opportunities they confront and master. This process of change is not always easy or comfortable. As you may recall, from almost the moment your child learned to talk, they also learned to talk back.

If you will indulge me, I would like to tell you a couple stories about my own children. My son Daniel is fifteen years old. Until about the age of 7, he almost always went to sleep with the light on, often falling asleep while reading a book. But even if he wasn’t reading, after I said goodnight
to him, he wanted the light left on. Then I would quietly return before I went to bed and turn the light off. One night I went back, and the light was off. I assumed my wife had turned the light off. But the next night it was off again, and my wife was out. And I suddenly realized that my son was turning the light out himself before he went to sleep.

Yes I realize that your children have long slept in the dark, and in most cases learned to keep you in the dark. But what I felt when I realized that my son was turning the light off himself was an odd mixture of both joy and sadness. Joy that he was getting older, more self reliant, and had conquered his immature fears. And yet sad that he needed me just a little bit less as he was learning to make his way through the world. In the years ahead, you will experience perhaps both that joy and sadness.

The university’s lawyer tells me that having told you a story about my son, I must now also tell you a story about our younger daughter Merissa. Shortly after moving to Houston eight years ago we took a trip to Astroworld, the Six Flags amusement park just a few miles from here that has now closed. Daniel and Merissa were quite excited about our family outing. We got there early in the morning, and the park wasn’t too crowded. We went first to a kind of water roller coaster, giant circular rafts that spin
down a water chute. Now our daughter, who is now ten, had been gradually following the example of our son, and on our prior visit to an amusement park had quite enjoyed riding a small roller coaster. But as we approached this ride, she hesitated, seemed to grow fearful, and declared she didn’t want to go on any roller coasters. I was surprised, for I had thought that once she had starting enjoying roller coasters, she would simply want ever faster and higher. Later that afternoon, with a bit of encouragement, we went back to the ride, and everyone got on together. I think Merissa enjoyed it; my wife most definitely did not. For many years thereafter, Merissa would rarely go on roller coasters. I realized that the growing experience for my children will often be characterized by some backsliding, perhaps even by fearing things I thought she had grown comfortable with. Your children, too, may surprise you with new fears and insecurities, and they will need your help, patience and understanding to overcome them.

This summer we actually went back to Disney World and Universal Studios. Both Daniel and Merissa were initially a bit hesitant about the roller coasters, and my favorite ride, the Tower of Terror. But eventually I persuaded them, and it turned out they really enjoyed the ride. Sometimes your job will be to encourage them to overcome their fears, try new and challenging things, and who knows, they might just like it. But like a roller
coaster, there will be ups and downs and sometimes your – or their – heart will be in your throat. They will need your help through those times.

Lastly, I want to read you something from a book that, so far as I know, can be found in only one library in the world. The title is Herman Kolbe and the Structural Theory of Organic Chemistry. It’s about a nineteenth century German chemist. Why on earth would I want to read from such a book? Being an academic, the answer of course is that I wrote it—my senior year of college. Actually, I just want to read one paragraph from the acknowledgments:

Finally, I would like to thank my parents and family for the love, support and encouragement they have always shown. I especially thank my mother, who has continued to show her support despite the realization that I am not going to medical school. I still worry that I am a disappointment to my mother. Despite the fact I did well in organic chemistry, medical school was not for me. Education is indeed about dreams and opportunities, but they are your children’s dreams and opportunities. The hard part is developing those dreams and seizing those opportunities. Our new young students will flourish so long as they
find those things that they are passionate about. They will need your support as they develop those passions. I already know they are counting on you.

A Wall Street Journal article on over-involved parents of college students described the cell phone as the world’s longest umbilical cord. We hope your children will make use of that umbilical cord, seeking advice and comfort as decisions, challenges, and yes, disappointments, confront them. But we also hope that you will keep in mind that the college experience is for your child—our student—to navigate, and that learning to undertake such responsibility is a valuable and important part of their educational experience.

Rest assured that your sons and daughters have chosen a wonderful place to begin their education and their adult lives. Rice shares their and your high aspirations, and offers all that a university can in excellent teaching, facilities and support systems that will allow them to flourish. We care intensely about what they do with their lives.

I could spend so much more time talking about how extraordinary our new students are. They are already winners of prizes in mathematics, chemistry, physics and engineering, founders of non-profit organizations and
businesses, holders of patents, award winning artists and musicians, published authors and nationally ranked athletes. I could go on, but perhaps I can be very brief if I just say that your child’s fellow students are just as extraordinary, brilliant and accomplished as your child. In many cases, this will be the first time a new student is surrounded by others so motivated and talented. They will learn from each other and inspire each other to achievement, to decency, to friendship. So take a moment, turn to the family to your left, and then to the family on your right, and congratulate them for producing such outstanding classmates for your children.

Your children will leave here to go on to graduate education or employment in the world. In that world, they will be better prepared than most. Part of that preparation is learning to interact with, respect, and learn from people quite different than they are. This class, the class of 2016, is one of the most diverse and most international in Rice’s history. So when your classical music loving close cropped kid brings home a friend with flowing hair and four earrings--only one of which is in an ear--with some loud playing hip hop CD’s, welcome that opportunity to learn and interact.

If history is any indicator, your sons and daughters will flourish. Rice graduates excel across the disciplines in their careers. Indeed, Rice
graduates succeed in realizing their goals as the graduates of few other schools do. They are Pulitzer prize winning authors, high government officials, motivating teachers, pioneering leaders in venture capital, corporate CEOs of major enterprises, movie producers, astronauts, leading fashion designers, musicians and architects, Nobel prize winning scientists, dedicated physicians and medical researchers, and professional athletes and Olympic contestants.

We hope you will return often to our campus, and especially for either or both of our centennial celebration and our families weekend this fall. Separating from our children is difficult, whether for a few hours, days, weeks or months. But leave today confident that your child, your young adult, is embarked upon a journey that will serve him or her well for years to come. We thank you for entrusting your family members with us, and investing with us in their futures. We are honored to play a role in the next step on their way to opportunity, achievement, and contribution.

So, don’t worry, don’t cry. We wish you godspeed in your journeys home, and look forward to seeing you often in the years ahead.