

The enemy of great

Feb 14, 2013 | Jonathan Jansen

Welcome to the opening of the 2013 academic year. Our theme this morning is **The Enemy of Great.**



Prof Jonathan Jansen

Photograph by: Times LIVE



" We are good: that is our problem; we are good, but not yet great"

But I begin by introducing to you these four young first-year students in the front row who represent so beautifully our two major commitments: the academic project, which has an uncompromising focus on high academic standards, and the human project, which has a wholehearted devotion to opening up opportunities for all students to access higher education.

Some of these students, such as Boitumelo Thlaole, of Heatherdale High, in Bloemfontein, come from poor homes and disadvantaged schools, but she scored more than 90% in mathematics, the life sciences and physical science. Other students, such as Roxy Stott, of Bergvliet High, in the Cape, were denied access to medical training in their province - though Roxy achieved seven distinctions. Both Boitumelo and Roxy are now student doctors at the University of the Free State.

I am exceptionally proud of them because they prove, yet again, that our nation need not make false choices between academic excellence and human compassion. That is how you become a great campus and a great country.

Many of you will be familiar with the Jim Collins' bestselling book, *Good to Great*, in which he argues that the reason we do not achieve greatness in our schools, companies or governments is that we are actually quite good. In this zone of goodness we become complacent; we are happy to remain in cruise mode rather than extend ourselves to become truly outstanding individuals or organisations.

"Good," Collins famously said, "is the enemy of great."

In my three-and-a-half years at the University of the Free State, I can honestly say that this is a good place. I have seen the goodness of people in every sector of our work: campus security, academic teaching, student health, institutional planning.

The people of middle South Africa are kind, generous, hard-working and committed.

Wherever I travel in this country and abroad, people admire your achievements: the transformation of human lives, the investment in the smartest young scholars, the many new buildings and the stable, respectful culture developing across the undergraduate student community. We do many good things. But that is precisely our problem; we are good, but not yet great.

Good is a computer lab that is stocked with functioning computers; great is a 100% WiFi campus. Good can be seen in clean and well-maintained campus grounds; great is the first fully compliant green campus in the country. Good is feeding hungry students; great is establishing South Africa's first student cooperative venture through a partnership with farmers in our area to provide fresh produce for half of the market value to students who volunteer their services to the "co-op". Good is handing out textbooks on time; great is digitising all the learning and reference materials for every course. Good is to tolerate a student or staff member who is different to you; great is to embrace that person.

Good is publishing in the SA Journal of Science; great is publishing in Science, Cell or Nature.

We are a good university; we are not yet a great university.

We become a great university by changing the old and familiar metrics with which we measure greatness. You do not become a great university, for example, by hiring only your own people; people who look like you, pray like you and make love like you.

Some of the great universities in the US recognised that the secret to building their reputations was to hire top researchers fleeing persecution in Europe during the period of national socialism. Talent does not come in one creed or colour, or from within national borders alone. The Okinawa Institute of Technology, in Japan, is an island university that is told by its government that its state subsidy is guaranteed only if fewer than half the professors are Japanese. We will continue to pursue diversity in our staffing ranks both as a matter of social justice but also as a concern for institutional reputation.

After more than three years together, you know my weaknesses as a leader.

I cannot lead alone. I depend on you so that together we can make this a truly great university.

The slide-show version of this edited speech is available on <http://www.ufs.ac.za/2013Opening>