Cam Wesson Remarks — October 20, 2026

Chair Slater, members of the Board of Governors, distinguished guests, delegates from our sister institutions, elected officials, alumni, faculty, staff, students, friends of Shepherd University, and—most importantly—my family:

Thank you.

I stand here today filled with gratitude, humility, pride—and, if I am being completely candid, an incredible amount of disbelief.

Since I arrived at Shepherd there have been moments when I wanted to pinch myself just to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

This is one of them.

In fact, I have been thinking about taking out my phone and getting a selfie from up here. (*Take out phone*)

I mean, really—when am I going to get this view again? (*Take selfie*)

There. Now I have proof this is all real!

Exactly forty years ago, I graduated from high school in Talladega County, Alabama. I recently had the opportunity to celebrate that anniversary with my classmates, and it caused me to think about the distance between the young man I was *then* and the person standing before you *today*.

I can promise you this - that younger version of me *did not* see this coming.

I grew up in the small town of Childersburg, Alabama. My father was the town pharmacist and my mother kept the books. Like so many families, ours believed in hard work—not as an abstraction, but as a basic way of life.

You showed up.

You did your job.

You kept your word.

You treated people fairly.

And you understood that most things worth having are the result of hard work.

I didn't realize it at the time, but those lessons were extraordinary preparation for a life in higher education.

And perhaps even better preparation for being a university president.

My first encounter with a college campus came even earlier.

In the fall of 1974, my parents took me to an Auburn football game.

Cam Wesson Remarks — October 20, 2026

I was six years old.

And I was mesmerized.

Like a lot of little boys, I dreamed of playing college football. Unlike most of my classmates, however, I didn't dream of playing for Alabama, I dreamt of playing for Auburn. In fact, I'm so glad Shepherd's colors are blue and gold because I've refused to wear anything crimson my entire life.

Unfortunately, it quickly became clear that my enthusiasm *for* football substantially exceeded my ability *to play* football.

So that particular dream never worked out.

But something else happened that beautiful fall day in 1974 - I experienced a university for the first time.

I saw campus buildings and college students. I heard the marching band. I experienced the traditions and the energy of rolling Toomer's Corner after an Auburn victory.

Although I couldn't have explained it at six years old, I immediately understood that important things happened on a university campus. They were places where people were transformed by knowledge.

That first visit planted a seed.

Years later, I would return to Auburn as an undergraduate student. I *would march* in that band. I would study architecture and anthropology. Eventually, education would take me from Alabama to become a global adventurer, and my academic career would take me to Illinois, Oklahoma, Vermont, Pennsylvania, and now West Virginia.

I became an archaeologist.

A professor.

A department chair.

A dean.

A provost.

And today, somehow, the grown up version of that six-year-old kid who sat in a football stadium in 1974 is standing before you as the seventeenth president of Shepherd University.

So yes; pinch me.

I think *I am* dreaming.

But an inauguration is not about the person being inaugurated.

And this one certainly isn't.

An inauguration is about an institution.

It is about inheritance.

It is about stewardship.

And, most importantly, it is about the future.

And we gather today at an extraordinary moment in the history of higher education.

We are at a crossroads.

Across our country, confidence in institutions has eroded.

Government.

The media.

Business.

Religious institutions.

And yes—colleges and universities.

More than half of Americans now doubt whether a college degree is worth its cost.

Think about that.

For generations, higher education represented one of America's clearest promises.

Work hard. Learn. Earn an education. Build a better life.

Today, millions of Americans are asking whether that promise still holds.

They are asking questions we in higher education cannot afford to dismiss.

Is college worth it?

Is it affordable?

Does it prepare graduates for meaningful work?

Are universities listening to the communities they serve?

Do we teach students how to think—or what to think?

What impacts will Artificial Intelligence have on the future of education *and* the future of work?

And perhaps the most fundamental question of all:

Do we still value education?

Not credentials,

Not rankings,

Not degrees,

Not prestige,

But Education,

Do we believe the inherent value proposition still tilts in favor of learning?

Do we believe an educated person is better equipped to navigate this ever-changing world?

Do we believe education expands human possibility?

I do.

Deeply.

But belief is not enough.

Higher education must earn the confidence of the people we serve.

And Shepherd must earn it every single day.

Perhaps my training as an archaeologist makes me particularly interested in moments like this.

Archaeologists spend a great deal of time studying societies at moments of change.

We study what happens when technologies shift.

(Pull out the hand axe and display it to the crowd.)

This was once a revolutionary piece of technology that changed the way people cleared land, planted crops, and built permanent communities.

It was also responsible for changing social and political relationships *within* those communities

Economies change.

Institutions lose legitimacy.

People move.

Old assumptions sometimes fail to explain new realities.

And archaeology teaches us something important:

People living through transformative moments rarely recognize their full significance.

They simply know the world somehow feels different.

I think many Americans feel that way today.

The pace of change is astonishing.

Artificial intelligence is transforming how we work and learn.

Technologies emerge, spread, and become obsolete in the span of just a few short years.

Industries are being completely reinvented.

Many of the careers today's students will go on to pursue don't presently exist.

Information travels around the planet instantaneously—and misinformation travels just as quickly.

We carry in our pockets access to more information than any previous generation could have imagined.

And yet we often struggle to determine what is true.

We are more connected than any people in human history.

Yet too many of us feel increasingly disconnected from one another.

This has led to what modern psychology has called the loneliness epidemic.

We live in a moment of extraordinary innovation—and extraordinary distrust.

For someone of my generation, GenX, some of this feels strangely familiar.

I'm a child of the Vietnam War and Watergate.

My earliest memories were formed during another period when Americans questioned institutions, leaders, authority, and each other.

Those years changed our country.

But there is an important difference between that era and ours.

Change now happens exponentially faster.

Technological revolutions once unfolded over a generation.

Now it can unfold between freshman orientation and commencement.

Our students are preparing for a world none of us can fully predict.

And that makes the work of universities not less important—*but more important*.

Because when we can't know exactly what the future will require, we must educate people capable of meeting whatever lies ahead.

People who can think.

People who can write.

People who can calculate.

People who can create.

People who can innovate.

People who can master new technologies without surrendering their humanity to them.

People who approach those who see the world differently than themselves with curiosity rather than judgment.

People who can solve problems we have not yet imagined.

That is what education does for students ***and*** for society.

And that is what Shepherd must continue to do exceptionally well.

But there is another part of college we sometimes overlook when we discuss return on investment.

It's harder to measure.

There isn't a column for it on a spreadsheet.

It is the profoundly human dimension of education.

Ask graduates what they remember about college twenty or thirty or forty years later.

They may remember a course.

They may remember a book.

They may even remember a particularly good lecture.

But they will most certainly remember the people who were central to their experience.

The professor who saw something in them before they saw it in themselves.

The coach who demanded more.

The staff member who noticed when something was wrong.

The roommate who became a lifelong friend.

The person they fell in love with.

The mentor who changed the trajectory of their life.

College is a collection of human relationships.

Including the relationship you have with yourself.

I know because my own life has been shaped by those relationships.

My professors changed me.

My colleagues changed me.

My students changed me.

And the institutions themselves.

Education isn't merely a transaction, it is a transformation.

It is the transformation of people.

And transformation is almost always personal.

That is why places like Shepherd matter.

I've spent much of my professional life at universities considerably larger than Shepherd.

Wonderful institutions.

Important institutions.

Places that taught me a great deal.

But I have never experienced a university quite like this one.

When I began thinking seriously about becoming a university president, I knew I did not simply want to *be **a** president*.

I wanted to serve a place I could believe in.

A place where the mission mattered.

A place where people knew one another.

A place deeply connected to its community.

A place where I could walk across campus and encounter students, faculty, staff, alumni, and neighbors—and actually know their names.

And then I found Shepherd.

As soon as I set foot on campus I knew Shepherd was where I wanted to be. I knew I had found my people.

I knew I wanted to become the president of ***this*** university.

Because Shepherd ***is*** special.

I felt it the first time I crossed the Rumsey Bridge.

I felt it walking across campus.

I felt it talking with our faculty and staff.

I felt it meeting our students.

I felt it in Shepherdstown and across the Eastern Panhandle.

And after these first months, I feel it even more strongly.

I have never served an institution quite like Shepherd.

And I can't imagine a place better suited to me.

And those of you who love Shepherd know exactly what I mean.

There is something wonderfully authentic about this university.

We know who we are.

We are a public university.

We are a regional university.

We are a university with deep roots in Appalachia with an increasingly broad reach.

We are a university where exceptional teaching still matters.

Where professors know their students.

Where staff members understand that helping a student solve one seemingly small problem can sometimes determine whether that student stays in college.

Where education remains personal.

And where opportunity remains at the heart of our mission.

There is pride here.

Appalachian pride.

West Virginia pride.

Shepherd pride.

And at a moment when confidence in institutions is fragile, we should not be embarrassed by that pride.

But pride cannot become complacency.

Because Shepherd, like higher education itself, stands at a crossroads.

We can't rest on our storied accomplishments.

We can be proud of what we've done.

Confident in who we are, and ambitious in what we seek to become.

That's how I choose to move forward from today.

Our academic leadership is ready.

Our faculty are ready.

Our staff are ready.

Our alumni and friends are ready.

And our students deserve nothing less.

We will ensure everyone knows what a Shepherd education means.

It is affordable and accessible to everyone.

It prepares you for more than a job; it leads to meaningful and productive careers.

We will embrace technology while insisting technology serves humanity—not the other way around.

We will prepare our students to solve problems that don't yet exist.

Our historic roots in the liberal arts will teach our students to think critically, communicate clearly, understand history, analyze evidence, and appreciate human difference; All skills that will become **more** valuable in an age of automation, not less.

We will deepen relationships with businesses, schools, healthcare providers, nonprofits, government, and communities throughout this region.

We will welcome students who are the first people in their families to attend college.

We will welcome veterans.

Adult learners.

Transfer students.

International students.

Students who arrive absolutely certain of their path, and students who arrive having no idea what they want to become.

In fact, Shepherd lends itself to those who are willing to engage in a journey of discovery.

Because sometimes discovering what you want to become is the whole point.

We will measure ourselves honestly.

We will hold ourselves accountable.

We will celebrate our success.

And when something isn't working, we will have the courage to change it.

Because stewardship doesn't mean preserving everything exactly as we found it. (Pull the axe head out)

Stewardship means leaving something stronger for those who are yet to come.

I sometimes wonder if somewhere along the way we stopped dreaming.

Not just in higher education, but as a culture.

We became cautious.

Suspicious.

Afraid of failure.

We became experts at identifying the reasons why something can't be done.

Maybe we need to become dreamers again.

Universities should be places where dreaming is encouraged.

Dreaming accompanied by hard work.

When dreams are pursued with effort and newfound knowledge, they become reality.

Cam Wesson Remarks — October 20, 2026

A student should be able to arrive at Shepherd from a small town in West Virginia—or Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Alabama, or anywhere else—and see the path toward any life they can imagine; beyond anything they once thought possible.

I know something about that.

Because once upon a time, a six-year-old boy from Alabama walked onto a university campus and saw a world he didn't know existed.

The experience invited him to dream about his future, never knowing that it would one day lead him to a stage in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Shepherd gives that same permission to every student who comes through our doors.

Now, I recognize something else.

Presidents are expected on occasions like this to talk about vision.

And vision matters.

But after more than three decades in higher education, I've learned that vision without hard work is just empty rhetoric.

So I want to make you a promise.

I will work.

I will listen.

I will show up.

I will tell you the truth, even when the truth is uncomfortable.

I will make mistakes—and when I do, I will own them.

I will expect accountability from myself and from the people who lead alongside me.

I will defend this university.

I will advocate for our students.

I will support our faculty and staff.

I will embrace the future with an eye toward our history and unique traditions.

And I will never forget that Shepherd's presidency does not belong to me.

It is held in trust.

For a little while.

Then the 18th president of Shepherd will hold it temporarily.

The question I ask myself is what kind of university will number eighteen inherit?

Will our students be bold in confronting the future?

Will they live lives of consequence that positively impact their families, their communities and our world?

Will they ask meaningful questions and not rush to judgment?

And will they all, as alumni, come to understand the value of this place and what they received here?

Those are the measures that matter to me.

And I wouldn't be an academic if I didn't understand the value of a timely quote-

There's a line from my favorite *Lord Huron* song that always inspires me:

"What good is living a life you've been given if all you do is stand in one place?"

That question feels especially appropriate today.

Universities cannot stand in one place.

Shepherd cannot stand in one place.

And neither can I.

We honor those who built this university not by putting their contributions on a shelf, but by carrying them forward.

For more than 150 years, generations of people have believed Shepherd was worth building.

Faculty who devoted their lives and careers to teaching.

Committed staff who resiliently kept this institution moving through every challenge without ever allowing our students to see the extraordinary efforts it takes to keep this wonderful university functioning.

Presidents who carried responsibilities I am only just beginning to comprehend.

Alumni who built lives and families and communities—and then gave back.

Donors who invested in students they would never meet to realize the future we have now inherited.

People across West Virginia who understood that this university belongs not to those who work here, but to the communities we serve.

We inherit their work.

Now it is our turn to build upon that legacy and invest in a future we can only dream of.

I began by saying that we stand at a crossroads.

Crossroads can be frightening places.

But they are also places of possibility.

We can look at declining confidence in higher education and become defensive.

Or we can listen.

We can look at new technologies and retreat.

Or we can lead.

We can look at deepening division and disagreement in our society and lose hope.

Or we can teach people how to live, learn, and work alongside those with whom they disagree.

We can lose our momentum longing for how things used to be.

Or we can learn from the past to build something worthy of the future.

I know which path I choose.

I choose the transformative power of education.

I choose our students.

I choose Shepherd.

And I choose hope—not naïve hope, but the kind of hope built from hard work, discipline, evidence, courage, and faith in each other.

I believe the future of Shepherd University is bright.

Not because the road ahead will be easy.

It won't be.

Not because higher education faces no serious challenges.

It does.

And not because Shepherd will get every decision right.

Cam Wesson Remarks — October 20, 2026

That's not possible.

I believe in our future because of the people sitting in this room.

The people I've met since my initial campus visit.

Because of the people teaching in our classrooms.

Because of the people working in our offices, laboratories, libraries, residence halls, athletic facilities, and across this beautiful campus.

Because of our alumni.

Because of this community.

And above all, because of our students.

We will not fail because this place – this work– is too important to too many people.

And because we will do it together.

Forty years after graduating from high school, I find myself beginning again.

A new university.

A new community.

New responsibilities.

New possibilities.

And perhaps that is another lesson of education.

We are never finished becoming.

And neither are institutions.

Shepherd is still becoming.

So am I.

And so are you.

Today, I ask all of you to join me in imagining what this remarkable university can become next.

Let's be ambitious enough to dream.

Humble enough to listen.

Courageous enough to change.

Committed enough to do the work.

And confident enough to believe that a small public university in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, can show the country something important about what higher education can still be.

Personal.

Affordable.

Relevant.

Human.

Transformative.

A place where people matter.

A place where ideas matter.

A place where opportunity matters.

A place where a student can arrive with one understanding of who they are—and leave having discovered who they might become.

That is a university worth believing in.

That is a university worth fighting for.

That is the Shepherd University I believe in.

And it is *the* privilege of my professional life to serve as its seventeenth president.

So perhaps I don't need to pinch myself after all.

I'm fully awake.

I'm here.

And I'm ready to get to work.

Thank you.

And Go Rams!