Darden’s 50th Anniversary Convocation: Opening Remarks
Dean Robert F. Bruner
September 23, 2005

We gather to commemorate the founding of Darden 50 years ago. And we welcome into our grounds the Rector, President, and Provost of the University, members of the Board of Visitors, Darden Foundation Trustees, especially Gene Lockhart, the Chair of the Trustees, members of the Darden family, including Josh Darden, former Rector, faculty, students, alumni, and three former Deans of Darden, Robert Harris, Robert Haigh, C. Ray Smith, and Maria Sheppard, widow of former Dean, C. Stewart Sheppard. We note as well, six special visitors to Darden, students from Tulane, refugees from Hurricane Katrina to whom Darden has opened its doors and heart. We grieve with you over the death and destruction in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and now Texas and pray for all people affected by the storms. Please join me in a round of applause for these new members of our community and for the hope of rapid recovery in the gulf region.

Rarely, if ever, in the history of the school, has there been a coming together like this of students, alumni, faculty, staff, and friends. If there is strength in numbers we surely feel it today. The breadth of attendance asserts our wide reach as a school and our strong ties to this great university; no one can imagine Darden without the University of Virginia, or the University without Darden—our contributions flow both ways between Darden and the University.

Darden was founded in 1954 and opened its doors to the first students in 1955. The period since then embraces two remarkable business stories. The first business story is the role of free markets, human ingenuity, and the spread of management best practices in contributing to the largest gain in human welfare in recorded time. The recovery from devastating wars, the expansion of trade, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and astonishing technological change all show that business is the engine of prosperity. Business has propounded global virtues such as risk-taking, innovation, leadership, delighting the customer, honest dealing, and human liberty. Free trade is an instrument of world peace by engaging national adversaries in a web of commercial transactions. Business has delivered the goods: more nutritious food, more comfortable homes, more effective medical treatment, faster and safer transportation, and instant communication.

At mid-Twentieth Century, the conventional wisdom feared that the spread of capitalism would create a bureaucratic structure as deadening as communism or fascism. But the opposite happened: large corporations became more nimble and innovative as competition spurred them to become better. And the astonishing rate of small business formation drove economic growth, job creation, and innovation. In short, the buoyant roles of business and free markets are central in the history of the past 50 years.

In parallel with this first story is a second remarkable story, Darden’s. The founders’ foresight positioned the school to ride the updraft of the incredible economic boom. Today we gather on these beautiful grounds at a school that ranks in the highest echelon of its field. Darden was lucky—but its founders were also smart. Charles Abbott, the
first Dean, and the founding faculty created a distinctive model of business education; subsequent cohorts of faculty elevated it to prominence. The model can be summarized in three phrases: high touch, high tone, and high octane.

✓ “High touch” refers to classroom experience based on a high degree of interaction among faculty, staff, and students. Our very classroom experience is extraordinarily high touch as it promotes debate and discussion among students. Darden defines the high end of its field in terms of direct contact hours between faculty and students. We do this because we believe that nothing can substitute for the human touch in learning.

✓ “High tone” recognizes that technical mastery is necessary but not sufficient—we aim to train leaders who do more, such as communicate well, inspire others to take action, organize complex projects and teams, and make decisions with integrity. Ethics, honor, and teamwork are the signature of our students in the marketplace.

✓ “High octane” says that we teach and study hard; we are impatient; we set high standards. The buzz at Darden is palpable—at coffee, in case discussions, in team meetings. People care to wrestle over issues here. The Darden experience is rigorous, tough-minded, and practical—and at the same time, "warm hearted".

Darden is a leader in the classic two-year American MBA program, which is still the gold standard throughout the world. Through this model, and the graduates it has produced, Darden has contributed the business leaders who have created the most vibrant economy the world has ever known. They, in turn, have improved standard of living for millions of people, and through their generosity have created opportunities for countless Darden students.

Against the backdrop of these two business stories, this is the right time to renew our bonds as the Darden community and commit to our larger mission. Darden has changed in good ways over the past 50 years; we are stronger and better as a result.

Looking toward the future we should set high aspirations. This is no time to sit still. We face formidable challenges in sustaining the progress we’ve made – the shifting demographics of demand for MBA training, the dawning understanding at other schools that teaching counts, the accelerating battle to develop new ideas, the urgent need to build visibility - to make sure the world knows how good we are. Darden must have a commanding presence in the world of business education based on the clear leadership in the quality of its teaching and the generation of market-facing research. Darden should reach beyond its beautiful home to teach students in Northern Virginia, Asia, Latin America, Europe, and Africa. Darden must sharpen its organization and practices to become the kind of place that prospective students and faculty clamor to enter. To achieve all this Darden must expand its base of resources and lift its expectations.

In the first 50 years, our leaders performed a task that some might have called impossible. Starting from scratch, they built a school that challenged the top incumbents of the time. They put us on the national stage. Now, the challenge is global - and any school without critical mass and scale economies cannot hope to sustain its position. As the new
generation of leaders, we all have a lot of work to do: work that we *will* do - and succeed at. But the stakes are high and we need everyone's help.

I ask our extended family to join us in the effort to define and realize a bold new future, so that 50 years hence in 2055, the extended Darden family will gather to applaud the legacy *we* created for the *next* generation.