

Local News

Preview of Dr. Michael Rao's Inaugural Address that he will deliver this week as VCU's fifth president

Quest for Distinction

'Our guiding star must be excellence'

By Michael Rao

This is my fourth college presidency, but the first time I will participate in an inauguration ceremony. I find it to be a humbling but exhilarating experience because it provides a unique opportunity to tell Virginia Commonwealth University's story — present, present and future.

VCU is a remarkable institution and I am so proud to be here.

The roots are deep and long — 173 years for the founding of what would be the Medical College of Virginia, 94 years for the Richmond Professional Institute, and 43 years after the two institutions came together as Virginia Commonwealth University.

Today, VCU is a major public research university.

I emphasize that VCU is a *research* university, committed to innovation, to the healing and caring of patients, to employing the full force of the human mind to discover and convey knowledge, to engage society's problems and find solutions.

Year after year, we graduate doctors, artists, entrepreneurs, pharmacists, nurses, engineers, dentists and leaders in disciplines ranging from communications to social work.

We are very proud of the diversity of our student body, which makes VCU one of the most diverse universities in the country. VCU graduates students from across the range of socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural and geographic backgrounds.

VCU draws its mission from the spirit of the nation. From the beginning, Americans have anticipated a better future. We are the land of promise and education has been the instrument of our ambitions.

My message today is that we, as a university, must recommit ourselves.

Our guiding star must be excellence: Academic excellence, research excellence, excellence in patient care, and, above all else, student excellence.

Our driving purpose is for students to succeed — to graduate and be leaders in their fields and their communities.

We have a plan to do this and it is called Quest for Distinction.

Quest embodies an audacious but reachable vision: To be the premier public urban university in the nation.

It focuses our energies and our resources on those things that are important to our students, our community and the



Dr. Michael Rao

Rao bio sketch

Place of birth: Boston.
 Age: 45.
 Present position: Fifth president of VCU, effective July 1, 2009.
 Pre-VCU position: President of Central Michigan University.
 Alma maters: University of Florida, doctoral degree; University of South Florida, bachelor's degree.
 Family: Wife, Monica; two sons, Miguel and Aiden.

Inauguration schedule

When: Friday, Oct. 14, from 10 a.m. to noon.
 Where: 7,500-seat Siegel Center, 1200 W. Broad St. in Downtown.
 Keynote speaker: U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.
 Who is invited: The public.

Commonwealth.

The vital thing is that Quest puts the interests of our students — of effective learning — first.

It is a responsible, accountable plan that mandates we measure our progress.

Quest draws from VCU's many historic and traditional strengths: Its demonstrable capacity for scientific discovery, aptitude for healing, gift for artistic imagination, compelling student diversity, climate of inclusion and its urban resourcefulness.

It preserves our long-standing engagement with the communities we serve and acknowledges our responsibility to the region and the state to be a catalyst for economic and cultural vitality.

Quest is not about lofty abstractions and disengagement, but rather the immediate and intense needs of people.

How do we improve employment prospects and support career ambitions?

How do we cure ailments and heal wounds?

How do we inspire creative expression that enriches our culture and quality of life?

How do we use the power of the human mind to improve society and create opportunities for individuals?

The message of this university to the world and all prospective students is this: If you are ready to get your hands around real things, if you want to wake up in the morning and know that you are making a difference, then come to VCU.

If we do this, VCU *will* be the premier public urban research university in the country — a remarkable university, an institution of lasting value to Richmond, our Commonwealth, America and the world.

The writer is president of VCU and the VCU Health System.