



June 2024

Dear Members of the Vanderbilt Class of 2028,

I am so excited to be sending you this message—my first communication with you directly, and the first of what I hope will be many conversations that we have together. As dean of Residential Colleges and of The Martha Rivers Ingram Commons, one of the most important parts of my job is to connect with all of you and to help you have a meaningful, fulfilling, and yes, challenging, first year at Vanderbilt.

In addition to my role as dean, I am also a professor in the department of Teaching and Learning. I study how people learn and develop identities in relation to different school subjects, and how those identities can change based on the organization of classrooms and other learning environments. This makes my job in Residential Colleges particularly interesting, as I am constantly attending to how we can design programs, activities, and experiences that help students to learn about and make sense of who they are. This is important, because identity-building is a core activity in college, as you have new experiences and meet new people that help you to learn more about the world and the role you want to play in it.

One of the first programs you will be a part of is called *Vanderbilt Visions*, a six-week program that is required for all first-year students. Visions is a place to meet other people, learn about life at Vanderbilt, develop your own community, and begin to really make the shift from high school to college. The transition to college puts you in a space where almost everything is new—the people, the place, the food, sometimes even the weather! For some people, novelty is exhilarating, while for others, it is frightening. Regardless of where you sit on that continuum, this novelty creates an opportunity to think intentionally about who you are, and how you connect with others—even, or especially, those whose experiences and outlooks might differ from your own. For that reason, we have chosen a book to read together for the Campus Reading that is centrally about the challenges and opportunities of connecting with others across differences. *I Never Thought of It That Way*, by Mónica Guzmán, offers a set of guidelines for how to talk openly and effectively to others across political and cultural divides. Sharing many stories of her own experiences as a daughter of Mexican immigrants who have different political beliefs from her own, Guzmán's book creates an opportunity for us to explore how to leverage curiosity and understanding in conversations, helping to create connections across disparate worldviews.

This book is the first of many opportunities for us to develop a common language that we can use to get to know one another and to explore the world around us. We will be discussing this book during CommonVU Orientation. **With that goal in mind, we ask that each new student submit a reflective essay on the Campus Reading, due August 12.** Instructions about the content of the essay, and how to upload your essay in Brightspace, are attached.

In order to form a community and connect with each other, let's start to share our stories. I am really looking forward to hearing yours.

Until August,

Melissa Gresalfi
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