

Dear members of the Vanderbilt Class of 2026,

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 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 being the dean of The Ingram Commons, 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 on The Ingram Commons particularly interesting, as I am constantly attending to how we can design programs, activities and experiences that help students learn about and make sense of who they are.

One of the core programs you will be a part of is called Vanderbilt Visions, a nine-week program required for all first-year students. Visions is one of the first spaces to meet other people, learn about life at Vanderbilt, develop your own community and begin to make the internal shift from high school to college. The transition to college is one of the first times you have a chance to look around you and ask yourself: “Who am I, and who do I want to be?” It’s a time when you are invited to innovate and design—yourself, your community, your interests and your passions. And for that reason, we have chosen a book to read together for the Campus Reading that offers a way to think about the culture and context within which innovation, leadership and change can develop. *Creative People Must Be Stopped: Six Ways We Kill Innovation (Without Even Trying)*, written by Vanderbilt Professor David A. Owens, invites us to explore how we might set goals for change and anticipate and engineer those aspects of our contexts that could support or thwart our efforts. When we can look around and see so much need for urgent change, Professor Owens’ book offers us a compelling breakdown of what to do and how to get out of our own or others’ way as we work to become the people—and build the world—that we want to see.

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 and during our meetings of Vanderbilt Visions. **With that goal in mind, we ask that each new student submit a reflective essay on the Campus Reading; it is due Aug. 15.** Instructions are attached about the content of the essay and how to upload your essay in Brightspace.

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
Dean, The Martha Rivers Ingram Commons
Professor, Department of Teaching and Learning