

## NEWSROOM

[Home](#) / [News](#) / [2024](#) / [January](#) / "Equality, Opportunity & Justice"

## "EQUALITY, OPPORTUNITY & JUSTICE"

### NORFOLK STATE UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT DELIVERS KEYNOTE ADDRESS CENTERED ON HOPE AND ACTION

by [Kelley McGee](#) | January 19, 2024

Read time: about 2 min

Norfolk State University President Dr. Javaune Adams-Gaston was welcomed to campus by President Kelly and a standing ovation from a packed audience of students, faculty, staff, elected officials and faith leaders gathered in the David Student Union Ballroom. She delivered a keynote speech that was an impactful reflection on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy, inspired by his 1967 speech, "Where Do We Go From Here?" Dr. Adams-Gaston urged attendees to not only reflect on their past actions, but consider what their role should be in creating a more just and inclusive future for all.

"Ask yourself, 'am I living up to the charge and social responsibility that Dr. King gave us all while serving as a political prisoner in a Birmingham jail?' Deep in my heart, I do believe that you are willing to do the work for us to have equality, opportunity and justice," Adams-Gaston said.

President William Kelly echoed Dr. Adams-Gaston's call to action, reaffirming the University's commitment to learning from its past, and fostering a more inclusive environment moving forward.

"Our goal is, if you will, to be audacious. We want to be the most inclusive public university in Virginia, ready to serve and support all students from Virginia and beyond, where each and every member of our University has a

true sense of belonging," President Kelly said. "And by all students, I mean all students. High school students from Newport News, our hometown that we cherish. Community college students ready for the next step. Transfer students who are looking for a fresh start, and non-traditional students who are looking for the opportunity to return to the classroom. Our doors are open to all who would benefit from an education anchored in excellence and founded on the core values of leadership, scholarship, honor and service."

The event was organized and hosted by Christopher Newport's Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer, Vidal Dickerson. SGA President Kate Bennett and National Society of Black Engineers Chapter President Darryle Logan also contributed remarks. Adams-Gaston's thought-provoking speech marked the culmination of a weeklong series of events at the University dedicated to honoring King's legacy. Her words served as a reminder of the continued relevance of King's message, and the ongoing struggle for social justice.

"Recently the Supreme Court has changed some of the rules of how we engage in higher education. So, when we're talking about fighting for equality and opportunity and justice, we know that there is no greater equalizer than education...and we know that voting is the other part of that equalizer," she said. "But we have to be careful that we don't allow people to dial back the ability for folks to go to college to get an education, and the ability of all individuals to vote. If we don't look at those things, we disenfranchise millions of people and limit their opportunities for the future."

Near the end of her remarks, Adams-Gaston shared a poignant observation about her commute from Norfolk to Richmond, a drive that takes her past cotton fields where slaves worked generations ago.

"Something physically happens to me when I pass those cotton fields," she said. "I feel the ancestors and the pain they had to endure to build our nation."

It is important, she said, to use the lessons of the past to create positive change.

"We have an opportunity and a promise to be audacious in our vision for the future," she said.

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