I am honored today to officially welcome David Van Zandt as our president.

I know many of you have had the opportunity to meet David, to engage him in conversation, and to work with him. So you will know of his informal style, his openness to a range of viewpoints and ideas, and his genuine enthusiasm for The New School.

I think David would admit that The New School takes a little getting used to. During the search process he did say repeatedly that he did not want a Presidency at, dare I say, a “normal” university. Now David I know there have been many surprises but I trust that we have at least delivered on this expectation!

It has been a real pleasure to work with David through his transition into the Presidency. He has been actively learning about our academic programs—their strengths, what differentiates them, and how we are doing at retaining students, advising them, helping them to afford their education, connecting them with careers, and engaging them beyond graduation.

While David’s predilection for data is well known—and I have to say, his capacity to seek, understand, and retain data is truly remarkable—it is as a girding as he thinks ambitiously about our future. As a manager, he expects metrics and accountability. But as a leader, he knows that real innovation can only occur when people share insights, good instincts, creativity, courage and a tolerance for risk. These are the qualities at the heart of The New School identity.

It is clear David is here because of The New School’s distinctive character and remarkable history, its academic profile and richness, its incredibly talented faculty and students, its entrepreneurial spirit and engagement with the Moment, the City, and the World. I know he shares our commitment to make The New School a vital model for the future of liberal learning and scholarship and creative and professional practice.

Given the pressures the academy is experiencing on almost all fronts it is an important moment to critically interrogate and assert our shared mission. Higher education today is under tremendous scrutiny, criticism, and skepticism. A quick sampling of recent book titles and headlines reads like a reality TV line-up: Academically Adrift, The Big Lie About the Life of the Mind, Wannabe U, College Isn’t Worth A Million Dollars, The Disposable Academic.

This is the time to be taking intelligent and measured risks. After all, why not? In times such as these where dramatic shifts are reshaping the academy, the opportunities will come if we are agents of change rather waiting to be swept along reacting and responding as the world changes around us. We also need to be careful not to be merely tinkering when bolder ideas and actions are what is called for.

The New School has the assets, the opportunity, and indeed the responsibility to be a leader in shaping the future of higher education. After all, this is what we do at The New School. We have survived and prospered through innovative responses to changing conditions for education: Creating a new kind of university in response to academic conservatism and the constraint on open debate. Creating a new kind of university as a haven for exiled scholars. Creating a new kind of university that embraced avant-garde artists and performers. Creating a new kind of university that saw design as central and integral to its identity. And most recently creating a university that took all this intellectual and creative passion and turned it to the most urgent issues of the day—the future of our cities and our environment. Ours is a legacy of innovation, enterprise and a restless seeking for what is most relevant and compelling for the time.
We want this legacy to continue to propel us forward but the fact is we are a different university now—larger, more developed and in some ways more traditional. So the question becomes how do we recapture a university culture that successfully germinates, incubates, and mobilizes exciting new ideas and approaches. However innovative we are academically, we need to be equally innovative as an organization.

It has been clear in the dialogues David and I have had with groups of faculty just how strong the connections and shared interests are across the divisions. We have left these conversations impressed and proud of the depth of scholarship and originality of our faculty. We need to do more to support and connect the tremendous energy and creativity that is in abundance here. Our faculty and our students want and need opportunities to form communities of learning, scholarship and practice that are not limited by the internal structure of the university.

We know that David Van Zandt has come to The New School to help us realize our tremendous potential. As we move forward, it will be critically important that we draw on and learn from the values, intelligence, creativity and perspectives of our students, alumni, trustees, faculty, administrators and friends. We are all stakeholders in The New School Project. This is a tremendous community of learning and action. Thank you for being part of it. I have never been as confident in our future as I am today.