Good afternoon and welcome to the start of a new school year. In addition to starting the year by focusing on the honor code, one of our most important institutional values, I have a few thoughts I’d like to share with you.

Some of you may have glanced at the program for today’s convocation, seen the title of this speech, and thought to yourselves, “There is no way anything that Mr. Sheppard thinks is cool is, in fact, cool.

After all, I’m 49-year-old, balding guy who usually walks around in a suit, with a pen sticking out of his pocket. I’m asleep by 9:00 PM each night, even on Fridays, and I get up at 4:00 AM to do yoga and meditate. My favorite part of the weekend is doing three hours of yardwork each Saturday morning, treating it as a combat sport and my favorite kind of music is most popular among some of your grandparents. My own children think I was put on this earth to embarrass them and would tell you I am incapable of mastering even the most rudimentary of outdated of dance moves like the WHOA.

Yup, I wouldn’t blame you for one second if you looked at the program and thought, “There ain’t no way T Shep would have any idea what is cool.”

I can’t write an article entitled “Does Gatsby Still Matter” like Mrs. Holmes that so persuasively articulates the relevance of the Great Gatsby to your lives that the article is published by none other than the National Association of Independent Schools, but you might have the opportunity to spend a whole year with Mrs. Holmes working harder than you ever have before while coming to fully appreciate the power of the English word. I think that’s pretty cool.

I can’t pull a three foot alligator out of Lake Sherwood Wise with my bare hands and I don’t have an all-consuming passion for science like Mr. McWhorter which his students sense each and every day in his class. I also can’t use that passion for science to create an advanced science research program called INSTAR, which you’ll learn more about in the weeks ahead and which will enable those of you who share Mr. McWhorter’s passion to take science farther than you ever imagined in high school. I think that’s pretty cool.
I’m still waiting to discover my inner musical talents which might enable me to sing in tune or play even one instrument, let alone inspire a group of students to produce beautiful music in an orchestra or choir like Mr. Sexton or Dr. Cranford. You, on the other hand, can join a music program that appreciates those with well developed talent AND those who are just curious and getting started. That’s pretty cool.

And I can’t travel half way around the world during my summer vacation to the World Leading Schools Association Conference in Prague, Czech Republic where I might sit down for lunch with the head of a school in Africa whom I’ve never met before and, within five minutes, convince that head of school that they wanted to create an exchange program with St. Andrew’s which will grow our already remarkable Global Studies program, but Mr. Tokarski can and I was lucky enough to be sitting right next to him eating my salad while it happened. That’s pretty cool.

**I’ll tell you what else I think is cool...**

I think it’s pretty cool when the visiting team shows up without enough players to compete and instead of taking an easy forfeit victory our girls’ soccer team lends them three of our best players and plays a full game on a cold winter night when they could have been home studying or sleeping. That’s the true meaning of sportsmanship, and I was lucky enough to see it unfold right before my eyes.

I think it’s pretty cool when one of you sees a new face on campus and extends a hand of welcome, leaving them no doubt that they have come to a school where kindness matters and that we are all Saints who can find common ground while learning from others who may see the world through a very different lens.

I think it’s pretty cool that my morning commute is 2.1 miles long, but what’s really cool is that along the way I get to see the girls’ cross country team display remarkable dedication by starting their run before 7:30 AM on a summer morning when they could easily be enjoying a last few days at the beach. It’s equally cool that when I get out of the car, not at the office, but at the football field, I find the most dedicated football players I can imagine also sacrificing their sleep to get ready for the season.

I think it’s pretty cool that you go to a school where a group of teachers would spend a year researching, learning, and visiting other schools to consider how they can take what is already a very good classroom experience and make it even better, doing it all for you. This fall you’ll
begin to see their work unfold through “I2: Inspire and Innovate” and along the way you’ll be providing feedback and offering your own ideas about how we can innovate in ways that are right for St. Andrew’s. In doing so, you’ll be increasing the value of your diploma and doing the same for Saints who follow in your footsteps.

I think it’s pretty cool that you get to participate in an athletic program that consistently wins the MHSAA All Sports Award for the most successful athletic program while at the same time always imagining how we can create new and innovate programs like sailing and ultimate frisbee which you can try this year if you want.

I think it’s pretty cool when a group of students who are talented in math or writing would sign up to lead our new math and writing labs, giving back to our community by supporting any of who might want help.

I think its pretty cool when some of you would give up a Saturday morning to join us for Visioning Day last year and make some of the most powerful and compelling contributions which are clearly reflected in the final draft of our vision statement.

Even if you didn’t come to Visioning Day, I think it’s pretty cool when senior administrators can reflect on ways we can engage you and ensure that your voices continue to play an important role in the life of the school. The end result is that at several times this year we’ll create forums for you to share your thoughts with me and Mrs. Chadwick. I’ll also extend an invitation each month for some members of the senior class to join me for lunch, and I’ll be meeting each quarter with Toni, Arness, Jo’vette.

I think is pretty cool when I got to spend a Sunday afternoon last winter at St. James Church witnessing no less than seven of you being named eagle scouts in one day, reminding me that the remarkable person you are each becoming is drawn from many places both inside and outside the classroom.

I think it’s pretty cool when I see older students modeling the way and looking out for younger students, reminding us all that here at St. Andrew’s we value kindness and gratitude, while also appreciating each other’s talents which serve as an essential thread in the fabric of our community.

And I think its pretty cool that we would officially commence the new school year by coming together to sign the Honor Code and, in doing so, reflect upon an essential element of our
community that has given us strength since the Honor Code was created by students and teachers in the early 1980’s.

That’s what a 49-year-old balding guy who practices yoga, meditates, goes to bed at 9:00 PM and can’t master the WHOA thinks is cool. As your year unfolds, let me know what you think is cool. Until then, don’t forget to take a moment to look around and remind yourself how fortunate we all are to have come together in this place at this time in our lives.

Have a great year.