To the GREAT Princeton Class of 2023:

Greetings from Nassau Hall! I’m looking forward to your arrival in Princeton. My colleagues and I know that in the years ahead you will dazzle, impress, and surprise us as you engage with this University and make it your own. We can hardly wait.

You will find Princeton a place of ideas, activities, relationships, and evolving traditions, including some that are very old and some that are quite new. I am writing now in connection with one of our newer traditions. During each year of my presidency, I have chosen a book as the “Princeton Pre-read.” My goal when selecting the Pre-read is to find a scholarly book that simultaneously introduces entering students to the University’s academic life and also provokes them to examine ethical issues that will be important during their time on campus and after graduation. We send the Pre-read to every new undergraduate and make it available to other members of the community. It becomes the focus of my Opening Exercises address, the Freshman Assembly, and discussions that I lead in the residential colleges.

I am excited about this year’s Pre-read, Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy. I expect—in fact, I hope—that some of you will love the book and others will disagree vehemently with it, but either way I think that you’ll find it clear, topical, rigorous, original, unpretentious, concise, and occasionally funny (well, funny by academic standards, at least!). In my view, it is a first-rate scholarly book. It is also a bit unusual, and I want to say something about that.

Until now, I have selected Pre-reads written by tenured professors at Princeton or another leading research university. Stand Out of Our Light is different. The author, James Williams, only recently completed his doctoral work in philosophy at Oxford University. Before that, he was a technology and business strategist at Google. Stand Out of Our Light emerged as the winning submission for the first Nine Dots Prize, a competition that encourages “creative thinking [about] contemporary social issues.” It has received favorable attention from the Financial Times and Vox, but it is not an especially famous book (at least not yet!). So why this book this year?
To begin with, some of the characteristics that I just mentioned might make this a better Pre-read than other books. At Princeton, we want you to engage with books, not venerate them. To be sure, we want you to understand books sympathetically and to respect their authors. But we also want you to explore beneath the surface of the book, wrestle with its meaning and implications for your life, deepen and extend the author’s own vision, and form an independent judgment about what you can learn from the book and where you disagree.

Last year, I met an educator who told me proudly that all of her students were required to read seventy-five famous books. That way, she said, they would be ready for college because they would rarely if ever enter a classroom unfamiliar with a great book that the other students had read.

I admired her passion—and her students’ remarkable perseverance—but I also wondered whether this strategy was wise. I would rather have students immerse themselves imaginatively, lovingly, and critically in a single challenging and multi-layered book than trudge dutifully through seventy-five of them. I am also certain that I have not read all the books she deemed essential for college students—not now, as a university president and professor, much less when I came to Princeton as a freshman from a public high school in Oregon. You’ll always meet people who have read good or famous things that you have not—and thank heaven for that: it means you will always have more to discover and learn, which is one of the most delightful parts of life!

Research universities are truth-seeking institutions. At Princeton and at our peers, reading books is not about filling out your resume or ‘skill-building’: it is about participating in mind-blowing, exhilarating, sometimes disconcerting arguments that make you rethink notions that you have long held dear. Reading a book requires you to understand what someone else is saying and to make your own independent, thoughtful, and revisable judgments about where truth lies.

I hope that you will engage with James Williams’s argument in exactly that spirit: first appreciating his insights and perspectives as thoroughly and sympathetically as possible, and then making your own judgment about the validity of his propositions. That advice may be unnecessary. I frankly do not think that you will be able to read Stand Out of Our Light without reacting strongly to it, one way or another. In a very real way, it is about you and your classmates. It is about how digital technology is affecting your ability to shape your identity, your life, and your society.

James Williams believes that digital technology and social media are changing our world in profound ways that we barely understand or even notice. I agree, and that is a principal reason why I chose his book as this year’s Pre-Read. Digital technology has revolutionized that way we live and communicate, and it has done so with dizzying speed. We have had little time or opportunity to adapt the habits, customs, and cultures that humanity has relied upon for centuries to organize life and render it meaningful. We are living very differently than we did in the recent past. Is that a good thing? Should it bother us?
Williams thinks it should. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that “the liberation of human attention” from adversarial digital technologies “may be the defining moral and political struggle of our time.”¹ That is a bracing claim. Many people will see it as manifestly hyperbolic: “well, digital media may have their problems, but they can’t possibly be that dangerous.” I do not know whether Williams’s bold assertion is correct, and one might agree with much of his book even if one thought that some other problem (say, addressing climate change) was the defining “moral and political struggle” of our time. But I think that there is a chance that Williams is right, and that is one reason why I look forward to discussing this book with you.

We see a lot of unsettling change in the world today, much of it at least arguably tied to digital media. For example, data about recent high school graduates—in other words, you—suggests that happiness levels are dropping, that mental health issues are increasing, and that these trends correlate with cell phone use (in other words the more time you spend on your phone, the less likely you are to be happy). Teens who text their friends are less happy than teens who actually see their friends face-to-face.²

Meanwhile, a tumultuous, spiteful temper grips democracies the world over. Examples include heated conflicts that swirl around Donald Trump’s presidency in the United States; Great Britain’s disruptive “Brexit” debate about leaving the European Union; disturbing divisions related to the rise of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Viktor Orban in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey; the violent protests of the “yellow jackets” in France; and the increasing prominence of nativist parties in countries including Poland, Germany, and Sweden.

Do these developments have anything to do with the effects of digital technology? Many people think so. News outlets brim with stories about how foreign countries or domestic political groups are using social media to stoke division and manipulate public opinion. Williams, however, suggests that the digital landscape may be affecting democratic political competence in even more radical and pervasive ways. He suggests that digital media by design appeal “to the lowest parts of us” through a “cheap exploitation of our vulnerabilities” that his friend Tristan Harris neatly describes as a “race to the bottom of the brain stem.”³

If this is anything close to correct—and, remember it comes from a former strategist at Google—it is worrisome news for democracy. Many people now take for granted that democracy is a good thing, but political theorists have for centuries recognized major obstacles to its success. The case for democracy depends on trusting that the electorate, despite its uneven levels of interest, expertise, engagement, and

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³ Williams, p. 33.
education, can be counted on to do the right thing, or else select people who will do the right thing on their behalf. Lots can go wrong—and throughout history lots has gone wrong.

Democracy is a fragile good, one that requires active maintenance from an engaged citizenry. That is the idea underlying Winston Churchill’s oft-quoted statement that “democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time,” and Benjamin Franklin’s equally famous reply to a question about what form of government the American Constitution established: “a Republic, if you can keep it.”

Suppose, then, that I were to tell you that something—a disease, a poison, or a technology—was rendering people worldwide just a touch more irascible, angry, or ill-tempered. James Williams contends that digital technologies, and the claims they make on our attention, are having that kind of effect. How much of an impact would they need to have before you became worried about whether it tipped the balance against people’s efforts to do something that is genuinely difficult even in the best circumstances: namely, to call upon the “better angels of their nature” and govern themselves reasonably well in the face of self-interest, ignorance, prejudice, group conflict, and all the other obstacles that make democracy such an audacious undertaking? The question is a bit like similar ones about the scope and impact of climate change: how much “hotter” can civic discourse get without putting the democratic dream in jeopardy? One degree? Two? There is surely a limit.

The distractions of digital technology also have implications for the educational project of this University and others. In a way, teaching is all about getting your attention. My colleagues and I try to focus your mind on ideas and projects that are demanding and time-consuming but that, once you climb the mountain, are spectacularly rewarding. We want you to be transported by the novels of Toni Morrison, captivated by the mysteries of quantum mechanics, and enthralled by the possibilities of urban design. Over the past year, I have had students and even faculty colleagues tell me that the incessant distraction of digital devices is making it harder for them to lose themselves in a book or an idea. There is scientific evidence to back up their impression. That worries me.

At a more personal level, your own choices about social media will be among the most important determinants of the experiences that you have—or that you miss—on this campus. Rarely, if ever, in your life will you inhabit surroundings so beautiful, or find yourselves amidst a community so talented, diverse, and brimming with activities. Princeton students often tell me that they wish they had more time to take advantage of it

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4 Abraham Lincoln, “First Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1861. In John Grafton and James Daley. 28 Great Inaugural Addresses: From Washington to Reagan. (Dover Publications, 2013), 92-93: “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”
all. If you find yourself thinking that you are too busy, I encourage you to think about how often you are busy with your phone—and how that time is affecting your state of mind.

I hope that these reflections help you to understand why I chose *Stand Out of Our Light* as this year’s Pre-read. Lest they seem too gloomy, I hasten to point out that Williams offers his argument with a conviction that technology can “make the world a better place.”\(^5\) I agree—and, indeed, I think there can be no doubt that technology has enabled people the world over to improve their standard of living dramatically.\(^6\) I am an optimist about the future, partly because what I see in you and your peers gives me hope. But here again I agree with something that Williams says: our hope for the future depends on our willingness to exercise agency and, in particular to grapple honestly and thoughtfully with questions like those that he raises.

Whatever you decide about how to use your phone and social media, I anticipate that your time at Princeton will bring you new friendships, new discoveries, new activities, and new encounters with provocative ideas. I hope that *Stand Out of Our Light* is—whether you agree with it or not—an engaging and enjoyable introduction to one part of the Princeton experience. I look forward to welcoming you to Princeton in September, and to discussing this book and many other ideas with you in the years to come.

With very best wishes,

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\(^5\) Williams, p. 98.