

“Inheriting the Power of a Liberal Education
and Investing in the Nation’s Future”

IUB Undergraduate Commencement

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President

Indiana University

Assembly Hall

Saturday, May 7, 2011

1. INTRODUCTION: “THE CONSUMMATION OF ALL STUDIES”

Trustees of Indiana University, Provost Hanson, faculty and staff colleagues, family and friends, and members of the class of 2011:

In his treatise on American universities, Harvard professor Charles Norton wrote that “[t]he highest end of the highest education is not anything which can be directly taught, but is the consummation of all studies. It is the final result of intellectual culture in the development of the breadth, serenity, and solidarity of mind, and in the attainment of that complete self-possession which finds expression in character.”¹

What Professor Norton describes is the power of a liberal education, one that not only builds character in individuals but prepares them for their lives as engaged citizens. It is called liberal not because it has a particular political affinity but because it is both wide-ranging and selectively deep. By demonstrating the interconnectedness of all knowledge, it opens you to possibilities that you may never have otherwise imagined.

¹ Norton, Charles Eliot. “Harvard.” In *Four American Universities*. New York: Harper and Brothers. Page 32 Google Books Website. <<http://books.google.com>>.

Today, as we gather to celebrate the time-honored ceremony of commencement, it is time to imagine those possibilities as you cross the threshold into your future.

2. THE POWER OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

For so many of you, the education that you have gained here has, indeed, been a liberal education. Such an education in the depth and breadth of human knowledge ranges from the classics in history and literature to the workings of modern government; from the rules of mathematics and logic to the basic laws of physics and biology; from world languages to international affairs. And this is precisely the type of education that our complex, interconnected world requires.

It is an education that fosters critical thinking and problem solving that will enable some of you to be the architects of new economic structures. It will encourage you to reach beyond like-minded colleagues and friends in order to answer questions about prosperity and poverty, about energy, transportation, technology, and many other areas—questions that we have not yet even begun to formulate. It will enable you to remain flexible, think analytically, respond quickly and thoughtfully, especially in a world that is changing constantly.

This is a world vastly different from the one in which your parents grew up and one that your great grand parents likely would not even recognize. It is a world where you should expect to change careers multiple times, and, with the increasing globalization of our economic system, you should also be ready to work overseas for a period of your career. This is a world in which you can blog, tweet, and text from nearly anywhere. In fact, some of you are probably texting right now.

By virtue of your presence here as graduates, you have inherited the power of a liberal education, and you now represent a great historic educational tradition.

3. THE CLASS OF 2011

Your class—the class of 2011—includes a record number of graduates. Across Indiana University, there are nearly 18,500 students graduating this May. Here at IU Bloomington, there are over eight thousand five hundred. That includes graduates from 92 different countries (that's 39 more than last year!), from all 50 states, and from 91 different Indiana counties. Our oldest graduate is 65—her birthday was last Thursday—our youngest 18, and we have 33 sets of twins graduating today.

This wonderfully accomplished class includes the drum major for the Marching Hundred, Phi Beta Kappas, and members of the Board of Aeons.

It includes the Co-Founder of the IU Minority Association of Pre-Med Students and the Co-Founder of the IU Photography Society—the same person, by the way—and a member of IU's national championship Ethics Bowl team.

It includes the president of the African Languages Club, a bluegrass fiddle player with the Bloomingtones, the class president of the IU School of Nursing, and the first class of 21st Century Scholarship Covenant students.

It includes McNair Scholars, Ernie Pyle Scholars, Wells Scholars, Hutton Scholars, and one Rhodes Scholar—our second in as many years.

It includes students who have travelled around the world for their studies, to Spain, Ireland, Tanzania, Japan and many other places.

This great range of educational experiences reflects the limitless aspirations of the Class of 2011.

4. BUILDING THE WORLD'S BEST SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

But as graduates, you are also the beneficiaries of over a century of wise investment in higher education by state and federal governments. That investment has created opportunities and, over many years, has immeasurably strengthened American higher education.

Such investment dates back to 1862 when the U.S. Congress passed legislation to establish land-grant colleges. That investment continued, and, especially in the years after World War II, was designed expressly to energize the research and creativity that went on to make the American system of higher education the envy of the world. As journalist Fareed Zakaria explained, “[H]igher education is the United States’ best industry. In no other field is the United States’ advantage so overwhelming.”² American investment in higher education helped foster an era of national prosperity and national security with discoveries ranging from the laser to the MRI, from the algorithm for Google searches to GPS, from fetal monitoring to advanced surveying techniques, along with thousands and thousands of other inventions and innovations.³

Among the best evidence of the quality of our system is the fact that countries around the world are now vigorously seeking to emulate it. China, Russia, Germany, Korea, France, and many other countries are pouring literally billions of dollars into their systems of higher education precisely to replicate, and then compete with, the American system.

The future will show whether America can maintain the will and confidence to sustain its investment in this country’s great public state research universities in an era that is seeing states all across the nation retreating from funding such institutions.

But you, the Class of 2011, in all that you do and accomplish, offer daily testimony to the quality of the American system and to the wisdom of continuing that investment long into the future.

²Zakaria, Fareed. “The Future of American Power.” The New York Times Website. 19 May 2008. <<http://travel.nytimes.com>>.

³ This series is borrowed from Jonathan Cole’s *The Great American University: Its Rise to Preeminence, Its Indispensable National Role, Why It Must Be Protected*, page 4.

5. THE PUBLIC VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Each one of you came to Indiana University to improve your prospects for the future. But the education you have received here, at one of this nation's finest public state universities, has enormous value beyond the boundaries of your own lives. By virtue of your education, you will enrich the communities in which you live both here and around the world.

We can see the truth of this statement right here in Indiana where higher education is one foundation upon which this state's prosperity rests. Consider one of this state's largest industries—pharmaceuticals—and the ideas and skills that have built that industry, ideas and skills that have arisen from university education and research. Consider health care in Indiana and the fact that IU trains more than 50 percent of Indiana's physicians, 64 percent of optometrists, 40 percent of nurses, and 90 percent of dentists. And the IU Health hospital system, Indiana's largest, takes the training, research, and expertise of our clinical faculty and researchers to hundreds of thousands of patients across the state.

If we look at our state's legal system, 75 percent of lawyers were trained at Indiana University, and 35 percent of Indiana K-12 teachers were trained at IU.

This is the incalculable and intangible value that your education adds to our society. As graduates, you understand that value and have already invested in your future. These are investments that will help shape all of our futures.

6. CONCLUSION: IMAGINING TOMORROW'S HORIZON

In remarks on the future of the university, former president of MIT Charles Vest said, "There is an infinity of important things to discover, understand, and apply. We, as a

nation, cannot lose our will to continue this great adventure. . . . And we certainly cannot afford to fail to invest in the very activities that will provide for the future: the quality of its life, the vitality of its economy, and the purity of its environment.”⁴

At the heart of his words, President Vest is saying that we are all in this together. We share this world and, together, are responsible for it. As graduates of Indiana University, you have been preparing for years to become the next generation to discover, understand, and apply all that you have learned.

Class of 2011:

Imagine the horizons before you;

Imagine what Vannevar Bush once called the endless frontiers;

and,

In your own lives, continue this great adventure of creation, invention, and discovery.

⁴ Vest, Charles M. “Not What We Think: What We Haven't Thought Of.” Keynote Address. The Jerome B. Wiesner Symposium on the Future of the Government/University Partnership. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. 26 Feb. 1996. MIT Website. <<http://web.mit.edu/president/communications/JBWSymp-2-96.html#summary>>.