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IU Bloomington Undergraduate Commencement

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President, Indiana University

Simon Skjodt Assembly Hall

Saturday, May 6, 2017

10:00 a.m.

1. QUESTIONING TRUTH

Trustees, Provost Robel, Ms. Slaughter, Secretary Paige, Mr. Van Houweling, honored guests, colleagues, and members of the Class of 2017:

Half a century ago, the great political philosopher Hannah Arendt asked in her famous essay on "Truth and Politics": "Do facts, independent of opinion and interpretation, exist at all?"¹

She went on, though, to answer this question most emphatically in the affirmative. Arendt argued that while events are open to interpretation, there is no excuse for blurring the dividing lines between fact, opinion, and interpretation.

She wrote: "Even if we admit that every generation has the right to write its own history ... we do not admit the right to touch the factual matter itself."² In other words, facts do exist and are beyond argument, dispute or opinion; and truth does matter.

¹ Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," Originally published in *The New Yorker*, February 25, 1967, and reprinted with minor changes in *Between Past and Future* (1968) and *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, edited by Peter Baier (2000) and *Truth: Engagements Across Philosophical Traditions*, edited by Medina and Wood (2005).

² Ibid.

2. THE VALUE OF TRUTH IN A POST-TRUTH ERA

You graduate today into what has been called the “post-truth era”—a time in which there is a disturbingly widespread casual attitude toward the truth. We have recently witnessed rampant attacks on established knowledge; a fundamental rejection in some quarters of basic science and dispassionate rationality; and political upheaval around the globe driven by wild claims and spurious statistics.

But as a great educational and research institution, Indiana University stands for truth; truth unembellished by artifice or equivocation; truth plain, simple and unadorned. For truth and veracity are the very foundations of our society.

Truth is an elemental component of our moral and ethical systems. “Telling the truth” is regarded as a fundamental part of our relations with other people, not just for its pragmatic utility, but as a good in itself. It is something we are all taught from the earliest age. And the ability to change one’s mind in the face of new evidence, of new true facts, is prized as one of the most revered of virtues.

For thousands of years, truth has been a topic of the deepest enquiry by the greatest minds from every human culture and civilization.

The search for what is true knowledge is the underlying theme of all of Plato’s works. In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates argues that it is impossible to find anything more akin to wisdom than truth.³

The Chinese philosopher Kong Zi, better known as Confucius, wrote in his *Analects* that “The object of the superior [person] is truth.”⁴

³ Plato, *Republic*, Book 6, 485.

⁴ Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, Annping Chin (translator), (Penguin, 2014).

To England's first Poet Laureate John Dryden, "Truth is the foundation of all knowledge and the cement of all societies."⁵

Truth, too, is fundamental to science. We rely every day on the truth of certain scientific principles, even to the point that we take them for granted. When we board an airplane, we trust that the principles of aerodynamics are true. When we seek the care of a physician, we trust that he or she will know which medications or treatments will benefit us and which might be harmful. When we drive across a bridge or through a tunnel or enter a high-rise building (or an arena like this one), we presuppose that it has been designed by architects and constructed by builders in accordance with the laws of physics and proven, time-tested techniques of design and construction.

And, of course, truth has been a vital cornerstone of the kind of education you have received at Indiana University. It has been both wide-ranging and selectively deep. It is an education in logic and reason, in the analytical and the beautiful, in the past and the present. It is a broad education in a wide range of subjects that are central to understanding the human experience. It is an education that aspires to truth.

Our society has a vital need for those with such an education—for those trained in truth and who have a reverence for truth. Devising solutions to the grand challenges our society faces—challenges whose solutions have the potential to resolve or mitigate the most difficult and vexing problems of humanity—will depend on applying the power of logic and reason to extensive bodies of factual information hard won over many, many decades. Our society needs policy-makers, scientists, public servants, business executives—the kinds of leaders you will become—who have an understanding of the importance of truth.

⁵ John Dryden, "A Character of Polybius and his Writings," in George R. Guffey, et. al. (eds.), *The Works of John Dryden, Volume XX: Prose 1691-1698 De Arte Graphica and Shorter Works*, (University of California Press, 1990), 23.

3. CELEBRATING THE CLASS OF 2017

You, the members of the Class of 2017, are superbly prepared to confront these challenges and to continue this tradition of the dedicated and unremitting search for truth. The extraordinary range of your achievements at Indiana University is testimony to the time you have invested so diligently in your education and to all that you have learned.

The IU Bloomington Class of 2017 is part of a record number of more than 21,000 graduates of Indiana University across the state—and this is the single largest graduating class in the history of the Bloomington campus.

Your class—the IU Bloomington class of 2017—includes graduates from 96 different countries, from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and from 89 of Indiana’s 92 counties. And the provost assures me that at next year’s Commencement, we will have all 92 counties represented. Our oldest graduate is 64, our youngest 19, and among this weekend’s graduates are 17 sets of twins.

This extraordinarily accomplished class includes Wells Scholars, three Goldwater Scholars, a Boren Scholar, and a Rhodes Scholar.

The Class of 2017 includes members of the IU Army ROTC’s Bison Battalion, which recently received the General Douglas MacArthur Award as the best ROTC program in the 7th Brigade, which includes much of the Midwest.

Members of the Class of 2017 have volunteered in the community tutoring local children who are survivors of domestic violence. Still other have worked in our community and around the world to advance the cause of human rights.

More than a third of you have traveled around the world for your studies, embracing the world in all its diversity, and not shunning it or closing it off.

And you have raised record amounts—more than \$4 million last fall alone—in support of the Riley Hospital for Children through your participation in IU’s largest student philanthropic event and one of the largest events of its kind at any university in the world—the IU Dance Marathon.

Through your dedication in the classroom, through your volunteer service in the community and around the world, and in countless other ways, you have affirmed Indiana University’s legacy as a university committed to academic excellence and the continual search for truth.

4. GREAT TRUTHS AND GREAT CAUSES

In 1950, the great statesman Sir Winston Churchill, then in between his two terms as Prime Minister of Great Britain, addressed his fellow members of the newly-assembled parliament. At a time when Europe was still recovering from the Second World War, and when matters of grave concern gripped the world—the Cold War with the Soviet Union had just begun, and there was impending war on the Korean Peninsula—Churchill reminded his colleagues that there are great truths worth pursuing and defending.

“The dominant forces in human history,” Churchill said, “have come from the perception of great truths and the faithful pursuance of great causes.”⁶

As you leave this ceremony, I encourage you to remember Churchill’s call. Strive to perceive great truths and to pursue great causes.

⁶ Winston Churchill, Remarks in the House of Commons, March 28, 1950.

Remember the work at the heart of your alma mater: the search for truth and the dissemination of knowledge to generations of students—students like you—whose characters are molded by the values of this great institution.

Venerate the truth. Search for it. Defend it when it is challenged.

Then, to borrow from Indiana University's 10th president, William Lowe Bryan, "the university will bring to the state in full measure the light and the truth, and have full right to wear its motto—*Lux et Veritas*, light and truth."⁷

Congratulations and best wishes to the Class of 2017.

⁷ William Lowe Bryan, "The Coming of the University," Commencement remarks delivered June 24, 1908, IU Archives.