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IU Bloomington Graduate Commencement
Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie
President, Indiana University
Indiana Memorial Stadium
Friday, May 7, 2021
10:00 a.m.

1. CARRYING IU'S LEGACY INTO ITS THIRD CENTURY

Trustees, Dr. McNutt, Vice President Wimbush, Executive Vice President Applegate, and members of the Classes of 2020 and 2021.

Last year, Indiana University celebrated its bicentennial.

This historic milestone provided a unique opportunity for the university to highlight all that it has achieved in its first 200 years as it grew to become one of the world's leading public universities, fueled an engine of opportunity and prosperity for Indiana and the nation, sparked discoveries that have helped solve some of our state's and our world's most difficult and urgent problems and illuminated the boundless possibilities of human imagination and creativity.

However, the celebration of our bicentennial was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has made the last year of your time at IU very different from the traditional IU experience. But despite the enormous challenges and disruption caused by the pandemic, you remained dedicated to your studies and steadfast in adjusting to all the public health measures needed to help fight the pandemic with a combination of courage, resilience, and an unwavering concern for others.

All of us have been enormously proud of how seriously and diligently you have responded to all that has been required of you. Your efforts have been vital to keeping the university functioning with some sense of normalcy despite all that has had to be endured. All of us salute you.

2. THE FUNCTION OF THE UNIVERSITY

As you graduate today, you are among the first to carry Indiana University's legacy into its third century.

You have benefitted from a 200-year legacy of educational excellence that is now the foundation of the present and the future. But what is the fundamental purpose of a university like IU in the 21st century?

The great civil rights activist, historian, and author W.E.B. Dubois addressed this question more than a century ago in a landmark 1903 book of essays. "The function of the university," he wrote, "is not simply to teach bread-winning, or to furnish teachers for the public schools, or to be a center of polite society; it is above all to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization."¹

Certainly, one reason you came to Indiana University—and one reason you have pursued graduate degrees—was to gain an advanced education of the highest quality—one that would prepare you for a personally and professionally rewarding life and career. IU has done much over the last 14 years to ensure that the degrees you earn fulfill this purpose—that they are highly relevant to today's information-based global society and speak to the issues facing the world. Indeed, many of you have earned degrees that did not even exist a few years ago. But, as DuBois suggested, teaching "bread-winning"—or preparing you to earn a living—while an immensely important outcome, is not IU's sole function.

And its function goes beyond providing teachers for the public schools—though we take great pride in doing just that. Our schools of education in Bloomington and around the

¹ W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, eighth edition, (McClurg, 1909), 84.

state train excellent, highly sought-after teachers who are regularly named the best in the state.

Nor is IU's function, in DuBois' words, to be a "center of polite society," though the manner in which universities like IU conduct inquiry and public debate has been crucial to civil society and to modern science. Many have lamented the unintended and unexpected effect of modern communications, like social media, to divide and isolate rather than bring together. Universities must be places that bridge those divides, not to reach agreement on all things but to improve understanding, sharpen ideas, and, ultimately, advance society through dialogue.

Thus, DuBois defined the function of the university as fostering, in his words, "...that broad knowledge of what the world knows and knew of human living and doing, which may be applied to the thousand problems of real life today confronting us."²

More than a century ago, DuBois realized that mitigating the most difficult and vexing problems then facing society would depend on applying the power of logic and reason to the myriad and immense bodies of human knowledge.

This, DuBois maintained, was the function of the university in 1903. And today, over a century later in 2021, it remains one of Indiana University's most noble functions for the next century.

The world is facing seismic changes—from rapidly changing and unstable geopolitics to the survival of democracy and from the impact of technology on personal privacy to the health and well-being of the human race.

The demanding, difficult, and pressing tasks that must be carried out are immense, and the problems in need of solutions are myriad.

² Ibid.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new urgency to the need to improve global public health, prepare for future pandemics, and conquer disease. A highly divisive political environment, at home and abroad, gives new urgency to reducing conflict. The racism, bigotry, intolerance, and hatred that too many members of our society, especially people of color, are forced to confront on a daily basis gives new urgency to the need to create communities where differences of all kinds, whether of race, ethnicity, or belief, are respected, valued, and protected, and where hatred, bigotry, and intolerance are powerfully condemned. The need to address countless other challenges, including responding to the effects of climate change, alleviating poverty, and building prosperity, grows more urgent with each passing day.

Addressing these and other challenges hinges on producing sufficient numbers of graduate-degree holders—people with advanced knowledge and critical-thinking abilities—who can devise effective solutions. And at a time of global change and upheaval when there is a national bipartisan consensus as to the vital and urgent need to massively increase investments in science and technology to ensure America's competitiveness and to buttress national prosperity and security, our nation will rely more than ever on universities like IU to well-trained graduates like you

Our university's essential work—as it has been for two centuries—is to provide students with the best, most contemporary, and broadest education possible—one that is accessible to all the citizens of Indiana and elsewhere, no matter what their means or from where they come. It is to pursue transformative research and scholarship at the highest level of excellence. And it is to serve our state and its regions, our nation, and the world in countless ways.

It is now incumbent on you to grasp and understand problems that exist no matter where you find yourselves, to use the wisdom you have gained to devise with the greatest of skill the best solutions to these and to summon the courage to respond when you are called upon to advance the common good.

3. EXTENDING YOURSELVES TO EVER-HIGHER LIMITS

Regardless of your discipline, you have all experienced the deep sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, and achievement—that sense of exhilaration—that comes from extending yourselves to ever-higher limits in new and uncharted areas and making new and revolutionary contributions to human knowledge.

Many of you have been vital partners in the research enterprise at Indiana University, and many of you, I am certain, will continue to make lasting and memorable contributions through research and scholarship. Others of you have focused with great intellectual intensity and rigor on mastering the advanced training in your professional field with an education of the highest quality—one that will enable you to make contributions of lasting value to the prosperity and well-being of society.

A number of you who are receiving advanced degrees today have already made such contributions and have blazed new trails.

This morning, Dominique Kemp III, for example, becomes the first African American in the university's history to graduate with a doctoral degree in mathematics from Indiana University. He earned his undergraduate degree at Stanford University, was honored with the Outstanding Thesis Award for his doctoral thesis here, and will soon be taking up a postdoctoral at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, followed by another at the Institute for Advanced Study and Princeton. We congratulate him on this noteworthy achievement and hope that many more mathematicians of color will follow in his footsteps.

And Cheryl Sullivan, who formerly served as Secretary of the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration under governors Evan Bayh and Joe Kernan and as National Issues Director of the Gore-Lieberman presidential campaign, completed her coursework in the late 1990s for a doctoral degree in what is now the O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs in Bloomington. Before completing her dissertation, she continued to pursue her public service calling in Washington, D.C., as deputy chief

of staff for policy to Senator Even Bayh and as CEO of the American Academy of Nursing. In 2018, Ms. Sullivan retired from the Academy of Nursing, completed and defended her doctoral thesis, and today graduates with a doctoral degree in Environmental Science at the age of 69!

These two graduates—and all of you—are now part of a select group whose members have made the serious and considerable investment of personal and financial resources required to earn an advanced degree. You now stand ready to use the knowledge and skills you have acquired to become the leaders of tomorrow.

4. TOWARD A WORLD YOU WILL BE PROUD TO HAVE BUILT

In his justly famous Day of Affirmation speech, delivered at the University of Capetown in 1966, even as the horrors of apartheid raged in South Africa, then-United States Senator Robert Kennedy said that all might agree on the kind of world we would want to build.

“It would be a world of independent nations, moving toward international community, each of which protected and respected the basic human freedoms. It would be a world,” Kennedy continued, “which demanded of each government that it accept its responsibility to insure social justice. It would be a world of constantly accelerating economic progress—not material welfare as an end in itself, but as a means to liberate the capacity of every human being to pursue his (or her) talents and to pursue his (or her) hopes. It would, in short, be a world that we would be proud to have built.”³

More than half a century later, we have made progress toward the world Kennedy described, but there is, unquestionably, much more work still to be done. There always will be. This is not the counsel of despair but the basis of hope, and—at your commencement from this place and into the world at large—it is my charge to you.

³ Robert F. Kennedy, “Day of Affirmation Address,” Remarks delivered at the University of Capetown, South Africa, June 6, 1966.

As graduates of Indiana University, you have been preparing for years to become the next generation to discover, to understand, and to apply all that you have learned.

Keep what is good; change what needs to be changed with wisdom; take pride in your work and the world you will make.

Indiana University takes great pride in you and your accomplishments.

May you carry on the traditions of excellence that have brought you to this moment.

And may it be said in years to come that it was graduates like you—here and around the world—who confronted and conquered the most difficult challenges of today and gained the respect and gratitude of all.