

“A Sound and Lasting International Partnership:
Honoring Dr. Sombat Thamrongthanyawong”

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie
President, Indiana University
Conferral of an Honorary Indiana University Degree on
Dr. Sombat Thamrongthanyawong
Indianapolis, IN
Hine Hall
IUPUI
Thursday, April 4, 2013
2:00 p.m.

1. IU AND THAILAND: DECADES OF PARTNERSHIP

More than half a century ago, in an essay in *The Educational Record*, Indiana University’s legendary 11th president, Herman B Wells, envisioned a future of global engagement in higher education.

“I am certain...” he wrote, “that hitherto undreamed-of working relationships may develop between American institutions and foreign institutions, personal relationships between American and foreign scholars, American and foreign students—relationships which will be sound and lasting because they will be built on the solid foundation of joint work of equal partners on behalf of a common objective.”¹

Nearly 60 years later, we find ourselves in an era of unprecedented global interdependence—an era in which Wells’ certainties about the future of sound and

¹ Herman B Wells, “Widening Horizons,” *The Educational Record* 38, (American Council on Education, 1957), as reprinted in Raymond F. Howes (ed.), *Vision and Purpose in Higher Education: Twenty College Presidents Examine Developments During the Past Decade*, (American Council on Education, 1962), 40.

lasting international partnerships are confirmed time and again. Such international partnerships are vitally important to Indiana University's research and education missions in the 21st century. They support faculty research, they provide opportunities for study abroad programs, and they are of great advantage in our efforts to recruit top international students and faculty.

All of this has certainly been true of Indiana University's partnership with Thailand, which dates back to 1948 and is one of the longest official relationships IU has with an international partner.

Over the last six-and-a-half decades, dozens of IU faculty members have lent their expertise and support to educational development in Thailand, including Joseph Sutton and John Ryan, both of whom later served as presidents of this university. The work of these faculty members over many years has not only benefited institutions in Thailand, but it also stimulated a new spirit of inquiry at Indiana University, and led to new areas of research and to a better understanding of our world.

Of course, over the years, we have also welcomed to IU many Thai scholars who have shared their expertise, their experiences, and their international perspectives with our students.

And, of course, many Thai citizens have travelled to Bloomington and Indianapolis to study a wide variety of subjects in preparation for positions of responsibility they would later hold in Thailand. Our close institutional relationship with NIDA has led IU to award honorary degrees to two of that university's former presidents, Amara Raksasatya in 2000 and Juree Vichit-Vadakan in 2007.

IU's close connection with Thailand also includes our friendship with Her Royal Highness, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. I was honored to spend time with Her Royal Highness, both here in Bloomington, in 2010, when I had the honor of conferring

an honorary Indiana University doctorate on her, and, last year, at Sra Pathum Palace in Thailand, where my wife, Laurie, and I were greatly honored to have been her guests. In our conversations, the princess's deep belief in the power of education was clearly evident, as was her strong commitment to improving the lives of her people. We are deeply grateful to Her Royal Highness for continuing to foster lasting friendship between Indiana University and the Thai people.

2. THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

We greatly appreciate the opportunities we have had to work in partnership with the people of Thailand and with many of the country's institutions of higher learning, and we are particularly grateful, of course, for our longstanding and ongoing ties with the National Institute of Development Administration.

NIDA was, of course, established by royal proclamation in 1966, and was given university status a short time later. Since that time, NIDA has trained thousands of the Thai government's top executives and diplomats for service across the country and around the world.

Subsequent speakers this afternoon will discuss, in more depth, the history of Indiana University's relationship with NIDA, as well as some of our numerous ongoing collaborations.

3. SOMBAT THAMRONGTHANYAWONG

Today, of course, we gather to honor and recognize the leadership of NIDA's accomplished president, Dr. Sombat Thamrongthanyawong, by conferring on him an honorary Indiana University degree.

From his days as a student leader, Dr. Sombat has been recognized for his deep commitment to the emergence of a sustainable democratic society in Thailand. In the early 1970s, as the elected leader of the National Student Center of Thailand, he played a key role in what is now known as “October 14th Democracy Day,” a role for which he is still highly-regarded in Thailand. In 1974, at the age of 23, he was named by *Time* magazine as a “Rising World Leader.” He was the youngest of the 150 people named to the list. To this day, he remains a strong advocate for governmental accountability and the rights of Thai citizens.

After earning his bachelor’s degree in science from Kasetsart University, and a master’s degree in Government Studies from Chulalongkorn University, Dr. Sombat became the very first graduate in the doctoral program in Public Administration at NIDA. It was during his time as a doctoral student that he first came to Indiana, where he lived in campus housing here on the Indianapolis campus, spent time with faculty in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs—in Indianapolis and Bloomington—and developed contacts in the Kelley School of Business, the Department of Political Science, and in other IU departments.

He began his career teaching at NIDA in 1989, and his outstanding research efforts led to a rapid promotion to the rank of professorship. He assumed the presidency of NIDA in 2007, having served as a member of the faculty for 17 years. For more than a quarter of a century, as a student, a faculty member, and now as president, he has served NIDA with great distinction.

Last year, I led an IU delegation to Southeast Asia, which included visits to Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and, of course, Thailand.

On that trip, I was very honored to be able to present Indiana University’s Thomas Hart Benton Medallion to Dr. Sombat. I was also fortunate to spend some time at NIDA, to

tour the campus, and—on that occasion and others—to talk with Dr. Sombat about his vision for the future of NIDA and how it might best serve Thailand and the broader global community.

Under his leadership, NIDA has established a number of new academic programs and is experiencing the kind of growth and change that will allow it to continue to offer an outstanding educational experience to 21st century students in Thailand.

Dr. Sombat's strong ties with government and business have attracted funding for the expansion of NIDA's physical plant, with the addition of new high-rise buildings, as well as new gardens that enhance the beauty of the campus.

He has also helped to develop at NIDA what has been called "the best library in Asia." NIDA's library contains not only an outstanding collection of traditional holdings, but also one of the most extensive collections of digital materials in all of Asia.

Under Dr. Sombat's leadership at NIDA, scholarships have been established to attract students from outside of Thailand. As a further way of attracting quality students from around the world, and, as a way of giving students the tools they need to work in a globalized world, NIDA has also implemented a number of programs in which English is the language of instruction.

Dr. Sombat has also invested robustly in faculty development, sponsoring a number of events that help the faculty become more effective researchers and assist them in getting their work accepted by leading journals and conferences.

4. CONCLUSION

In addition to all that he has done for the people of Thailand and for NIDA, Dr. Sombat has done a great deal to foster the longstanding partnership between our two institutions.

In the 1957 essay in *The Educational Record* I quoted earlier, Herman Wells concluded by writing that the international partnerships formed by universities “offer Americans new perspectives and enlarged vistas of understanding, and [the] political maturity so vitally needed in the solution of the problems of today’s chaotic world.”² Indiana University’s partnership with NIDA truly has offered us “new perspectives and enlarged vistas of understanding.”

And all of us are deeply grateful. And with leaders like Dr. Sombat, we are confident that our partnership will continue to thrive for many years to come.

² Ibid.