

## “Vital Skills in a Changing World”

Winter Commencement 2009

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President

Indiana University

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Indiana University Bloomington

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### 1. A DEDICATION TO COUNTRY IN A WORLD OF CHANGE

In his 1796 farewell address, President George Washington advised his fellow citizens to “[o]bserve good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all.”<sup>1</sup> He went on to suggest that the U.S. should be careful with whom it made international alliances. Like so many of our national leaders, President Washington was keenly aware of the relationship between peace and national security.

The presence here—today—of our honored guest, Commencement speaker, and IU alumnus Secretary of Defense Robert Gates brings Washington’s parting words to mind. As a great public servant, Secretary Gates has spent his entire career in the defense of this country, and has dedicated himself to the same democratic ideals that drove President Washington in the early days of its founding.

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<sup>1</sup> Washington, George. “Farewell Address to the People of the United States.” *Philadelphia Daily American Advertiser* 19 Sept. 1796. <<http://www.access.gpo.gov/congress/senate/farewell/sd106-21.pdf>>. President Washington did not publicly deliver this address. It first appeared in the above-named newspaper then appeared in papers around the country.

As we come together to celebrate this wonderful day of achievement for our graduates, all of us know that we are living in a world vastly different from the one our founding fathers knew.

Our world has changed dramatically even in the last fifty years. Back in 1959, innovations like the personal computer, the Internet, and the cell phone were still decades away. It was around fifty years ago that the Soviets launched Sputnik, and the race to the moon began.

Some of us remember this world fifty years ago, but most of you graduating today were not yet born. In fact, fifty years ago, our own President Barak Obama was not yet born.

Ours is no longer a world of Cold War polarization; rather it is a world of 21<sup>st</sup> century globalization. The iron curtain has been replaced by the digital horizon that stretches into the future. And your education has prepared you for this dynamic world of change.

## 2. THE NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL LITERACY

But even amidst such dramatic changes, some truths remain constant.

You inherit a world that has been shaped by the generations that preceded you. Your character and leadership will help shape that world for years to come.

During your years at Indiana University, you have been learning the universal language of logic and reason, developing flexibility of mind and skills, and broadening and deepening your own knowledge in accord with the best traditions of liberal education to prepare for lives of meaningful citizenship.

Just last year, two prominent American statesmen, former U.S. Congressman Lee Hamilton and former governor of New Jersey Thomas Kean emphasized one important

aspect of such citizenship. They wrote, “The United States cannot conduct itself effectively in a competitive international environment when our most educated citizens lack minimal exposure to, and understanding of, the world beyond U.S. borders. . . . Ignorance of the world is a national liability.”<sup>2</sup>

But this argument is not new.

It was thirty years ago, in 1979, that the President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies proclaimed our nation’s lack of foreign language skills “nothing short of scandalous.”<sup>3</sup>

And roughly two decades before that, the United States established the National Defense Education Act to support—in part— education in languages critical to national security.

### 3. A WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITY

Indiana University has long been deeply involved in preparing our students for active and meaningful international engagement. We have been training students in world languages for at least one hundred and eighty years, nearly as long as the university has been in existence. Currently, students at IU can take over 70 world languages—perhaps the largest number at any university in the United States. We are also home to nine federally-funded Department of Education Title VI Area Studies Centers, including seven National Resource Centers.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, “We can’t be competitive globally if we lack exposure beyond US borders.” *Christian Science Monitor* 12 June 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Clifford, Ray T., and Donald C. Fischer, Jr. “Foreign Language Needs in the U.S. Government.” *ANALS, AAPSS* 511 (Sept. 1990): 109-121. Quoted on page 110.

What this means is that our students have some of the best resources for learning about other cultures, their customs, and their languages, and our graduates are among the best prepared for a future that will demand global literacy.

### 3.1 WORLD-RENOUNED FACULTY AND PROGRAMS

That preparation is due, in part, to IU's outstanding faculty. We are incredibly proud of IU Professor of Political Science Elinor Ostrom, who just last week accepted the Nobel Prize for Economic Sciences in Sweden. Her life-long research on the use and management of common-pool resources has worldwide implications.

Faculty working across Indiana University are also looking to those broad horizons. They are studying counterinsurgencies in India, analyzing the future of nuclear weapons, providing input to homeland defense efforts, and, working in partnership with the Indiana National Guard, briefing personnel deploying to Afghanistan on rule of law challenges and other related matters.

Faculty in our many language programs have trained hundreds of people, ranging from IU ROTC cadets to senior members of Provincial Reconstruction Teams, on Afghan languages and culture. In fact, four cadets were commissioned as 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenants last night and are graduating today. Many of these efforts are coordinated by our Center for American and Global Security, which is helping to improve the university's response to state and federal agency needs.

IU is also home to a hub of expertise in the new language of computer security. Our Center for Applied Cybersecurity Research helped IU earn recognition as a National Center for Academic Excellence in both Information Assurance Research and Information Assurance Education. Among other projects the Center assisted the White House with the President's 60-day cybersecurity review, is participating in classified

reviews of Department of Homeland Security cybersecurity programs, and is consulting with the Air Force and the Navy on cybersecurity and cyberdefense initiatives.

### 3.2 OVERSEAS STUDIES AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

As vital as this work is, our students are also gaining experience in other lands and other cultures well beyond Bloomington, Indiana, and the U.S. In fact IU is one of America's leading international universities. Indiana University ranks 11<sup>th</sup> in the nation for sending our students abroad.

Especially in these challenging economic times, students recognize that their future depends on their understanding of other cultures.

As the legendary anthropologist and author Zora Neale Hurston once said, "You've got to go there, to know there."

And our students are going there.

### 3.3 IU'S DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI

We have also welcomed record numbers of international students to our campuses over the past few years.

Currently, we have over 6,300 international students. Over 400 students graduating today are from 61 different countries around the world. In fact, our oldest graduate—at 67—and our youngest graduate—at 20—are both international students.

We can measure the success of our programs, many of which date back decades rather than years, by the stories and success of our graduates.

For instance, James Collins earned his master's in history from IU in 1964 and went on to a distinguished career, holding diplomatic posts in Jordan and Turkey and serving as U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union. He currently directs the Russian and Eurasian Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

James B. Smith, a 1975 IU alum in history, is a retired brigadier general and serves as ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

We should also note other immensely distinguished alumni like former U.S. Congressman Lee Hamilton—Maurer School of Law grad; like former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill—SPEA grad; like former Secretary of Education Rod Paige—HPER grad; each of whom left Indiana University prepared to contribute on a national and international stage.

And of course, I would be remiss if I failed to mention our honored guest Secretary Gates, whose training in Russian language and history played a pivotal role in his future leadership. During the course of his long and illustrious career, Secretary Gates has been an extraordinary public servant, setting aside partisan politics as he has served under eight different presidents. And we are most fortunate that he has also served the world of higher education with his tenure as an outstanding president of Texas A-and-M University.

As he, himself, explained, "Our universities remain our most vital and vibrant source for new thinking and research on issues large and small."<sup>4</sup>

We are extremely proud to call Secretary Gates, and so many others, graduates of Indiana University.

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<sup>4</sup> Gates, Robert. Remarks delivered at the Association of American Universities. Washington, D.C. 14 April 2008. <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1228>

In fact a study done earlier this year showed that IU ranked fourth among universities in the nation whose alumni have served in cabinet level position in the federal government in recent years.

#### 4. TODAY'S GRADUATES

And today you are joining these graduates.

But many of you have already taken a step towards your global future.

Take, for instance, psychology major and honors student Laura Palmer, who travelled to New Delhi and South Africa during her years at IU. Of her experience in India, she said, “[It] made [her] even more confident that [she] wanted to become a physician.”

Laura is graduating Phi Beta Kappa.

Or take journalism major Ashley Lewis, who travelled to Ghana, Chile, France, and England on a variety of service and educational trips. Ashley wrote, “When embarking on a news story, I hope that the confidence I have gained from traveling and meeting new people will radiate when I interview individuals, [making] . . . that person much more comfortable to share *their* story.”

Ashley is a Hudson Holland Scholar and a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scholar.

Or take Christopher Mosher, a double major in exercise science and biology. Chris served as an Undergraduate Teaching Intern, volunteered as a Big Brother, and travelled with the Timmy Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving health care and education around the world.

Of his trip to Ecuador, Chris wrote that “[i]t was there, thousands of miles away from home, that I witnessed the immense power and importance of simply listening and the human touch.”

These three students represent just a snapshot of the profound difference international experiences can make in student lives.

Such experiences not only create opportunities for students, but they also transform futures. They make each of us appreciate even more the words of President Washington with which I opened: that we should “[o]bserve good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all.”

## 5. CONCLUSION: NEW AUTHORS OF THE STORY OF HUMAN PROGRESS

Just ten days ago, President Obama echoed those words when he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize. He said, “We can acknowledge that oppression will always be with us, and still strive for justice. We can admit the intractability of deprivation, and still strive for dignity. We can understand that there will be war, and still strive for peace. We can do that for that is the story of human progress; that is the hope of all the world; and at this moment of challenge, that must be our work here on Earth.”<sup>5</sup>

Graduates, in a world of change, you have been preparing for this moment.

This is your work here on Earth.

You are now the authors of that story of human progress.

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<sup>5</sup> Obama, Barack. Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize. Oslo City Hall, Oslo, Norway. 10 Dec. 2009. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>