“Democracy, Education, and the Freedom to Know”

IU Bloomington Undergraduate Commencement
Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie
President, Indiana University
Assembly Hall
Saturday, May 10, 2013
10:00 a.m.
3:00 p.m.

1. DEMOCRACY, EDUCATION, AND THE FREEDOM TO KNOW

President Higgins, Trustees, Provost Robel, honored guests, colleagues, and members of the Class of 2014:

As part of the 1920 celebration of Indiana University’s centennial, the university’s 7th president, David Starr Jordan, who by that time had also retired as the founding president of Stanford University—better known as Indiana University West—returned to IU to mark the milestone of this centennial. Jordan said that when he visited the public universities of the Midwest, he was impressed with the future stability of our democracy.

“The essential features of democracy,” Jordan said, “are its provision for freedom, order, and justice—the freedom to know above all other freedom, and justice the ultimate purpose.”[1]

Even as we bear in mind Winston Churchill’s caveat that democracy is neither always perfect nor always all-wise,[2] the idea that public universities have an integral role in the preservation of democracy is deeply rooted in American higher education.

[1] David Starr Jordan, in *Indiana University, 1820-1920: Centennial Memorial Volume*, (Indiana University, 1921), 323.

The Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education, drafted in 1999 by IU President Emeritus Thomas Ehrlich, then-senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, challenged universities to re-examine their public purposes and renew their commitments to the democratic ideal. Every campus of Indiana University is a signatory of this important document.

As the declaration stated: "this country cannot afford to educate a generation that acquires knowledge without ever understanding how that knowledge can benefit society or how to influence democratic decision-making. We must teach the skills and values of democracy," the declaration continued, "creating innumerable opportunities for our students to practice and reap the results of the real, hard work of citizenship."[3]

Public research universities like Indiana University educate 85 percent of the undergraduate students enrolled in all research universities.[4] Hence, it is the nation's public universities that have played a fundamental role in the democratization of education, and in so doing, they have helped to prepare millions of graduates for the integral roles they play as active and engaged citizens in democratic society.

2. AN EDUCATION FOR THE 21st CENTURY

During your years at Indiana University, you have received an education that has not only prepared you to succeed in the globally interconnected world of the 21st century, but one that has also prepared you to influence democratic decision-making and to practice and reap the results of the hard work of citizenship.

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[2] Winston Churchill, speech, House of Commons, November 11, 1947, in Robert Rhodes James (ed.), *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches, 1897–1963,* vol. 7, (Facts on File, Inc., 1974), 7566.
[3] "The Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Responsibilities of Higher Education," Campus Compact, December 2000.
[4] Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, "Ensuring Public Research Universities Remain Vital: A Report to the Membership on the Research University Regional Deliberations," November 2010.

Your Indiana University education has enhanced your critical thinking and problem solving skills. It has instilled in you the desire to ask—and the capacity to seek answers to some of the most important questions of our day: questions about globalization, about prosperity and poverty, about energy, technology, and fundamental questions about right and wrong. Your answers—and, perhaps more importantly, the debates in which you will engage as you seek these answers—will serve to renew our democracy and to help it continue to thrive.

Our distinguished guest, President Higgins, is an outstanding example of how the knowledge you have gained at Indiana University can immeasurably benefit society and influence democratic decision-making.

As literary critic and scholar Declan Kiberd writes in the foreword to President Higgins' book, *Causes for Concern: Irish Politics, Culture, and Society*, "democracy for this man [President Higgins] is the dissemination of a common culture as widely as possible among a people audacious enough to imagine their own present and future. …At its core is an educational ideal based on the principle that learning is life-long but never quantifiable, a process rather than a product, a humanistic challenge rather than a technical qualification."[5]

As you take your places among the next generation of business leaders, journalists, judges, artists, scientists, public health professionals, teachers, social workers, and government leaders, may you remember that learning is a process rather than a product—and may you be audacious enough to imagine the possibilities of your own present and future.

[5] Declan Kiberd, foreword to Michael D. Higgins, *Causes for Concern: Irish Politics, Culture, and Society*, (Liberties Press, 2008).

3. CELEBRATING THE CLASS OF 2014

Your many achievements at Indiana University are testimony to the time you have invested and to all that you have learned.

Your class—the IU Bloomington Class of 2014—includes graduates from 75 different countries, from 49 states, and from 89 of Indiana's 92 counties. Our oldest graduate this weekend is 70, our youngest 19, and among the members of the Bloomington Class of 2014 are 16 sets of twins. And we have three of a set of quadruplets—the fourth of whom will be studying medicine at IU next year.

This extraordinarily accomplished class includes Wells Scholars, a Beinecke Scholar, a Truman Scholar, and two Goldwater Scholars.

Nearly a third of you have travelled around the world for your studies, and many of you have dedicated yourselves to civic engagement and public service at home and around the globe.

Your class includes the founder of the IU campus chapter of Oxfam America, a relief organization dedicated to finding lasting solutions to global hunger, poverty and injustice. Your class includes others who have helped to lead Books and Beyond, a project of IU's Global Village Living-Learning Center, in which students work to provide high-quality reading material for school children in Rwanda.

The Class of 2014 also includes the first graduates of IU's School of Global and International Studies, one of six new schools established at IU in the last three years. It is a school that is expanding opportunities for international education for our students, including developing a greater understanding of how societies are evolving worldwide, and a deeper knowledge of globalization.

Many members of the Class of 2014 have helped to raise money for IU scholarships by participating in one of our great traditions, the Little 500. You have also raised record amounts—more than $2.6 million last fall alone—in support of Riley Hospital for Children through your participation in the IU Dance Marathon, IU's largest student philanthropic event and the largest event of its kind at any university.

4. CONCLUSION: FULFILLING THE "BEST QUALITIES OF YOUR OWN SPIRIT"

As graduates of Indiana University, you have been preparing for years to become the next generation to discover, to understand, and to use what you have learned for the benefit of society.

Robert Kennedy told students at the University of California Berkeley in 1966 that they were among the world's most privileged citizens because they had been given the opportunity to study and to learn. "In the world and at home," Kennedy said, "you have the opportunity and the responsibility to help make the choices which will determine the greatness of this nation. History will judge you," he continued, "on the extent to which you have used your gifts to enlighten and enrich the lives of your fellow man. In your hands," Kennedy said, "…is the future of your world and the fulfillment of the best qualities of your own spirit."[6]

Members of the Class of 2014, those choices and that future are now in your hands.

In the face of vast and sobering challenges, you have the power to shape your world and to fulfill the best qualities of your own spirits.

Thank you very much.

[6] Robert F. Kennedy, Address at the University of California-Berkeley, delivered October 23, 1966, Web, Accessed April 22, 2014, URL: http://research.archives.gov/description/194053