

“Cultivating Habits of Excellence: Spring Commencement 2006”

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1. INTRODUCTION

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle declared over two millennia ago that “excellence is . . . won by training and habituation . . . We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.”

Indiana University’s own Herman B Wells echoed Aristotle’s sentiments in his 1938 inaugural address. He explained, “The University cannot discharge any of its obligations to society unless it is first and foremost an institution dedicated to scholarship and scholarly objectives: a place where students learn the slow and arduous processes of mental discipline by which knowledge is acquired and wisdom won.”

Today we celebrate the habits of excellence that those of you who are graduating have cultivated in the years you have dedicated to mastering your academic subjects. Let us consider, however, what has encouraged such habits during the arduous processes of mental discipline that Dr. Wells called for and what strange companions habits of excellence create.

2. PASSION AND HONOR

What inspires many of us to great accomplishments is a passion for our subject, whatever that subject may be. That passion fuels our desire to learn, to know, and to share our knowledge with others. It creates a sense of responsibility to our discipline and to our world. Whatever we do, we must do right in order to bring honor to our field. This is not about perfection or achieving the impossible. Rather, it is about, as Henry David Thoreau put it, building castles in the air and then putting foundations under them (*Walden*). If we do not care, and care passionately about what we do, we will not be able to cultivate excellence because it will not matter to us. There will be no castles and thus no foundations. The life lived without passion and without dreams is lived without possibility.

3. RISKS OF EXCELLENCE

This intensity of spirit drives the habits of excellence and also suggests the risks we face as we strive for greatness. For some, these are risks of failure and humiliation. The higher the goal, the more painful the fall. For others, the risks are greater still. Allan Bloom captures the essence of this: “A serious life means being fully aware of the alternatives, thinking about them with all the intensity one brings to bear on life and death questions, in full recognition that every choice is a great risk with necessary consequences that are hard to bear” (*The Closing of the American Mind*).

Together we remember the pain of the recent losses of our own students; how we grieve as a campus community, the life and death decisions, the consequences that are indeed hard to bear.

Journeys that end too soon, voices stopped mid-song, are heartbreaking. But what of the journey or the song never begun out of fear of failure, lack of courage, or weakness of character? We should admire and celebrate those who have made valiant efforts, but we must pity those who chose not to try. Wasted potential is an irrecoverable and costly loss.

4. CHALLENGES FACED BY HISTORIC IU FIGURES

And we will all face challenges that stand in our way. Consider the first female African American graduate of Indiana University, Frances Marshall, who, early in the last century, faced a segregated campus and other forms of racial prejudice. She went on to have a long and respected career as an educator and administrator. Think about Alfred Kinsey, who suffered political and personal attacks while conducting his groundbreaking scientific investigations into human behavior and physiology. And what of Herman B Wells, a successful businessman then legendary IU president, who fought tenaciously in the name of civil rights and academic freedom.

Marshall, Kinsey, and Wells, all with such different backgrounds and facing so many challenges, illustrate Aristotle's habits of excellence that bring together disciplines as varied as the humanities, education, science, and business. Excellence is a great builder of communities.

5. GRADUATING STUDENTS AND HABITS OF EXCELLENCE

And what of the habits of excellence that you, the members of the Class of 2006, are already cultivating? Let me give you a few examples.

One student among you has vigorously pursued her passion for public radio throughout her years at IU. She was Indiana University's sole representative at National Public Radio's Next Generation Radio Project and was one of only two students selected among hundreds nationally for a position with NPR's *All Things Considered*. Her many

regional and national awards for feature and educational reporting demonstrate her continuing desire for excellence.

Also among you is a young man who has developed very different habits of excellence. Growing out of a course on ecology was his project to stop soil erosion at the IU nature preserve. This young man's habits of excellence have transformed an ecosystem.

Yet another student in our midst has served as an intern in the U.S. Department of State and as an assistant in the European Parliament. She has studied in Austria, Denmark, and Mexico and will soon continue her studies in Ireland. With an eye towards a global community, this student has faced the risks inherent in the pursuit of excellence.

You have shown your leadership by governing residence halls, organizing Dance Marathons, and creating opportunities for others. Over 700 of you are members of IU's Hutton Honors College; several have received Fulbright Grants; and one, the prestigious Mitchell Scholarship. Your leadership and intellectual accolades demonstrate your very high standards of achievement.

These and so many other examples from the Class of 2006 provide evidence of your many and varied habits of excellence. You have transformed Indiana University through your presence, your scholarship, and your involvement. Our pride and admiration for your passion and accomplishments know no bounds.

6. CONCLUSION: RESPONSIBILITY AND COMMUNITY

This legacy of past greatness and future potential reinforces the tremendous responsibility that attends the habit of excellence. Each of us has a responsibility to cultivate our talents to the fullest degree not only for ourselves but also for our world. Each of you will serve a larger community. Your habits of excellence will transcend your lives and promise a lasting impact on the world around you.

The pursuit of excellence is an evolving act of passion that will take you well beyond your years at Indiana University. Your challenge will be to discover where your real talents lie, to face life with serious intensity, and to cultivate your own habits of excellence in whatever you do.

Mr. President, with the fullest expectation of future excellence, I present to you the Class of 2006.