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IU Bloomington Undergraduate Commencement

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President, Indiana University

Indiana Memorial Stadium

Saturday, May 5, 2018

10:00 a.m.

## 1. IN PURSUIT OF TRUTH

Trustees, Provost Robel, Mr. Tash, Dr. Sawyer, Mr. and Mrs. Eskenazi, Mr. Ferguson, Mr. Shortz, honored guests, colleagues, and members of the Class of 2018:

At an IU Commencement ceremony more than 100 years ago, Indiana University's tenth president, William Lowe Bryan told the graduates: "The university must never surrender its mission to know the whole truth about the universe of which we are a part."<sup>1</sup>

A century later, Indiana University's commitment to the search for truth remains steadfast. The pursuit of truth is at the very heart of the academic disciplines that you have been studying at IU and has been a vital cornerstone of the kind of education that you have received here. At the heart of this pursuit is the knowledge that there will always be new truths to be discovered in all fields, that the natural and social sciences will continually evolve in the direction of ever greater comprehension, and that advancement and improvement in all aspects of human life and human understanding is forever possible. No matter what degree you have earned, at the core of the education you have received is the continuing, ever-critical search for truth.

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<sup>1</sup> William Lowe Bryan, "The Function of the University," delivered June 13, 1917, as printed in *The Spirit of Indiana*, (Indiana University Bookstore, 1917), 119.

Our society has a vital need for those trained in truth and who have a reverence for truth. Our society needs policy-makers, scientists, public servants, business executives—the kinds of leaders that you will become—who have an understanding of the elemental importance of truth. Our Commencement speaker, Paul Tash, reminds us that society needs journalists who report the truth, inform the public, speak truth to power, challenge corruption, and protect the vulnerable.

Truth and veracity are also the very foundations of our society.

For thousands of years, truth has been a topic of the deepest enquiry by the greatest minds from every human culture and civilization.

The search for what is true knowledge is the underlying theme of all of Plato's works. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates argues that it is impossible to find anything more akin to wisdom than truth.<sup>2</sup>

The Chinese philosopher Kong Zi, better known as Confucius, wrote in his *Analects* that “The object of the superior [person] is truth.”<sup>3</sup>

The great Italian Renaissance polymath, Leonardo da Vinci, wrote that “beyond a doubt, truth bears the same relation to falsehood as light (does) to darkness.”<sup>4</sup>

Truth is also an elemental component of our moral and ethical systems. We are taught from the earliest age to tell the truth—and doing so is regarded as a fundamental part of our relations with other people, not just for its pragmatic utility, but as a good in itself.

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Republic*, Book 6, 485.

<sup>3</sup> Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, Annping Chin (translator), (Penguin, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, Chapter XIX, 1168, Web, Accessed May 3, 2018, URL:

[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Notebooks\\_of\\_Leonardo\\_Da\\_Vinci/XIX#What\\_is\\_life?\\_\(1162-1163\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Notebooks_of_Leonardo_Da_Vinci/XIX#What_is_life?_(1162-1163))

## 2. THE CHALLENGE TO TRUTH IN A “POST-TRUTH” ERA

But it is claimed we live today, as we hear on an almost daily basis, in a “post-truth” era. It is the indictment of our age.

Indeed, we have witnessed in recent years, a disturbing and increasingly widespread casual attitude toward the truth. We have seen rampant attacks on established knowledge and open hostility to verifiable facts. We have seen a fundamental rejection in some quarters of dispassionate rationality. And we have seen political upheaval around the globe driven by wild claims and spurious statistics.

But as a great educational and research institution, for nearly 200 years, Indiana University has stood—and will always stand—for truth. Truth—unembellished by artifice or equivocation.

And while events are open to interpretation—and while we should revere as a virtue the ability to change one’s mind in the face of new factual evidence—there is no excuse for blurring the dividing lines between fact, opinion, and interpretation.

In this era that is too often characterized by blatant falsehoods and misrepresentation, it is vital to remember on this important day in your lives that facts do exist and are beyond argument, dispute or opinion; and that truth does matter.

## 3. IN DEFENSE OF SCIENCE

The “post-truth era,” unfortunately, also brings with it a distrust of expertise. As General Michael Hayden, a former director of the CIA and the National Security Agency, wrote only a few days ago: “To adopt post-truth thinking is to depart from Enlightenment ideas, dominant in the West since the 17th century, that value experience and

expertise, the centrality of fact, humility in the face of complexity, the need for study and a respect for ideas.”<sup>5</sup>

This de-valuing of expertise and experience has, all too often, led to a distrust of scientists and a rejection of basic science. Citizens and policy makers in the United States and elsewhere have cast doubt on established scientific understanding, sidelined scientific evidence, or skewed scientific advice on the basis of political and economic concerns.

But the very Enlightenment ideals that General Hayden described are at the very heart of science—and science, evidence, the centrality of fact, and reason form the foundations of a strong democracy. Ultimately, they keep our communities and families safe and healthy. But in this “post-truth” era, they are increasingly under attack.

Economists have estimated that a third to a half of economic growth in the United States since the Second World War has resulted from basic scientific research.<sup>6</sup> The cars and airplanes that brought your family members to this ceremony, the smartphones in your pockets, the techniques of design and construction that allowed for the building of this stadium, the clothes we wear, the food you and your families will eat as you celebrate this day together—all of these were developed and improved through scientific research.

#### 4. CELEBRATING THE CLASS OF 2018

You, the members of the Class of 2018, are superbly prepared to continue this tradition of the dedicated and unremitting search for truth, the great tradition of the Enlightenment. The extraordinary range of your achievements at Indiana University is

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<sup>5</sup> Michael V. Hayden, “The End of Intelligence,” *The New York Times, Sunday Review*, April 29, 2018, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Mariette DiChristina, “Why Science is Important,” *Scientific American*, July 22, 2014.

testimony to the time you have invested so diligently in your education and to all that you have learned.

The IU Bloomington Class of 2018 is the single largest graduating class in the history of the Bloomington campus.

Your class—the IU Bloomington class of 2018—includes graduates from 96 different countries, from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and from 89 of Indiana’s 92 counties. Our oldest graduate is 68, our youngest 19, and among this weekend’s graduates are 27 sets of twins.

This extraordinarily accomplished class includes Wells Scholars, Goldwater Scholars, and Boren Scholars.

More than a third of you have traveled around the world for your studies, embracing the world in all its diversity, and not shunning it or closing it off.

Members of the Class of 2018 have volunteered on campus and in the community to help create a more equitable and inclusive campus, to improve access to water in the Dominican Republic, and to encourage more women of color to pursue careers in technology.

And you have raised record amounts—\$4.2 million last fall alone—in support of the Riley Children’s Hospital through your participation in, and leadership of, IU’s largest student philanthropic event, and one of the largest events of its kind at any university in the world—the IU Dance Marathon.

Through your dedication in the classroom, through your volunteer service in the community and around the world, and in countless other ways, you have affirmed Indiana University’s legacy as a university committed to academic excellence and the continual search for truth.

## 5. GREAT TRUTHS AND GREAT CAUSES

Over half a century ago, President John F. Kennedy delivered the commencement address at Yale University.

“The great enemy of truth,” he told those graduates, “is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. Too often,” President Kennedy continued, “we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.”<sup>7</sup>

As you leave this ceremony, I encourage you to never forget President Kennedy’s call.

Resist the temptation to enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

Remember the work at the heart of your alma mater: the search for truth and the dissemination of knowledge to generations of students—students like you—whose characters are molded by the very values of this great institution.

Venerate the truth. Search for it. Defend it when it is challenged. Value the experience and expertise of others. Remain humble in the face of complexity.

Then, to borrow again from Indiana University’s 10th president, William Lowe Bryan, “the university will ...have full right to wear its motto—*Lux et Veritas*, light and truth.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John F. Kennedy, Yale University Commencement, delivered June 11, 1962, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Web, Accessed April 30, 2018, URL: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/Kennedy-Library-Fast-Facts/Yale-University-Commencement-Address.aspx>.

<sup>8</sup> William Lowe Bryan, “The Coming of the University,” Commencement remarks delivered June 24, 1908, IU Archives.

Congratulations and best wishes to the Class of 2018.