

“The Value of Knowledge in an Age of Change”

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President

Indiana University

Assembly Hall

IU Bloomington

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10:00 a.m.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE

In 1901, Indiana University’s seventh president David Stahr Jordan wrote that “the modern university rests [o]n the belief that knowledge of all kinds has real worth . . .”

President Jordan’s simple statement gains resonance and depth as we celebrate the time-honored ceremony of commencement and reflect on the value of the knowledge you have gained over the past few years.¹

2. CALCULATING IN DOLLARS AND CENTS

That value is calculated in different ways. For many, it is calculated in economic terms. Even as far back as 1965, President Lyndon Johnson indicated that a college graduate would earn a lifetime average of \$300,000 more than a person with an 8th grade education. More recently, that figure has risen to over \$1 million.²

¹ Hutchins, Robert Maynard. *The Learning Society*. New York and Toronto: Mentor, 1961. Page 16.

² For instance, see “Education and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings” published by the U.S. Census Bureau in Sept. 2011. <<http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/acs-14.pdf>>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2011.

This economic argument is recognized by people across the country who increasingly turn to higher education at this time of financial hardship. Students have flocked to Indiana University in record numbers over the past few years, recognizing both the quality and value of the education they receive here.

That economic argument is also good news for all of our graduates.

3. MEASURING ON DIFFERENT SCALES

But they will be the first to tell you that the value of higher education in American society is also measured in other vital ways.

Such an education prepares citizens for participation in the democratic process. It enlightens and empowers people to make reasoned decisions about their own lives and the lives of others—as doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, and business people. And it invites students to join an intellectual community that, in its broadest sense, traces its roots to the dawn of history and continues into the future.

It is impossible to measure the dollar value of such contributions to our society and our world.

I ask all of our graduates to think about your time here at Indiana University. For many of you, that time includes several Little 500 races, Dance Marathons, and homecoming celebrations. It includes your outstanding performance in the classroom and our student-athletes' dedication to excellence on the court and field. Of course, that includes the rebuilding of our Hoosier basketball program. Some of you may even recall last week's win against Kentucky. In fact, some of you may still be recovering from that game.

Your years at Indiana University have also included historic moments that have touched the lives of people around the world: moments like Barack Obama's election as this nation's first African-American president. Those moments include the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and the devastating earthquakes in Haiti, Chile, and Japan. They include the Arab Spring of revolution and independence.

At this historic time, you have steeped yourselves in an intellectual community dedicated to analyzing and understanding such milestones. You have taken your education around the world to learn first-hand about other cultures, their values, and their ways of life. And upon your return, you have immeasurably enriched Indiana University with your international knowledge, experience, and understanding.

Again, it is impossible to measure, in dollars and cents, the value of belonging to this global intellectual community at this moment in history.

4. THE FIRM FOUNDATION OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

You have built your knowledge and understanding on the firm foundation of a liberal education. It is called liberal not because it has a particular political affinity but because it is both wide-ranging and selectively deep. Such an education in the depth and breadth of human knowledge ranges from the classics in history and literature to the workings of modern government; from the rules of mathematics and logic to the basic laws of physics and biology; from world languages to international affairs. And this is precisely the type of education that our complex, interconnected world requires.

It is an education that fosters critical thinking and problem solving that will enable some of you to be the architects of new economic structures. It will encourage you to reach beyond like-minded colleagues and friends in order to answer questions about prosperity and poverty, about energy, transportation, technology, and many other areas—questions that we have not yet even begun to formulate.

These are questions that require highly skilled experts from many areas and disciplines. Whether you are an accountant, a researcher, a writer, an entrepreneur, a philosopher, or a volunteer, you are responding to and shaping our world of constant change.

This is a world vastly different from the one in which your parents grew up and one that your great-grand parents likely would not even recognize. It is a world where you should expect to change careers multiple times, and, with the increasing globalization of our economic system, you should also be ready to work overseas for a period of your career. This is a world in which you can blog, tweet, and text from nearly anywhere. The revolutions we have witnessed around the world this year have taught us the tremendous impact that such technologies can have.

By virtue of your presence here as graduates, you have inherited the power of a liberal education, and you now represent a great historic educational tradition.

5. THE CLASS OF 2011 AND INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITY

Today's ceremony celebrates the class of 2011, which includes over 2,000 December graduates and a total of over 20,000 graduates: graduates from 53 different countries, from 45 states, and from 75 different Indiana counties. Our oldest graduate is 64, and our youngest 20, and we have at least 2 sets of twins graduating today.

This wonderfully accomplished class includes Phi Beta Kappas, Founders Scholars, Gines Scholars, and Herbert Presidential Scholars.

It includes 151 students who have earned their doctorates, and with that accomplishment they join less than 1% of Americans who hold that degree.³

It includes a female Scholar-Athlete of the Month, 2011 Scholastic Achievement Award winner, and Big Ten Champion diver (all the same talented young woman).

It includes Vice President of Publicity for the Vida Theatre Group, past Vice President of the Singapore Student Association, and Historian for the Chinese Student and Scholar Association.

It includes Webmasters for the Tai Kwon Do Club and for the IU Math Club.

And it includes a first prize-winner in the Audio Engineering Society Student Recording Competition.

This great range of educational experiences reflects the limitless aspirations of the Class of 2011.

These achievements have grown out of your participation in the rich intellectual community that pervades Indiana University. This is a community that has been home to 15 Rhodes Scholars, dozens of Marshall Scholars and Fulbright fellows. It includes 28 members of your graduating class who have earned a 4.0 grade point average.

This university's outstanding faculty includes members of the National Academies, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and some of the most prestigious academic societies around the world, including the American Philosophical Society and the Royal Society, the world's oldest, largest, and most important scientific academy. Eight Nobel Prize winners are associated with the university, including Distinguished Professor Elinor Ostrom, the first woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Economics, and just last

³ "Educational Attainment in the United States: 2009 – Detailed Tables: Table 1 All Races." U.S. Census Bureau Website. <<http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2009/Table1-01.xls>>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2011.

week, we announced the induction of a record ten IU faculty members into the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

6. CONCLUSION: A CONCENTRATION OF EXCELLENCE

This concentration of excellence is an intellectual force for the present and the future. Over the course of your years here at Indiana University, you have learned not only how to solve the problems of today—through intense study, application of general theoretical principles, and collaboration—but you have learned to look beyond immediate needs and existing technology to imagine what will help shape our shared future.

More than anything, you have learned that your education cannot end today. Your commencement is your induction into a new world of learning that will last for the rest of your lives. Self-directed and self-motivated, this world of learning is not merely an individual endeavor, offering only personal rewards and enrichment. This learning will connect you more firmly to the world around you and will help you continue to understand, contribute to, and improve that world.

Educational pioneer Robert Maynard Hutchins captured this notion when he said in 1951, “A republic, a true *res publica*, can maintain justice, peace, freedom, and order only by the exercise of intelligence. When we speak of the consent of the governed, we mean . . . that every act of assent on the part of the governed is a product of learning . . . Hence the ideal republic is the republic of learning.”⁴

By virtue of your presence here, among this outstanding class of 2011, you are members of that republic of learning. For the sake of your alma mater, your communities, and our nation, may you remain members of that republic your whole lives long.

⁴ Hutchins, Robert M. *The Conflict in Education in a Democratic Society*. Westport: Greenwood, 1953. This text is based on lectures Hutchins delivered in 1951 and 1952. Page 75-6.