

The Liberal Arts: Now More than Ever
ΦBK Address, 28 April 2017
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Good afternoon students, family, friends and faculty. When I was an undergraduate, the school I attended did not have a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. It never bothered me much. I knew little about the organization. I was preoccupied with coursework and what would come next. Would it be a job, or graduate school, hopefully not the unemployment line.

No matter the outcome, it was certain to be a period of great transition, letting go of the security of friends and family and the comfort of a university community, and stepping off into the unknown equipped with little more than what I carried in my head and in my backpack. And here you are, stepping into a much more complex unknown than I could ever have imagined back then.

Within the next week or two, many of you will complete your time at U.W. Have you ever stopped to consider why some people call the completion of your degree program “graduation,” while others refer to it as “commencement?” Truly, it is a graduation, a time of closure and a time of recognition for years of hard work, sacrifice, and study. Those of you who have earned today’s recognition should be pleased and very proud of what you’ve accomplished.

Those who think of the upcoming ceremonies as commencement have a different perspective. Commencement speaks to a beginning, something new and hopefully exciting. Like all of you, I too graduated from the University of Wyoming. While I was uncertain of it at the time, I now know that I had acquired the tools for a successful life and career. Over time, I believe you will discover the same, but you’ll do it in your own time and in your own way.

Will life be a straightforward and logical progression built solely on your years of preparation here at UW? Most certainly not. Will it be challenging--filled with highs and lows, successes and failures--unpredictable and opportunistic? Most certainly so. The other certainty you will face will be surviving and prospering amidst the challenges of life in the 21st century.

Terrorism, ISIS, global climate change, poverty, refugees, war, budget deficits, violence, racism, sexism, crime, and economic uncertainty: from every direction, the sky seems to be falling. That perception is reinforced every day by the media that stalks us on our cell phones and on our computers and through our electronic social interactions. The speed with which global changes are occurring are breathtaking...and they will be yours to address.

Since the very beginning of higher education, every graduate from every college and university has faced uncertainty and the ever-new challenges of the future. The primary fuel that will ensure success in your life and career, as well as in the progress of the world, will be your knowledge.

Clearly, the ultimate resource in the future will be imaginative people who are well educated, skilled, and full of life and spirit. Endowed with liberty, YOU will now be the ones to turn your wills and imaginations to securing the future for generations to come.

I want to suggest to you today that the “broad liberal education” for which you are being recognized will serve you well as your future unfolds. Phi Beta Kappa champions the principles of such an education because we are confident that a world influenced by them will be a better world.

The term “broad” as it applies to a liberal education indicates that you have command of a wide range of facts and information. But facts are inert and largely irrelevant unless they matter.

The development of “values” is the second dimension of a liberal education. A strong system of values that enables you to differentiate between the facts that do matter and the facts that do not.

Finally, “deliberation”, the ability to pull facts that are important together into a reasoning process that helps you better understand for yourself what you can do and what you should do. The cultivation of your deliberative skills--making, understanding, and critiquing arguments-- is the third dimension of a liberal education.

It was in the early 20th century that the concept of the “American Dream” began to take hold. It was an idealistic concept, grounded in the notion of possibility, that a better, richer, and more fulfilling life was out there, waiting for each of us to earn through our hard work and determination.

But it is no longer the 20th century, and many of those idealistic concepts find themselves struggling against a new way of thinking. Neoliberalism is on the rise: an ideology and an attitude that reduces all value to money. The value of education, they contend, is the commercial value of the degree. This view of education is uninformed, overly simplistic, and too often, self-serving.

Counter balancing this ideology are those who understand the critical learning that occurs through books, as students are pushed and pulled to explore the thoughts and ideas of hope and fear, life and death, democracy and freedom, law and justice, loyalty and love, friendship, and courage.

Historical, philosophical, and literary areas of study may not be able to teach absolute truths, but they can teach us about alternatives and how others have responded in similar circumstances. They are comprised of the ideas that the greatest minds have to offer.

Great intellects have thought for centuries about the human condition and human differences. We serve future generations well when we encourage our students to understand how insights from culturally and temporally different minds can shed light on the challenges of the time. None of this is trivial.

Despite the American dream having taken a strong materialistic turn in recent years, higher education and the American dream are still joined at the hip. For some, higher education will serve as a catalyst for social mobility or economic success. For others, it will preserve and convey the values upon which our culture and society rest, and for still others, it will preserve the vitality of our democracy through an educated and involved citizenry. For most of you, it will accomplish all of that and more.

When properly conceived and taught, the liberal arts do not by themselves make us better people, but they can open our eyes. They show us how to look at the world and how to understand the accomplishments of civilization in important and serious ways.

Instead of treating higher education as a commodity, we need to treat it as a right. Rather than seeing it solely in economic terms, we need to recognize it once again for its important intellectual and moral purposes. We need to challenge those unable to look beyond their own purse strings.

So, we are here today to recognize and honor your liberal education. Phi Beta Kappa matters because liberal education matters. Your membership is for life, and Phi Beta Kappa will make a difference in your life.

Membership in Phi Beta Kappa is recognized worldwide as the gold standard for intellectual capacity. I've reviewed literally thousands of resumes over the years. When I see Phi Beta Kappa listed on the resume, I know this is a special person. It's not just about what you've done, it's about what you can do, and what you will do.

You are in extraordinary company. Notable Phi Beta Kappa members past and present include:

John Quincy Adams
 Theodore Roosevelt
 Harry S. Truman,
 Franklin Roosevelt
 Woodrow Wilson
 Ralph Waldo Emerson
 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
 Booker T. Washington
 R. Buckminster Fuller
 John D. Rockefeller
 Jimmy Carter
 George Herbert Walker Bush
 Bill Clinton
 innumerable supreme court justices
 Eli Whitney
 Alexander Graham Bell
 Daniel Webster
 Nathaniel Hawthorne
 Robert Frost
 Oliver Wendell Holmes
 Nelson Rockefeller
 Jonas Salk
 Frank Oppenheimer
 Pearl S. Buck
 James Michener

T.S. Eliot
 Stephen Sondheim
 Kris Kristofferson
 Glenn Close
 Leonard Bernstein
 Ben Bernanke
 Jeff Bezos
 E.O. Wilson
 Mark Twain
 Henry Kissinger
 Condoleeza Rice
 Francis Ford Coppola
 Michael Crichton
 Tom Brokaw
 Daniel Pearl
 Gloria Steinem
 John Updike
 Ta-Nehisi Coates
 Hillary Clinton
 Professor Ric Reverand
 Professor Eric Nye
 Professor Carol Frost
 And Professor Myron Allen...to name but a few.

Membership in Phi Beta Kappa is recognition of your accomplishments as an undergraduate student, and of your potential to contribute to our society. Whether you know it or not, we know that you will be successful, and we know that your contributions will extend far beyond your family and your personal success. Found in any review of the accomplishments of past members are two hundred years of hard evidence.

Let me close with my favorite of Aesop's fables, "The Farmer and His Sons."

A farmer at death's door wanted to impart to his sons a secret of great importance. He called them around him and said, "My sons, I am about to die and I want you to know that there is a hidden treasure in my vineyard. Dig and you will find it." As soon as their father had passed away, the sons took spade and fork and turned up the soil of the vineyard – over and over again.

They searched and they searched for the treasure they thought was buried there. They found nothing. But at harvest time, the grapevines, after such thorough cultivation, produced a crop like never before.

Written some 2,600 years ago, "The Farmer and His Sons" is a striking allegory for education. Learning is a "long and winding road." It is not always goal directed and purposeful. We often stumble accidentally into our most vivid and meaningful learning experiences. Pasteur was right when he said that chance favors the prepared mind.

That is precisely what you are doing here at the University of Wyoming. You are preparing, and your faculty are helping, to develop your intellect so you are ready to take it out into the world.

Education is about exposing you to forms of intellectual capital that have power in the world. It is about learning to argue and reason. It is about cultivating intellectual and ethical judgment, abstract thinking, and quantitative reasoning.

And it's not just a "private good" – something you do for your own individual development – your scholarship is a public good, with a critical role in developing good citizens, community leaders, and thoughtful people.

Just as the two sons cultivated their vineyard, you have cultivated your intellect here in Laramie. You have dug long and hard. The treasures you discover will continue to unfold throughout your life in ways you've not yet imagined.

Thank you and congratulation to the inductees.