

New Student Convocation Address: The Academic Challenge
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Allow me to welcome to campus the University of Dayton class of 2010. My name is Charles Wells, and I am chairperson and professor of the Department of Management Information Systems, Operations Management, and Decision Sciences in the School of Business Administration, and I am here to talk to you about the academic challenge. I am going to do so by focusing on what it takes to achieve academic excellence, a topic that is very important to me. Thirty-four years ago as a first-year student at Harvard University (we were also called freshman at that time), I attended a gathering like this one. Some nice person spoke to my class about important things. I can remember wondering, “Why have they chosen this speaker?” You might be wondering the same thing about me. Now, 34 years later and entering my twenty-third year at the University of Dayton, I know the answer. It is because I am so...young.

But besides being young, there is another reason I was asked. The University officials who asked me to talk to you were certain that they would hear an address laden with the values important to this organization as a university and as a Marianist institution. So let me repeat to you the first thing said to me in that address one-half lifetime ago: There are only two times this University will call you together as a group. Today, right now, is the first. The next time will be when you graduate. That we are here, together, underscores how important the issue of academic excellence is to this University. I will spend the next few minutes developing a perspective about why academic excellence should be important to you, too.

Why should you seek to be excellent?

It is easy, and somewhat meaningless, for me to simply say that you should aspire to do your best. Let us think about your responsibilities from the perspective of what universities are and why they exist in our society. First, educational organizations date back thousands of years, with formal “schools” existing for roughly 5,000 years. In circumstances where technologies do not exist to record knowledge, it becomes incumbent on society to maintain knowledge by developing apprentice or mentor/tutor systems and ceremonial procedures in order to survive and thrive as a culture. While at the beginning of a society this might apply primarily to life-and-death kinds of knowledge, such as medical or agricultural knowledge, these types of systems and procedures apply to other aspects of learning; for example, the histories contained in the works widely credited to Homer are believed to have survived through oral traditions—an impressive accomplishment when you consider the relative size of his works. One of the more famous examples of a mentor/tutor relationship occurred between the philosopher Aristotle and Alexander the Great. It is difficult to imagine that Alexander’s mother, upon asking Alexander what he had learned today, accepted the response that I imagine many have said at one time: “nothin’.”

Generally speaking, our modern university structure arose in the 12th and 13th centuries as a means of providing further training in the developing bodies of knowledge of law, theology, and medicine and also as centers of study for the rediscovered works of Aristotle and Arab scholars. Imagine for a moment attending a university at that time. You would not have studied the works of William Shakespeare, Isaac Newton, Johann Sebastian Bach, Leonardo da Vinci, Sigmund Freud, Adam Smith, or Charles Darwin, because they did not exist yet. Students and faculty were originally organized in guild-like groups. Faculty, who controlled both teaching and graduation requirements, gradually became more influential in university operations. This is not a minor historical artifact. Faculty define a university.

So Universities have been around for about 900 years, and I have been teaching at Universities for about three percent of their entire existence. No wonder I need a break. Universities are a remarkably recent social experiment. You are fortunate to live in a time when you can shape your life's contributions to society through a university education. Given you have beaten the odds to arrive at this place at this time, it becomes your responsibility to seek excellence. What a waste if you don't.

Who has the opportunity to go to UD? The short answer: few. But allow me to estimate this answer by using census data less than two years old. According to the US Census Bureau's Current Population Study dated October 2004 and released in October 2005, there were 7.7 million individuals 18 or 19 years old. 2.4 million, or thirty-one percent, were enrolled in 4-year colleges or universities. 618,000, or eight percent, were enrolled in private 4-year schools like UD. You can look around at almost 2,000 of the 618,000. Only eight percent go to private colleges and universities. You are fortunate to have the resources and secondary educational experiences to be here, thus it becomes your responsibility to society to seek excellence.

An additional advantage that accrues to you because you have the opportunity to attend college is increased lifetime income. The 2000 Census revealed that when taken in aggregate, a high school graduate can expect to make \$1.2 million in lifetime earnings, compared to \$2.1 million for a college graduate. The 2000 Census also shows that economic prosperity of the 1990s gave a financial boost to those Americans who were already doing well, yielding greater gains in salary and more college degrees. You, your parents, your future children, and their children are part of this cycle of prosperity. You are blessed. Give thanks by taking advantage of this opportunity and seeking to be academically excellent.

I've discussed why you are fortunate to be here. Let's also consider your educational opportunity that arises because of the uniqueness of a university campus. As I mentioned before, faculty define a university. There is no other place on earth that collects together such a diverse group of people with deep knowledge in specific disciplines. As you are about to learn, university faculty are different.

- Each faculty member has an opinion that is correct an unusually large percentage of the time. Through a minor inductive process, faculty, including me, extend that to being correct all of the time.
- UD faculty members are the ones who will get excited if you exceed their high expectations, and take pride in your development as a young adult. But—and this is important—they are not high school teachers. While a high school teacher’s job might be totally defined by what happens in the classroom, a university faculty member engages in a wide range of activities outside of the classroom, about half of his or her job.
- University faculty are scholars, and scholars write about what they are thinking and doing. Our Dean of the School of Education and Allied Professions, Dr. Lasley, once said whimsically that he “tried never to have an unpublished thought.” He will be relieved that this thought is now archived in the proceedings of this convocation. We communicate with our colleagues nationally and internationally through presentations and publications. The process of scholarly publication exposes a professor’s thoughts to his colleagues for critique and refinement. The result is a more keenly honed mind and a deeper understanding of the state-of-the-art, and by being in the classroom, you are the direct beneficiaries.

What you should do to be excellent?

As a faculty member, I feel a deep responsibility to expedite your learning. We are here to help you learn, but your learning is your responsibility. Make no doubt about it, your learning—the investment that you make in yourself—and not your grades, will shape events for the rest of your life. Do not be passive. Ask questions. Be intellectually engaged.

You are in the most stimulating and richest learning environment that you will ever encounter in your life. I believe this is sometimes difficult to appreciate because you have spent your entire intellectual life in school. But as I have just described, what you are accustomed to will not compare to this new place. In time you will understand why alumni love to return to campus and associate themselves with the University of Dayton for the rest of their lives. They realize they have been blessed to have had the opportunity to learn at one of these extraordinary places, to meet and learn from the men and women of stature who have invested their lives working here, and to meet others who have gathered together on a campus to test new ideas and grow into adulthood, along the way making new lifelong friends. Perhaps finding a lifelong partner. What a place to be....

As part of your orientation, you were asked to read Bill McKibben’s book entitled *Enough*. I also read the book this summer, and I wish to congratulate the faculty who made this selection. I have not talked with any members of the committee, but I can readily understand that the selection of *Enough* serves several objectives simultaneously. For me, it brought an extremely important topic—genetic engineering—to the forefront

of my thoughts. I was intrigued by how many references to genetic engineering began to percolate in my environment—on television, magazines, journals, etc. The book also provided a rich forum from which to think critically about the various arguments made against germline engineering.

Of course, because of this address, my thoughts turned to academic excellence as I read *Enough*. From this perspective, independent of whether or not I agree with Mr. McKibben, I am very critical of the book. If I ask you to write an advocacy piece, I might be more predisposed to this form of exposition; but as a scholarly work that objectively examines the germline issue, it fails. As such the book serves as an excellent foil for scholarly writing that achieves academic excellence and maintains academic integrity. Allow me to cite some examples from the book.

- It is not enough, if you pardon the pun, for you to believe that (1) genetic research on the brain makes me uncomfortable, and (2) most people think like me, and thus conclude (3) most people are uncomfortable with genetic research on the brain. There is only one way to determine that result, and that is to perform a survey. To have validity, such assertions must have some independent and objective support. In this context, academic excellence means bringing real facts forward to support an argument.
- It is not compelling (and, in fact, offensive) to categorize large groups of people by professions and claim to know how they think, as was done with scientists (“offering us progress and sneering a superstition” or “scientists...hold in contempt the ‘fairy tales’ of the pious”); engineers (“Human beings...can be more complex than the engineers give them credit for”); philosophers (“...many philosophers have given up on them [large questions], turning their profession into a branch of higher math”); and economists (“...economists, who tend to believe...that ‘man is an acquisitive animal whose wants cannot be satiated.’”).

In this last case, I have spent most of the last 30 years working around or with economists, and I can say affectionately that if any stereotype applies to economists, it is that they cannot be stereotyped, much less universally agree on a characterization of human behavior.

- I was intrigued by the claims made concerning the anticipated decline in the world population, cited in the journal *Nature*. The particular issue of *Nature* did have an article on population forecasts which did support the assertion made in the book, but it had different authors and title. According to the database EBSCO, an article with the cited title does not exist. Do not lose your credibility by making such errors. It matters because it calls into question everything else you write. Academic excellence involves being sufficiently careful so as to be accurate.
- Also, do not lose your credibility by using language that overtly distorts the truth simply to make your point. An excellent example in this book arises when the

author uses the word “gentle” to describe the annual floods in Bangladesh. The idea being proposed is that the people there are just fine, and have no issue with these gentle floods caused by monsoons. In 1998, either during or shortly before the writing of this book, 1300 people were killed in floods there, exceeding the death toll of Katrina. To put this in context, about 500,000 people have been killed in natural disasters in Bangladesh from 1964 to 1998. Over 100 people have been killed there in floods *this month*. Given the suffering of the people of Bangladesh, the word *gentle* seems grotesquely out of place.

I was intellectually engaged while reading this book. As a result, these issues, and about two dozen others that time does not permit me to speak to, did not pass unnoticed. I strongly encourage you to be intellectually engaged, too, to think critically about your topic, whatever the theme might be, and to spend extra time honing your writing. Your opinions are important, but they are not substitutes for facts.

You will learn many skills in addition to critical thinking; for example, we will continue to reinforce your ability to work in student teams. Of course, Leopold and Loeb became rather famous for their brand of teamwork, so we will augment your experience with healthy doses of materials that critically examine ethical behavior.

I repeat, do not be a passive learner. Every professor I know wants you to ask questions. Every professor I know wants you to be intellectually engaged with the course material as it unfolds. To achieve academic excellence you must make the effort to ask questions and you must be intellectually engaged.

To close, I want to remind you that there is such joy in learning and in understanding. I envy you for all of the discoveries that await you in the days to come until graduation and beyond.

Good luck to you, and thank you for your attention.