

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN



# 2014

## commencement

**COLONEL MICHAEL S. HOPKINS  
FORMAL INTRODUCTION AND  
COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS  
TO THE CLASS OF 2014**

MAY 17, 2014  
MEMORIAL STADIUM



## Commencement Speaker

COLONEL MICHAEL S. HOPKINS  
Class of 1991  
NASA Astronaut



Colonel Michael S. Hopkins is a 1991 graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, earning a bachelor of science in aerospace engineering. While at Illinois, he met his future wife, Julie, who also earned her Illinois bachelor of science in health and safety studies in 1991. They have two sons.

A Missouri native, Col. Hopkins came to the University of Illinois because of the school's national reputation for excellence in engineering. As a freshman he joined the football team as a walk-on player and finished his career as a team captain in the 1991 John Hancock Bowl. While at Illinois, Col. Hopkins served in the Reserve Officers Training Corps, earning a commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force immediately after graduation.

After earning a master's degree from Stanford University, he was assigned to Kirtland Air Force Base, where he worked on advanced space system technologies. In 1996, he attended the flight test engineering course at the United States Air Force Test Pilot School, Edwards Air Force Base, California. Subsequent assignments took him from Canada to Italy and finally to the Pentagon where he served as a special assistant to the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, where he worked until he commenced astronaut training.

In 2009, Col. Hopkins was selected as one of 14 members of the 20th NASA astronaut class, graduating from Astronaut Candidate Training two years later. On September 25, 2013, Colonel Hopkins, with two Russian Cosmonauts, was welcomed on board the International Space Station for a six month mission. 2,656 orbits, 70 million miles and two space walks later, Colonel Hopkins returned safely to Earth on March 10, 2014.

One of the personal items that made this trip with him was an orange and blue Illinois flag. And for 166 days, Colonel Hopkins was a proud reminder to the world that there is no place on the earth - or off of it – that is out of reach for a graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

**University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Commencement Address**  
**Formal Introduction of Colonel Michael S. Hopkins**  
**Saturday, May 17, 2014, Memorial Stadium**  
**Chancellor Phyllis M. Wise**

It is now my great honor to introduce today's Commencement speaker, Colonel Michael Hopkins. A 1991 graduate of our own College of Engineering, Colonel Hopkins exemplifies that magical combination of innovation, hard work and generosity that we believe is a hallmark of all of our graduates.

A Missouri native, Colonel Hopkins came to the University of Illinois because of our national reputation for excellence in engineering. As a freshman he joined the football team as a walk-on player and finished his career as a team captain in the 1991 John Hancock Bowl.

While at Illinois, Col. Hopkins served in the Reserve Officers Training Corps, earning a commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force immediately after graduation.

After earning a master's degree from Stanford University, he was assigned to Kirtland Air Force Base, where he worked on advanced space system technologies. In 1996, he attended the flight test engineering course at the United States Air Force Test Pilot School, Edwards Air Force Base, California. Subsequent assignments took him from Canada to Italy and finally to the Pentagon where he served as a special assistant to the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

While at Illinois, he met his future wife, Julie, who also earned her Illinois bachelor of science in health and safety studies in 1991. And together, they have charted a course that has taken them from Illinois around the world. They have two sons, Ryan and Lucas. And I should warn both of Lucas and Ryan today that when it comes time for you both to make your college choices – we intend to add two more Hopkins members to the Illinois family.

In 2009, Col. Hopkins was selected as one of 14 members of the 20th NASA astronaut class, graduating from Astronaut Candidate Training two years later.

On September 25, 2013, Colonel Hopkins, with two Russian Cosmonauts, was welcomed on board the International Space Station for a six month mission. 2,656 orbits, 70 million miles and two space walks later, Colonel Hopkins returned safely to Earth on March 10, 2014.

And today, as we celebrate our Commencement outdoors for the first time in more than 50 years, I don't think we could find a more appropriate speaker. He played on this very field. And just a few months ago, he was looking down on it from 270 miles above us.

During graduation ceremonies throughout the country, you will hear many universities tell their graduates that the sky is the limit. Today, it is my pleasure and privilege to introduce our speaker, a man who is proof that those institutions aren't setting their sights nearly high enough.

Please welcome Colonel Mike Hopkins!

**University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Commencement Address**  
**Saturday, May 17, 2014, Memorial Stadium**  
**Colonel Michael S. Hopkins**

Thank you Chancellor Wise for that very nice introduction.

I just want to start by getting the astronaut issue out of the way. As you might imagine, I get questions about it all the time.

What's it like to be an astronaut?

Well, it's a job that shares a lot in common with everyone else's daily experience.

I thought I'd walk you through a typical day to show you what I'm talking about.

- Your alarm goes off, you roll out of bed and you put on a suit.
- You fight for a seat and settle in for a long, uncomfortable, commute.
- You get off at your stop.
- And you spend the day in your office – that has a window if you're lucky...
- At some point you probably grab some lunch.
- And maybe, if it's a nice day, you go out for a little walk.
- And once you've got your work done, you grab your stuff and catch your ride.
- And you finally get to head for home.
- Like I say, it's not much different from every other job out there.... And just like yours, mine started right here at Illinois.

But, right now, my first job is to express my personal gratitude to you, the Class of 2014.

Thank you for inviting me to be a part of your Commencement at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This is a special opportunity for me in so many different ways.

It's the first time I've been at the 50-yard line of this football field since I played my last game here in 1991. Today also marks my first college graduation ceremony. I finished my own undergraduate degree requirements in December and started my masters' studies in California immediately, so I missed my own ceremony. It's a privilege for me to share yours.

I'm honored. I'm humbled. And to be completely honest, I'm more nervous standing up here talking to you than I was stepping out of an airlock to walk in space. I'm serious. My Illinois experience prepared me to do many things in my life and opened up so many opportunities for me and for my family. But, the one thing it never prepared me to do was to stand in front of several thousand of the smartest new graduates from the best university in the world and try to tell you something you don't already know.

When I got the phone call from Illinois asking if I'd do this, my first question was, "Are you sure?" Don't get me wrong, I jumped at the chance. But there are thousands of other distinguished, accomplished and admirable Illinois alumni in the world who I hope you would welcome on this stage today.

What I'm suggesting is that we don't confuse fame or popularity with professional success or with personal achievement.

We all have the power to define our own success. I'm going to say that again, as it is really the point of my talk today.

You have the power to define your success.

And if you give that power up – if you let somebody else decide what you need to be, what you need to do or how you must accomplish things – you're going to miss out on some fantastic opportunities in your careers and in your lives.

This isn't hollow advice. Or something I read in book. This is my real life experience talking.

Chancellor Wise's introduction was very kind and it makes me sound pretty good. I appreciate that. But I'd like to tell you the real story behind that biography.

Let's start with football. As you heard, I was a captain of the 1991 team here. But, what you didn't hear is that I came to Illinois because I knew it was a top engineering program.

I didn't have an athletic scholarship. In fact, I wasn't even recruited as a football player. I was walk-on. I was fortunate to be given an opportunity to earn some playing time. But it was four years before I became a full-time starter.

And now let's talk about my degree. Part of the reason that I didn't walk through my graduation ceremony was, as I told you, that I finished in December. That would be December of my fifth year. It took me four and a half years to get my academic work done here.

So let's talk about my wife. We met here. She's also a 1991 Illinois graduate. But it was nearly five years after we started dating before we were married.

So, let me recap: 4 years to become a full-time starter on the football team; four and a half to graduate; and five to convince Julie to marry me.

If someone from the outside was deciding what success should look like for me, I wasn't doing so well.

So finally, let's talk about what got me here today – my trip into space. It took me 13 years and four tries to become an astronaut. I started applying to NASA's astronaut training program in 1996. I was turned down for the 1998 class. For the 2000 class. And again for the 2004 class. I figured I'd just keep applying until I either made it, or NASA told me "don't bother."

I was finally accepted into the 2009 NASA class.

18 years after I graduated from Illinois, I finally got started on my high school dream. It would take another four years of training and classes before I would fly a mission.

It's actually interesting to me that about the same time many of you were freshmen or sophomores here, I was a freshman with NASA. Just like yours, my first couple of years was really general education and training classes.

And my last two were focused on the higher level, specialized skills. For me, "graduation" came this past September with my launch into space. And today, I get to be here as you all prepare to launch the next stage of your lives and careers.

I'm lucky enough to be doing what I consider the best job in the world. But I want to be perfectly clear that this is my idea of the best job in the world. Being an astronaut was a dream of mine that began in high school. And it was a dream that took me - and my family - more than 25 years to reach. I was fortunate enough that perseverance, stubbornness and luck gave me a chance to do a job that happens to be very public and very popular.

And it turns out, interesting enough to get you invited to be a graduation speaker.

But when you really look over my career and my experience, someone else deciding whether I was on track to be a success could have derailed things at any step of the way.

I wasn't recruited to play football. The NFL certainly didn't come looking for me. I took longer to graduate than many of my classmates. And I had quite a collection of NASA rejection letters.

To a lot of people, these aren't the hallmarks of an astronaut.

And if Julie and I had listened to some of them – if we had given up our convictions about what we considered successful lives and careers – I'd have been left simply dreaming about space rather than traveling through it last fall.

I don't know what your dream job is. You might not even know what it is yet. But please believe me, you won't find it if you let someone else dictate the rules for you.

You have the power and the right to define your own success in your life and your career.

Not your parents, not your friends, not the university from which you graduate today.

Now, I'm not saying you shouldn't take advice from people you trust or from institutions you respect. And you certainly don't want to go at it alone. In fact, I hope you take a minute today to thank those family members, friends and mentors who have helped you get here.

But, ultimately, this is your life, your career and you should be the one who decides what you want from it.

You all know that today you're joining some pretty amazing company as Illinois alumni.

There's John Bardeen – the guy who invented the transistor and won two Nobel prizes.

There's Jawed Karim – the co-founder of YouTube – who was the speaker here just a couple years ago.

There's Nick Offerman – from Parks and Recreation.

There's Roger Ebert – maybe the most famous movie critic in history.

Last year's speaker was Shahid Khan – the Jacksonville Jaguars owner and founder of one of the most successful manufacturing companies in the world.

Some household names to be sure.

But you're also joining the company of about 449,212 others who might not be making national headlines or Fortune 500 lists – but who are no less successful and no less accomplished and who are no less deserving of our respect and admiration.

Social workers. School nurses. Engineers. Accountants. Men and women who take over the family farm. Volunteers at homeless shelters or community centers. Art teachers, professors...

Or maybe parents who choose to leave the workforce to take care of their children.

This one is personal.

My wife Julie chose to put off her own career in medicine to become the primary caregiver for our kids as we pursued my chance with NASA. And I consider that to be her - really our - greatest success because we are joined here today by two amazing young men that I am extremely proud to call my sons, Ryan and Lucas.

This is the list that really counts. These are the people who I believe embody the spirit, the personality and the real impact of a University of Illinois experience.

Your degree is important, but it doesn't define who you become or how you make your impact.

I might be a couple decades removed from your experiences at Illinois, but I know one thing is no different for you all today than it was for me in 1991.

This university didn't just teach us how to do a job. It gave us the tools and knowledge to recognize our own potential.

And it gave us the wisdom to understand the truest gauge of success is going to be found in our own hearts.

The size of your paycheck isn't the measure of your achievement.

You don't have to be famous to be exceptional.

But it often turns out, if you're willing to take the responsibility to define your own idea of success, and if you're brave enough to follow the road where that idea takes you, you'll be amazed at where you can end up.

For me, that road began right here at Illinois. It took me onto this very football field, led me to my wife Julie and our two sons, and ultimately it took me into Earth's orbit.

But it also brought me to the very last and most surprising place I ever would have expected or imagined.

It brought me back here. Back home to Illinois. And it gave me the opportunity and privilege to stand here today offering the Commencement address to the Class of 2014.

Don't ever forget that no matter where you end up, no matter what you do, and no matter how the outside world may see you, underneath it all, a little bit of Illinois will always be with you.

And I hope as a University of Illinois graduate – just like me – that there is no place on this planet, or off of it, where you won't jump at the chance to show your own Orange and Blue pride!

Define your own success.

Be ready to go where that requires you to travel.

And most of all, make sure you enjoy the ride.

Congratulations to you all!