

# **“Being Yourself”**

## **COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS**

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**STANLEY O. IKENBERRY, PRESIDENT  
AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION**

Chancellor Aiken, President Stukel, Members of the Faculty, Distinguished Guests,  
Friends, Families, and above all,  
The honored, tested, pride-filled, Illinois graduates:

My hat goes off to the Class of 2001.

Thank you for inviting me to join you on this the most special of academic days. Absent that, and having been away in Washington for the last five years, we would have missed each other, and I would have regretted that.

Washington, contrary to what you may be thinking, is a wonderful place. Some damn it with faint praise, saying Washington has the best of both worlds: Northern charm; and Southern efficiency.

Still, whatever your view of Washington -- and it is a great city -- I am delighted to be coming back to Illinois and especially pleased to have been included on this special day.

Actually, I've missed you. In some ways my job at the American Council on Education has been similar to my role at the University of Illinois -- with one major exception: no students -- or at least very few. And I have missed that.

I remember the student who worked part-time on the University switchboard. Our family had just moved to Champaign-Urbana and I had failed to write down my new phone number at the President's House. When I asked the student if she could give it to me, much to my dismay she said no. It was against University policy, she explained!

That was my first lesson from students on the limits of power, but it was far from the last. Ultimately we solved the problem of remembering phone numbers by getting it listed so I could look it up!

And then, having listed the number, I remember the several students who called every fall, asking for Stan. One time I replied, "yes, this is Stan. But, do you know who this is?" The young man paused, and said, "no sir, I don't. But, do you know who this is?" I replied no, I did not. "That's

terrific," he said. "And have a good evening Sir."

I remember also the pizzas students used to send over. Late one night I got a call from a local pizza shop to confirm my order of 50 large pizzas, with pepperoni and anchovies. And another incident in which 500 students were protesting on the front lawn of the President's House, demanding that I send pizzas to students who were occupying the Chancellor's Office in Chicago. But then again, you never did anything like that!

So, again, congratulations. You have so many talents and gifts. And yet, as in all of life's achievements, it took hard work and sacrifice to bring you to this point. You have my admiration and I salute you.

As I was thinking about what I might share with you I couldn't help but reflect on how lucky you are, and how fortunate the world is to have your talent at just this moment in time. The opportunities are incredible.

You're especially lucky because you have had access to some of the best minds in the world, one of the world's great libraries, and some of the most sophisticated laboratories, studios, and computing systems anywhere. And that will be of great value to you as you begin this new chapter in your lives.

Last fall nearly 70 percent of America's high school graduates went on to college, up from about 60 percent a decade earlier. And that number will continue to climb. It must, because life is different for your generation.

It's not just that you live in a new century. You live in a new era. You could call it the information age, the knowledge era, or, as Alan Greenspan described it, the conceptual economy. But by whatever name, the future of our country, the future of families and communities, hinges on education. What you know and what you accomplish will shape tomorrow.

As it turns out, education is right at the center of the new era. It is the number-one issue of concern to the American people. The education bill now moving through Congress -- tax bill included -- will be the most important piece of legislation Congress will pass this year.

When foreign leaders come to town, along with national defense and economic policy, education is the key issue they want to talk about. The information-based knowledge era is just as real in Singapore as it is in Champaign. And for that reason and many others, your generation will be the most globally engaged in history. What happens half way round the world will matter to you more than any generation before.

The wonderful thing, however, is that education unites rather than divides nations and peoples. Unlike natural resources and minerals, education is not depleted by use. It is endlessly renewable, undiminished by application. It multiplies even as it is shared; and it grows stronger even as it is challenged and tested. And that is why sharing learning around the globe, and making sure all peoples have the opportunities you have enjoyed is so crucial.

So, whether through great planning or abundant good luck, you have prepared wisely for what lies ahead. And, on top of that, your opportunities are endless. The world needs you as never before.

Some of you will expand the world's energy supply while others will focus on using the energy we have more sensibly and productively. Some of you will pick up the pieces from the dot.com world, and find sustainable, profitable ways to do the world's work easier, faster, cheaper and better.

Some of you will increase the world's food supply and get it to those who need it. Others will share what you have learned by teaching others, giving them the most liberating, life sustaining gift one human being can bestow on another.

Some of you will fight to eradicate poverty and prejudice. Some will labor to heal the sick. Some of you will harness science and technology and others will search for the moral and ethical answers that will help us use that knowledge wisely and humanely.

So, you are lucky in any number of ways. You have a great education at a great moment in time when education matters more than ever before. And you enter a world that needs you more than ever.

What you have learned at the University of Illinois is a good start, but only a start, for if you are going to succeed you will need to keep on learning for a lifetime. The greatest thing I hope you have learned at Illinois is "how to learn," since the capacity to learn it is more important than knowledge itself. Your challenge will be to use that gift and keep on using it for a lifetime.

Beyond what you know, however, and what will interest and absorb you in your career or profession, your future will be shaped by what you believe, what you care about, and who you are inside. And it is that part of you I want us to think about for just a moment.

One piece of advice, among many, my father gave to me was to "invest in yourself." I thought at the time he was talking about investing economically. "Saving," if you will. But in fact he was speaking more broadly. He was talking about investing in yourself, apart from your career or profession.

He had in mind investing in your family and friends who will sustain you; investing in your personal faith that should grow as you grow; investing in music and art so they become an inseparable part of you; investing in books and travel; investing in the great moral and ethical questions of your time; and investing in your neighbors and the life of the community in which you live.

I came across a quotation that may capture what he was trying to tell me. It goes something like this:

"If one is trying to do something really well, one becomes, first of all, interested in it, and later absorbed in it, which means that one forgets oneself in concentrating on what one is doing. But, when one forgets oneself, oneself ceases to exist, since oneself is the only thing which causes oneself to exist."

A riddle? Perhaps. Still, it is abundantly true. You will find that the balance between you and your career, between earning a living and living a life, is one of the toughest things to get right. As you move out into the world and you find what it is that interests you, you will become fully and completely absorbed in it. But in that wonderful experience, you also risk losing yourself -- and that you don't want to do.

University presidents can be so absorbed in their work they lose themselves. It is a wonderful, all absorbing feeling, doing something important, something that makes a difference in the lives of

others, something that is so challenging it is sometimes terrifying. But the challenge, not just for university presidents, but for all of us, is to find our interest, become absorbed, and yet still know who we are, what we care about, what we believe in, and who we are as a person.

James MacGregor Burns is a now retired distinguished professor of political science at Williams College. He has thought a great deal about leadership and I hope you will begin to think of yourself as a leader, because you are. His conclusion is that “leaders are taskmasters and goal setters (that is to say, they are engaged, interested and absorbed)...but if they are to be effective,” he says, “ they must be whole persons, persons with fully functioning capacities for thinking and feeling.”

Knowledge is power, and you have gained both knowledge and power at the University of Illinois. As you leave these halls, however, I hope you will grow as a whole person, with a capacity to feel and believe as well as think and know. Do become absorbed with your career, but not so absorbed that you diminish the person inside you, the whole, fully functioning, thinking and feeling person professor Burns talked about.

As you leave campus, pause one more time at the Alma Mater. Climb up in her arms if you like, but be sure to read the inscription: “To the Happy Children of the Future, Those of the Past Send Greetings.

That is the intergenerational promise. Commit today to keep it. Come back; stay connected; help build even more opportunity and hope for future generations, because wherever you go, whatever you do, the University of Illinois will always be your home.

May the knowledge you have gained here be invested in service to humanity and may you live a life that brings great pride and inspiration to your family and your Alma Mater.

Congratulations, good luck and Godspeed.