

Commencement Address

by

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Thank you very much, Chairman Kennedy, for that wonderful introduction.

To President Hogan and Chancellor Easter, distinguished faculty, Illini faithful and most importantly you, the graduates of 2011. When I was asked to be the commencement speaker today, I was reminded of the wise words of the former governor of New York, Mario Cuomo, when he said, "A commencement speaker should think of himself as the body at an old-fashioned Irish wake. They need you in order to have the party, but they really don't expect you to say very much." So I'll try to keep that in mind today.

First and foremost, congratulations. This is a day of graduation, anticipation, some consternation and probably a little sadness. But it is also a great day of celebration, and each of you has earned the right to celebrate. Of course, we all know you didn't do it alone. You're surrounded by family members and friends who have helped you make it this far, and I think they all deserve a very big round of applause.

They have sacrificed for you, and today they share this accomplishment with you. But what is it exactly that you've accomplished? Most of you have been students for just about as long as you can remember. You might think that I'm congratulating you on reaching an end of your education. The opposite is true. Today, we're celebrating the beginning of your education.

Your time here at the University of Illinois has prepared you well. You've met students from all over the country and, indeed, from all over the world. You've studied in top-ranked academic programs in fields from business to engineering and, of course, to agriculture. From Champaign you have had access to one of our nation's most vibrant and entrepreneurial small cities, where they're building the world's largest supercomputer down the street. You have the tools and the knowledge to turn every experience into a learning experience.

But as you leave this campus and enter the world at large, you won't have parents to tell you what to do anymore. You won't have teachers and professors to assign readings or give you grades. You will still have family and friends to support you, but from now on your education is your job and nobody else's.

There was a time not too long ago when the ability to educate yourself was nice, but it wasn't essential. It used to be that with a degree from a great school, like this, you were almost guaranteed a steady job and a good income. But for better or worse, that's not the world you're graduating into. Technology is moving fast. Today's jobs of the future might be obsolete by the

day after tomorrow. And as President Obama emphasized in this year's State of the Union Address, the competition for prosperity is truly global. We are competing with countries from Finland and Germany to China and India to Singapore and to Japan.

So while I don't want to sound too much like a lecturing father, I do want to say you need to be serious about your future, because this competition is not abstract. Around the world, there are millions of people your age who want the same standard of living we have been used to, and you want. And they're willing to work for it. I've had the pleasure of traveling to many countries during my career and I've met some of these young people. They're taking their futures very seriously. Whether you become a farmer, a pharmacist, a business leader or a public servant, this competition is real and it cannot be avoided.

I'm not here to scare you, or to make you wish for the good old days. If anything, you are lucky to compete in a global marketplace. After all, our society is based around the idea that healthy competition can be good for everybody. It can motivate us to do our best. It can produce the kinds of innovations that make life better for all of us. It is the fundamental principle of the free market that competition is not a zero-sum game. But playing this game well requires you to be flexible and to adapt. It requires the capacity for self-improvement which I talked to you about earlier. It requires you to follow the example of Mark Twain, who once said, "I never let my schooling interfere with my education."

Back when I graduated college in 1970, curiosity, to a great degree, was a luxury. You could get by without it. But today curiosity is an essential skill, one which you must seek to develop.

How do you develop the skill of being curious? Here's one rather practical way. If you get a chance to live and work abroad, take it. We often think of other nations as our competitors, and they are. But they are also our partners. Their citizens buy our goods. We learn from their systems of government, some for good and some for bad. Many of their companies help to create jobs right here in America, and their economies are more and more intertwined with ours.

For example, these days we hear a lot about China and its growing economy, and I know that a number of Chinese students have come to learn and to excel and to add to the quality of life on this campus. I've had the chance to go to China several times, and I've met many of these young men and women who are hungry for what we have. I recognize their ambition, their eagerness to learn and engage, and I remember feeling very impressed, but also a little bit nervous. When I think about our relationship with China, those memories are just as important as any graph or data set.

I certainly don't think you should go away forever. In fact, I hope after your time here at the University, there is no state you would rather call home than Illinois. But the better you understand the world outside your state and outside our country, the better you will be able to serve your state and your country.

And even if you never get the chance to live abroad, you will certainly get the chance to live amongst many different cultures and many different ways of seeing the world right here in America. America's strength is its diversity. No country on the face of the earth shares such

diversity. In my life, I've had a chance to work with both public and private sectors. Each time I move from one to the other, there have been some people at first who didn't accept me. They felt I wasn't one of them. But the truth is that the broad perspective I gained in the public sector helped me do a better job when I worked for private firms and companies, and the culture of accountability and performance that I learned in the private sector has helped make me a better public servant. In both worlds, public and private, learning is a constant necessity.

The same curiosity can and should apply to politics. I know this is an area where being open-minded about different opinions is, to put it a little mildly, a rather difficult thing to do today, especially with cable TV. But I have always been proud of the many friends that I have from both parties, some of whom I disagree with intensely around political issues. These friendships have helped me do my job because the truth about progress in our country is that it comes from the center and never from the extreme. And remember that curiosity is not just about understanding someone's work or their ideology. At the end of the day, curiosity is truly about people.

Jamie Dimon, CEO of JPMorgan Chase, who I had the pleasure of working with, was a great example of this. I remember the first time he met my wife. He could have simply made small talk, "How's the weather?" Or he could have talked about himself, as many so-called self-important people do. Instead, he had every imaginable question of her. Where was she from? How many siblings did she have? What did her parents do? He asked her about her hobbies and her interests.

Now on one hand this has nothing to do with his success in business. But on the other hand because he is curious, he has the ability to understand where a person is coming from and the reasons they do the things they do. He can predict how someone will react in a given situation. Those qualities have everything to do with his success in business, and in many ways, his success in life.

If someone from your generation wants to be curious about people, you have incredible tools at your disposal. Facebook has 640 million users, so I guess you could attempt, starting today, to be friends with each of them. I bet some of you don't realize how new and profound the change is that you are experiencing. A mere 11 years ago, I had the pleasure of chairing Al Gore's presidential campaign. I went down to Nashville, and at the end of my first day he turned and asked me a question that I found utterly confusing. He said, "Do you have a Blackberry?" Seeing no reason why a particular fruit would be relevant to winning a presidential campaign, I said, "No, I don't." Today, I cannot be without that connectivity day and night.

Use these tools, appreciate these tools, but at the same time remember that an e-mail or a text will never capture the richness of humanity like the pitch of a voice, the emotion of a face, or the look in a person's eyes. Don't allow yourself to forget the importance of human interaction, even in this digital world.

In many ways I could not imagine a better time to address the graduates of the University of Illinois. As many of you know, my brother Rich is retiring from public service tomorrow, and I think of my work under President Obama as a crowning achievement in my public life – which I

guess is a polite way of saying in the not-too-distant future, I would like to spend less time in the office and more time with my wife, kids, and grandkids.

Step by step, my generation is leaving the spotlight and your generation is entering it. And so in this moment, I find myself thinking about my own family history.

My ancestors were Irish immigrants, and like so many before and after them, they came to America because they believed that this was the place where they could work hard and build a better life for their kids. They imagined a country where their descendents could be anything they wanted to be. Today I stand here, in a very real way the product of their imagination – and that is part of our American story.

But at the same time, there are things my ancestors could never, ever have imagined. The fact that my dad and my brother were mayors of Chicago, that I would serve as Chief of Staff to the first African-American president of the United States of America. So many of the changes in this country have been beyond anything they could have imagined. That's an important part of the American story as well.

So when I think of your generation, and of my grandkids, I imagine you continuing your education for the rest of your life. I imagine you embracing the global marketplace and succeeding in this global competition. I imagine you taking full advantage of our constantly changing world. But I also know that so much of what you accomplish will be beyond any of our imaginations.

More than any wisdom I can offer, that is the beauty of today. The world is big, it is full of possibilities, and it is yours. And on behalf of myself and your families, let me say we are curious to see what you do with it.

Again, congratulations to the graduates of 2011, and thank you very much.