

May 2015

President Daniels to graduates: Use your knowledge, skills to lift those around you

Thanks to the foresight and taste of past Trustees and presidents, ours is a campus of beautiful visual images: the Bell Tower, the Armstrong statue, the Mall Fountain. I love to gaze at them, and think of the history each has seen, and represents to us today.

But no sight I take in all year quite compares to this one: a sea of shining faces, wearing bright, hopeful smiles, all looking ahead to a new era of freedom and high promise. I'm referring, of course, to the parents, who have now made their last tuition payments. Can we take a moment and acknowledge them, and all those present who have enabled today's graduates to reach this wonderful moment of accomplishment?

We call these occasions "commencements", of course, to remind ourselves that they mark not an ending but the beginning, the commencement, of the next chapter of life. But I doubt any graduate here is thinking only ahead; a little nostalgia is natural, too. It's only human to reflect backward, after all, on a set of experiences that in most cases here comprise a healthy fraction of all the days these young people have spent on Earth.

We hope that you depart with memories of friendships, and fun, and at least a little frivolity. But this is Purdue, so in most cases the dominant recollection you will have is of work, hard work. These days, it has become clear, many colleges are less places of serious higher learning than a sort of summer camp or, as one writer put it, "four years of extended adolescence". A point of pride for every Boilermaker should be that you chose and succeeded in a serious university, a place where tough subjects are taught by a tough-minded faculty.

In every analysis of the national phenomenon called "grade inflation," through which many schools have come to hand out A's like Halloween candy, Purdue stands apart. It may seem everything else has changed since your parents' generation went here, but the average GPA has barely budged. One report named Purdue a "number one seed" in its "Sweet Sixteen" of rigorous universities. Be proud.

This means, of course, that the diplomas you will soon take with you did not come easily. In the words of an old commercial your elders will recognize, you got your self-esteem the old-fashioned way: you earned it. And that is why, in survey after survey, employers rank Purdue near the top in the attractiveness and the job performance of our graduates. That is why, in the Gallup-Purdue Index launched last year to measure the life success of college grads, Boilermakers surpassed their peers in every category.

Later in these proceedings, we will pause to pay special tribute to those graduates who have served our nation in its armed services. For them, this is not the first such occasion. They took on, and passed, some previous, rigorous set of tests. They left basic training, or boot camp, or flight school with the insignia that tell the world that they were skilled, they were equipped, they were fully ready for the duties ahead.

Those duties are, of course, extraordinary. They are the most arduous and often dangerous that a free society asks any citizen to undertake. Our veterans were prepared to endure blows and hardships without complaint. They had mastered equipment to help them succeed in the harshest situations or environments. They had demonstrated judgment, enough to be trusted with the lives of others who would rely on them.

I won't equate your Purdue education with the challenges of military training. But I will express the hope that, in a similar fashion, it has prepared you, readied you, equipped you for the lives of citizenship and leadership we expect you to lead.

I hope, for instance, you're taking with you some protective headgear. In addition to the content you have mastered, in education, the Liberal Arts, or engineering, were you issued your B.S. detector? (That stands for "bogus statistics", by the way.) I mean, did you learn to think critically, to know when you are being conned, or misled, or indoctrinated?

Did you acquire some body armor? Are you ready to take the blows that are sure to come? At a minimum, you should have learned that our freedom starts with free speech, and free speech means disagreement, and disagreement means that now and then you will be upset by things you hear and read. Or, as people like to say these days, "offended".

If you absorbed anything of our Constitution, you know that it contains no right not to be "offended". If anything, by protecting speech of all kinds, it guarantees that you will be. As they say, "Deal with it." And if you are disturbed enough, then answer it, with superior facts and arguments. Your diplomas say that Purdue has equipped you for this.

But is that where the metaphor runs out? Or does all your training, all your new equipment, imply a set of duties for life after Purdue? Later, we'll hear a suggestion that it does.

This little talk, and everything else beforehand, are mere prelude to today's real highlight, the moment when we formally confer your degrees. To me, the core of that conferral is its declaration that along with your diploma come its "rights, privileges, duties, and responsibilities".

We live in an age when people are quick to demand what they claim are their rights or privileges, but far less often recognize any attendant duties or responsibilities. I earnestly hope that your Purdue years have invested, or strengthened in you, a strong sense of responsibility, and duty. After all, those basic training graduates were all taught, and equipped, for a specific reason – to do a duty. One of yours is to be a productive, participatory citizen.

That means we expect you to be not just solid citizens but leading ones. And that means that you will occasionally "offend" someone else. Leaders conceive and bring change, and change always causes discomfort, and reaction. It was well stated that "No consequential idea ever failed to offend someone; no consequential person was ever spared great offense." Never with malicious intent, always with a respect for the views of others, in this sense, do your duty and "Take the offensive".

Of course we anticipate that as individuals you will lead personally responsible lives. That at work and at home you will conduct yourselves with the discipline, character, and regard for others on which a free society depends. That you will transmit these values to the next generation, as teachers, role models, and, I hope, for most of you as good and loving parents.

But these things are basic. There are other roles for which you are now unusually well equipped. In a world dominated and directed by technology beyond any extent humankind has ever known, you have a handle on things that baffle, confuse, and often scare your fellow citizens. A high percentage of you tackled the subject matter that gives birth to these technologies, so you comprehend them at a level known only to a small percentage of your countrymen. But even those of you who chose less technical disciplines or the humanities still have a grasp beyond that of most Americans – I include myself.

But the opportunity goes a lot deeper than explaining the benefits of biotechnology to a neighbor, or showing Mom and Dad how to use that smart phone.

A course I taught this year dealt with the horrible cataclysm of the Great War, or World War I as we came to call it. Among the intellectual confusions that helped condition the peoples of Europe to accept or even welcome the war was a gross misinterpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution.

Right after the war, Albert Einstein watched in dismay as his theory of relativity was misapplied to suggest that, just like time and space, human values and morals are totally relative and incapable of being determined.

A popular movie of your graduation year was welcomed for introducing elements of relativity and quantum mechanics to a wide audience. But it, too, caused some physicists to caution that casual analogies from complex scientific concepts can cause serious cultural misunderstandings. As Boilermakers, you are unusually equipped to share your insights with those less knowledgeable.

Let me cite one other duty that, paradoxically, your Purdue training has equipped you not to fulfill but to shirk. When our ceremony concludes, you will enter the ranks of a new societal elite. Unlike elites of the past, it's not based on an aristocratic name, or inherited wealth, or membership in the ruling political party of a totalitarian state. The elite of our age is a knowledge elite. It's made up of people like you who have acquired the skills and knowledge we are celebrating today.

In all of history, the marketplace has never rewarded cognitive skills as it does now. Where once what counted most was physical strength, or courage, or mechanical aptitude, today it's brains and smarts. The data say that you are destined to earn more money, work in safer occupations, and live longer and healthier lives than those without the kind of degrees you are about to receive.

Statistically, you are far more likely to take the actions that produce success in modern life. You are more likely to practice prudent preventive health. Most of you will choose spouses of similar intellectual readiness. You are far more likely to get married and stay that way. That in turn means your children will have greatly increased chances of their own success.

Social scientists have begun to document the extent to which our new knowledge elite congregates together, cozily insulated at work and at home from much contact with those less academically prepared. It's a dangerous development. As one scholar summarized it, "It's not a problem if truck drivers cannot empathize with the priorities of college professors. It is a problem if college professors, or producers of network news programs, or CEOs of great corporations, or presidential advisers, cannot empathize with the priorities of truck drivers."

Starting today, life will invite you to separate – professionally, socially, residentially, and attitudinally - from those without your educational equipment. Please don't.

Universities like ours were created specifically to build a broader middle class and a more inclusive, unified society. When so many trends, and so many strident voices, operate to foster divisions among us, who better than Boilermakers to bring Americans together? The businesses you form or grow, and the active civic and charitable lives I hope you will lead, will be a start. But don't stop there. Somewhere there's a softball league, an adult education class, a church on the other side of town, where you can make the human connections that keep a society healthy. For your own sake as much as theirs, seek out, and connect with those who are making their way through life

without the same equipment you've acquired. It's not just a right thing to do; one could say, it's your duty.

And of those of you who have come to study with us from other nations, we express a similar pride, and wish. Whether you choose to make a life here in the U.S., as we hope many of you will, or take your talents and learning back to your homeland, use your new equipment to know, understand, and lift up those around you.

At the battle of Trafalgar, on the day that would cost him his life, the British hero Admiral Horatio Nelson signaled his fleet, "England expects that every man will do his duty." We hope earnestly that you will live in peaceful times. We pray that none of you will ever be summoned to a duty that threatens your very life. But we do expect that you will employ your Purdue training, and the equipment this place has provided you, to perform the essential duties of citizenship and leadership, in the interest of all people, in particular those who were not so fortunate as to be with you here today.

Hail Purdue, and each of you.