

Commencement Address May 17, 2015

School of Chemical Sciences-University of Illinois

Thank you, for your words of introduction.

Class of 2015, Parents and Friends, Dean Hu, Professor Girolami, and Faculty.

It is certainly an honor for me to be here today and to be able to participate with you in this celebration of personal and academic achievement. When Professor Girolami surprised me by asking on a November Saturday if I would participate in this event, I indicated to him then and can assure everyone here today, that whatever list I might have had for things I wanted to accomplish or do, an address such as this to a graduating class at the University of Illinois was not on that list. The second major surprise occurred that afternoon, when the Illini football team kicked a field goal with eight seconds remaining to defeat Penn State to start a two game winning streak that played a role in finally obtaining a bowl bid.

Today, you have reached a milestone as you are leaving this university and school of chemical sciences. I do not know you personally but believe that I do know something about you. I say that because I have some knowledge about what it takes to get into this university, but more importantly, what it takes to get out of here and be awarded the degrees you are receiving today.

I'm certain that you have learned a great amount of the facts and details of science, chemistry and other related areas. I would also assume you also have developed some very critical skills on how to think, to be creative, and develop perspective. There are also some personal characteristics you have including perseverance, hard work and the drive to move a task to a conclusion. These accomplishments will provide a strong foundation for a career in a number of possibilities whether they are in academia, industry, the public arena or the entrance for some of you into further academic studies.

One thing you can be certain about is you have obtained a degree from one of the very best chemical schools that exists anywhere. The quality of the research, teaching, facilities and the collaborative environment here is certainly first rate. It is likely this weekend that speakers at other commencement exercises also giving the same message. But there is some information that I'm sure that many of you know but some of you may not which indicates this excellence. The Nobel Prize is certainly one of the most prestigious awards given. This University has won more Nobel awards than any other university in the Big Ten. And a very significant number of these awards have been won in Chemistry or related areas such as Physiology and Medicine by faculty and alumni of this School. In the past several days, six members of the faculty in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences have been elected to the National Academy of Sciences. Four of them are from the Chemistry department or associated with it. This is a special place.

As you move forward into your career, one observation you will likely make and conclusion you will reach is "That you are not the smartest guy in the room". You may already have made that observation in some of your interactions here at Illinois. That is a conclusion I also personally made. But I am here today to tell you that it really is not necessary that you be the smartest guy in the room. There are a lot of talented and smart people in this world with whom you will compete but talent alone is never enough. There is considerable truth to the expression that states "Hard work will beat talent, especially when talent does not work hard". The success you will have and the achievements you make will be very dependent upon your hard work and a number of other attributes. Your technical competence is certainly necessary but there are other traits which I believe are equally important. They include how effectively you are able to communicate with persons at all levels in the organization, how clearly you delineate your personal objectives and also the objectives of the organization and their rationale, the determination of the optimal path to reach those objectives in a timely and efficient manner. Your ability to work with individuals with a variety of personalities will be necessary. Finally, it is critical to maintain your personal value system and do not deviate from it.

There is also one certainty that you will need to recognize and that the technology which is current today and you know well will certainly change, and the rate of change is certainly increasing. I considered myself to be a synthetic organic chemist when I left Illinois, and maybe I still do. However, over the course of my career, I found that it was very necessary to learn a considerable amount of engineering, biotechnology including recombinant DNA and enzymology, and the financial part of the business. Exposure to the international technical and business community and its different cultures was required. The specifics for each individual will differ but the need to be on a continual learning curve will not change.

There are some other comments I would like to make that might be considered to be in the “lifestyle” area. It will be important to develop some balance in your life. You have not only your career to consider but also your family, community and self. You need to include room for all of them and to enjoy life while pursuing your career goals. I would also suggest that there are a lot of interesting and important activities in addition to science and would include the arts, music, philosophy, literature and history. If you haven’t already, include them as part of your continual learning. In Walter Isaacson’s biography of Steve Jobs, Jobs clearly indicated that the successful development of new products at Apple was due to the intersection of technology and the humanities.

Most of us have had a number of advantages and considerable support which have been a factor in our being here today. I would encourage you to think about different ways in which you could “Give Back”. It is likely that many of you have already been doing that in addition to your role as a student and I would encourage you to continue. Your contributions might be of your time, various skills, intellect, or finances. One area you might consider and have a role is communicating the value of science to the public. It is worthwhile to consider your possible role in professional societies, joining and working in any number of community functions. One possibility is in various education activities, such as the schools in your community.

One other current and important topic related to the education process is the funding for education at state universities. As indicated earlier, I received my undergraduate degree from Michigan State University which was founded in 1855 and considers it to be the pioneer land grant university. The Morrill Act was passed by Congress a short time later to provide funding for similar universities and Illinois was established in 1867. The basic premise and philosophy of the land grant movement was that a college education should be provided for all of our young people and not only the children of landowners, elite and well to do. The last freshman class in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences consisted of 24% first generation college students. It is a category that also includes me. This belief has resulted in the provision of an excellent education at a reasonable cost for a very long time. However, the funding of these universities, including Illinois, has changed considerably and the percentage provided by the state has decreased a great deal. There are a number of reasons for this change but in order to maintain the quality, funds needed to be provided by other sources, one of which is increased tuition and fees for students. One impact of this change which may include a number of you is the significant increase in graduates who are leaving school with large amounts of debt. This funding question is an important debate and discussion, especially in this state. It does impact this university and I would encourage you to participate in it.

Before I finish, there is one request I would like to make to each of you. There are some very special persons you need to recognize and they are likely your parents, other members of your family, a good friend, your major professor, or some other professor or teacher who has played a major role in your development and provided inspiration to you. Look them in the eye and tell them "Thank You" for their support, encouragement, maybe a necessary push at times, and also for simply being there. Today is a day of celebration for them and they should be recognized.

In a few moments, each of you graduates will hear your name called and you will walk across the stage, receive congratulations and your diploma. With that relatively small bit of ceremony, you will become a part of the University of Illinois, forever. Your life story and resume will always contain the line: "2015-The

University of Illinois". I certainly believe that you will have joined a very special group, and we alumni welcome you.

I want to close by offering each of you congratulations for your achievements and give you my very best personal wishes as you now move on to the next stage of your life and career. It is now time to go into the world and tell them, Illinois sent you. Godspeed.

Dr. John Witt