



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

COMMENCEMENT REMARKS

Presented by President Julio Frenk
at the University of Michigan
on December 18, 2016

Distinguished members of the Board of Regents; President Mark Schlissel; members of the faculty and of the entire University of Michigan community; dear graduating students, family members, and friends: I am delighted to join you as an honorary member of the Class of 2016. Receiving an honorary degree from one's own Alma Mater is very special. If that university happens to be one of the top institutions of higher education in the world, then you will easily understand how humbled, fortunate, and grateful I feel today. It is an additional privilege for me to share the stage with such a stellar group of fellow honorary degree recipients.

Raising One's Sights

You have all heard of the concept of "three degrees of separation," but my relationship with the University of Michigan might better be described as three degrees of attachment. Some years ago I came here to pursue a Masters of Public Health. I already had earned a medical degree, and with it the ability to serve one patient at a time. Yet I wanted to tackle broader questions of public health—by, in effect, making society my patient—and that brought me here. As I got underway in my graduate studies, I was constantly confronted with dimensions of health that I did not know...It is amazing how education can really introduce us to the depth of our own ignorance.

My thirst for more knowledge was given focus by my inspirational mentor, Avedis Donabedian, and by a group of outstanding professors who also became trusted friends, like Rashid Bashshur, Ken Warner, Mayer Zald, Charles Tilly, and Ron Kessler, among others. With their guidance I raised my sights: I pursued a second Masters and a joint PhD.

My three degrees from Michigan might lead you to believe that I was just really attached to Ann Arbor winters. I think, more accurately, that I had become attached to the way this University helped me raise my sights. I lifted my gaze and developed a new sense of what was possible. In my own career, and my own life, raising my sights has made all the difference. So thank you, University of Michigan!

Whether the degree you have been awarded today is your first or your second or your third, today it is your turn to embark on the act of separation, and I want to talk for just a bit about the life changing act of raising one's sights and the unique role universities play in making that happen.

Let me first state the obvious: Your graduation coincides with an extremely complex moment in human history, when the ground appears to be shifting under our feet and we often seem to be encouraged not to raise our sights but to lower them, to look inward, to distrust the other.

My message to you: Resist that. You have been educated at one of the best universities in the world, and that means you are uniquely qualified—one might say, uniquely obligated—to raise your sights and, by so doing, raise all of ours.

The Transformative Power of Universities

Let me say a bit about how I think your time here at the University of Michigan has prepared you for an approach to citizenship that is optimistic and civil, respectful and forward looking.

The world's great universities share common characteristics that allow them to create conditions for transformation—of people, of ideas, of problems into solutions. Universities develop communities to create and disseminate knowledge. When that happens, the world becomes a better place. Because knowledge—whether generated by scientific research, humanistic inquiry or artistic expression—is the most powerful force for enlightened social transformation.

That might sound a bit oversimplified or optimistic, but I believe it is true. I believe that a community centered on knowledge as its primary currency is well positioned to understand and improve the world. In the pursuit of this mission, the university can serve as a model of creative problem solving by enabling the free expression of new ideas, even controversial ideas, and embracing a diversity of perspectives in the often contradictory pursuit of truth.

Exemplary University

These values and behaviors encapsulate the ideal of what I like to call the “exemplary university”—the notion that universities should serve as examples or models of those values and behaviors for society as a whole. In a very real sense, universities can demonstrate that there is an enlightened path towards a better society.

For one thing, universities exemplify endurance. Look at Michigan: Over a period of two centuries, it has been both an innovative catalyst for change and a reassuring force for continuity. Universities provide the indispensable mix of resilience and renewal that is the essence of a vibrant civilization. Universities built our great libraries, preserving history and culture for centuries; they gave us the polio vaccine and the structure of the double helix; they mapped the human genome and the confines of the universe; they developed advances that led to the transistor and the Internet; they generated fundamental insights into human behavior and social relations; they inspired ideas of beauty, divinity, and justice.

Powered by knowledge and enriched by the contributions of scholars in an excellent, diverse, and challenging environment, universities produce a better present, and their graduates go on to invent a better future.

World in Transition

As new graduates, you now hold in your hands our tomorrow. You are the vehicle through which universities truly become exemplary institutions. But to do so, you must raise your sights. The world you are graduating into demands nothing less. You face the challenge—and the privilege—of being educated young leaders during one of the most intense periods of change in human history. Today you transition into a world that is itself in transition.

First of all, you will face the most dynamic labor market ever. Because of the rapid pace of automation and the dizzying advance of artificial intelligence, many jobs are disappearing—initially blue-collar but increasingly white-collar as well. Fortunately, this same technological progress is also creating different jobs, many of which emerged during your time here. In this dynamic environment, creative adaptability will be crucial. You will have the opportunity to reinvent yourselves multiple times throughout your working life. Career plasticity will be the norm of the future. My advice to you: Keep an open mind, seize unexpected opportunities, return to your university when you need refreshing, and most of all, embrace change by raising your sights.

These are exciting times, but they can also be unnerving and generate a sense of insecurity. A lot of the recent backlash against the “system” or “establishment” stems from fear and insecurity, as millions of people in both developing and developed countries feel uprooted, left behind, and threatened by the impersonal forces of globalization.

There is no question that our societies urgently need to bridge the painful divides that fracture us along economic, educational, and cultural fault lines. The response, though, should not be to lower one’s sights and seek false security in homogeneity and isolation. Diversity and interdependence are not only unavoidable; they are desirable. They represent enriching social forces. But we must develop policies that account for their unintended consequences.

What can universities do? Alongside their vital role in research and scholarship, universities must respond to this changing context by reaffirming their responsibility as engines of opportunity and social mobility. They must become open spaces capable of meeting the shifting educational needs of people throughout their entire careers, starting immediately after graduation. Educational institutions and training centers must create a dynamic set of opportunities for both future and current members of the labor force.

Universities Lead the Way

Most of all, though, universities must lead the way in restoring trust in institutions. In many quarters today, it is common to question wholesale the legitimacy of institutions. We are at a time when trust in organizations and in expertise is at a low point that is actually dangerous for democracy. How do we lead people back?

Institutions are the instrument that we humans have invented to deal with the fact that all of us are here for only a limited amount of time. Institutions create the shared values through which individual creativity can flourish in the pursuit of common goals. This is how we all transcend—through and with each other. This is how we all raise our sights.

As it did for me when I had the privilege of studying here, this great institution, the University of Michigan, has opened your eyes to new perspectives and expanded your horizons. I imagine that the ideas you had when you first arrived are very different than those you have today as you prepare to leave. This is how universities transform individuals who then go on to transform the world.

Your time at Michigan has uniquely prepared you to value the power of the natural and social sciences to figure out how we face our most vexing challenges and the power of the arts and the humanities to understand why we should do so. Your University has transformed you into knowledgeable citizens who personify the values of tolerance, civility, respect for others, and empathy—the exquisite ability to work with and care for each other. This is how we set an example to the larger society. The exemplary university exists because it produces exemplary graduates.

Separation and Attachment

Just as today marks a formal separation from your initial educational pursuits at the University of Michigan, it is also the beginning—the commencement—of your lifelong attachment to this institution and to the power of learning.

In a very real way, your degrees from the University of Michigan provide a shared connection to the eternal values of truth, tolerance, and the temperament to disagree respectfully—values that are so critical as our world strives to restore trust. This is what makes universities so enduring.

Class of 2016: Your path will be yours alone, with its unique challenges and gifts. But even as your lives move in vastly different directions, you always will be bound to each other by virtue of your connection to this great institution. Wherever your path leads you, always remember to raise your sights.

Congratulations!