

Graduate Commencement Remarks

May 12, 2007

President David Maxwell

As I am sure you have all noticed, in recent years the media have been increasingly filled with disturbing accounts of professional misconduct, illegal and unethical behaviors. From Enron, WorldCom, Tyco and Martha Stewart to major financial houses, student loan companies, K Street lobbyists, members of Congress and the White House, there seems to be a growing epidemic of people who feel it's acceptable to act purely in their own self-interest, betraying the trust placed in them by others, and subverting the publicly-stated mission of the organizations and institutions that they are supposed to serve.

Every college and university in the country – virtually every business and organization, for that matter – has a mission statement. To be less than charitable, these statements are usually a bit of rhetoric that – since they're inevitably created by a committee – are either too brief to mean anything, or too long to understand. To be even less charitable, I suspect that a lot of organizations have a mission statement because they think they're supposed to – someone told them it's an important marketing tool – not because they recognize it as a sacred mandate that must guide their planning, their decisions, and their behavior.

I'd like to think that Drake University's mission statement is a glaring exception to this rule, not just because I had a hand in writing it (along with some people who are much smarter than I about these things), but because it really *does* say something important, and because we *mean* it – we see it as a *promise* to all of our constituencies, but particularly to our students.

Now I'm sure that all of you have the University's mission statement indelibly imprinted in your memories (perhaps some of you even have it as a tattoo), but for those few of you who might have missed it, let me share it with you:

Drake's mission is to provide an *exceptional learning environment* that prepares students for *meaningful personal lives, professional accomplishments, and responsible global citizenship*. The Drake experience is distinguished by *collaborative learning* among students, faculty, and staff, and by the *integration of the liberal arts and sciences with professional preparation*.

I would hope that that prose sounds familiar to you, but – more importantly – I hope even more that what it describes sounds like your experience at Drake, because – as I said – it’s a *promise*. But we also recognized several years ago that behind those critical terms – *meaningful personal lives, professional accomplishment, responsible global citizenship* – there are a lot of important assumptions that those of us who think about these things all the time share and value, but that are probably fairly obscure to others, including our students.

So several years ago, Provost Ron Troyer, Dean John Burney and I decided to do what only three academics in the humanities and social sciences can do – take a perfectly good, two-sentence statement and turn it into a four-page document. We were, to put it simply, attempting to explain what Drake University’s Mission Statement *means*: what *are* the University’s responsibilities, in specific terms, to ensure that we deliver on our promise? And, equally important, what *are* the specific attributes of a graduate who is prepared for those three critical outcomes – *meaningful personal lives, professional accomplishment, responsible global citizenship*?

In a few minutes, you are to receive a professional degree for which you’ve worked very, very hard. You are leaving here aspiring to assume leadership positions in vitally important segments of American society, and I want you to know that we are confident that you have what it takes to fulfill the considerable expectations and responsibilities that await you.

That confidence is derived from the specifics of Drake University’s *Mission Explication*, the specifics of the promise that we made to you (whether you knew it or not) when you enrolled. The *Mission Explication* reads, in part (don’t worry – I’m not going to come close to reading the whole four pages...):

Drake graduates:

- Develop the individual skills that allow them to assume leadership in their chosen fields and to provide the knowledge, expertise, and vision to achieve organizational goals. They hold themselves to high standards of integrity and accountability.
- Demonstrate mastery of content in at least one disciplinary or interdisciplinary body of knowledge.
- Speak and write effectively.
- Think critically with an ability to conduct a reasoned analysis and evaluation of arguments, as well as to raise ethical questions that lead beyond factual knowledge to informed choices.
- Apply knowledge and skills to understand new situations.

- Synthesize and focus the ideas and efforts of a group in the solution of problems.
- Pursue new knowledge with intellectual curiosity, rigor, honesty, and accountability.

It goes on to say, Drake graduates:

- are *reflective practitioners* with an understanding of the larger goals of stewardship inherent in their professional endeavors, and have a sense of obligation that extends beyond the self. They develop an ability to anticipate the consequences of actions as well as a commitment to ethical conduct.
- Use the breadth and depth of their educational experiences to reflect on their professional activities and the consequences for the larger society.
- Push the boundaries of current knowledge and current practice in their fields.
- Act to maintain professional practices that are consistent with their ethical judgment and stewardship responsibilities.
- Demonstrate the capacity to raise questions about the relationship of their profession to ethical and civic issues.
- Assume responsibility for the common good of local, national, and global communities.

I want to leave you with my hope that all of this sounds familiar to you – perhaps not in the rhetoric, but more importantly, in the substance – that it sounds like the outcomes of your experience at Drake, that it sounds like your aspirations for yourself, and that it sounds like we’ve kept our promise to you. But if we have kept that promise, I also want you to think about some of the key words in what I just read to you – ethical conduct, stewardship, honesty and accountability, high standards of integrity, responsibility for the common good – and you can tell that we have very high aspirations for you.

Drake University is a very, very special place – after eight years here, Maddy and I know that from our current students, from our colleagues and friends on the faculty and staff, and from the thousands of alumni we’ve met who tell us that their time at Drake was one of the most powerful experiences in their lives. We’ve also come to understand that graduating from Drake University is a *privilege* – it’s a privilege that you yourselves have attained with hard work and often great sacrifice, but privilege entails *responsibility*, a responsibility to make things better than you found them, not just for yourselves, but – more importantly – for others. As you go forward, I hope that your sense of privilege for being a member of the Drake family provides you with satisfaction; I hope that your sense of responsibility drives you to do good and great things. In the meantime, please stay in touch with us; let us know if there are ways in which

we can do even better in keeping our promise, and tell us how we can help you fulfill yours.