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THOSE RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES

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Commencement Address
University of North Dakota
June 8, 1937

It is recorded, in a story which has been handed down to us from classical antiquity, that a poor Roman, dissatisfied with the conduct of his case in a court of law, rebuked his attorney as follows: ("My lawsuit is about three goats, which I complain, have been stolen from me by my neighbor. This the judge desires to have proved to him; but you, with swelling words and extravagant gestures, dilate on the Battle of Cumae, the Mithridatic War, and the perjuries of the insensate Carthaginians, the Syllae, the Marii, the Mucii. Now, pray, say something about my three goats.") (Martial, Epigrams, VI, 19.)

In the practice of higher education, we have certain current equivalents of the high-sounding topics to which the lawyer in this ancient case devoted his oratory, and we also have equivalents of the simple issues which the old goat-rancher rightly regarded as being basic to the matter in hand. It is upon one of these simple issues that I wish to speak this morning; without, I hasten to add, attempting to indicate who are the goats in this business of university education.

The fundamental educational issue upon which I wish to speak this morning is concerned with the meaning of a university degree. Legally, of course, the degree is merely a certificate of completion of a certain university curriculum, and it carries no rights except those granted by the state in connection with the licensing of members of certain professional groups. In many universities, including your own, the university degree is granted with a proper simplicity of statement which makes no claim to the bestowal of special rights. In others, an older wording often refers to these rights in somewhat grandiloquent fashion. My own baccalaureate degree, for example, was granted, if I remember the phraseology correctly, "With all the rights, duties, and privileges thereunto appertaining." Sometimes the wide geographical extent of the claim is indicated by the phrase "with all the rights and privileges pertaining to that degree both here and elsewhere."

Now, of course, the real reason why some universities still use this impressive language is because they are descended in spirit and procedure from the old universities of Western Europe. The universities of medieval Europe gave them these ancient symbols and language. Those medieval universities, we must remember, were modeled on the idea of the cloister. According to the medieval conception, the church was the one authorized teacher, and the university was, in the legal as well as in the customary sense, an agency of the church. The university degrees were professional licenses to teach coming from the central teaching authority of the Western European world at that time, the church. The holder of a doctorate was not a physician, he was a scholar whose degree indicated that he had been given the formal right to teach theology, law, philosophy, or medicine. The master's degree, too, was a teaching certificate, the mere possession of which often gave a scholar certain priestly privileges, even though he might not be a priest. When a university graduate got into trouble, as sometimes happened, even centuries ago, his degree might automatically class him with the holders of special rights granted to the clergy in such instances. Thus, five hundred years ago, if we can believe the mixture of

legend and history which is our only source of information, the French poet Francois de Montcorbier, otherwise known as Villon, whose readiness with a dagger was surpassed only by his facility with a rhymester's quill, killed a priest in the Rue St. Jaques. If Francois had been a common man in the strictly legal sense of the term as it was employed at that time, there can be little doubt that he would have been executed for the homicide. But legally he was not a common man. It appeared to be true that he came from the depths of poverty, that he consorted with cutthroats and pickpockets, and that his personal reputation stood none too high with the official guardians of the public order, but these evidences of his low station were not sufficient to outweigh the simple and impressive fact that he was a master of arts of the University of Paris. Even though he was not a priest, he had a priestly degree, and he was therefore able to demand trial by the ecclesiastical instead of by the civil authorities.

The medieval universities, although closely bound to the church and often acting as church agencies, formed a rather free confederacy of learning which was relatively unhampered by state control. With the rise of nationalism in modern times, there has been a tendency all over the world for universities to become state institutions. The original custom of giving a degree as an ecclesiastical license to teach was therefore extended to include making the degree serve as a state certificate of permission to practice one of the learned professions. This practice has been carried on until today in most parts of the world some university degree, and in certain parts of the world all university degrees, are either state licenses or prerequisites to the granting of state licenses for engaging in various professional pursuits.

But after reviewing these formal rights of a licensing nature it seems to me that we can agree they are not the most important rights which should be carried by a university degree. The most important rights given with a degree are not stated in laws or regulations governing the granting of permission to engage in particular professions or occupations. The most important rights are customarily not stated in specific terms anywhere. Let us examine these more important rights. Let us try to see what they are as well as what they are not.

In giving you my statement of what I conceive them to be, I am afraid that I may appear to be doing so somewhat too dogmatically since I shall follow the system of stating propositions in the one-two-three order so dear to the hearts of all professors. I do not mean them to be dogmatic, however. I give them merely as suggestions.

First of all, it appears to me that the university degree should give its possessor the right, the duty, and the privilege of doing more and harder work than the average man who lacks the degree. That may sound tiresome, but extra work and heavy work are usually tiresome. The fact remains, however, that the world needs to have many things done which are not now done and which require unusual powers, superior skills, and complex tools and instruments of the kind which universities can give. The man with a university degree possesses more of these powers, skills and tools than he would have had without the degree, we may assume. If our assumption is not correct in any particular case, if a man does not have these added capacities as a result of his university education, then his degree means nothing. The words are there, stamped on that piece of parchment, but the degree in effect is non-existent, and it most certainly does not carry with it any of these important rights of which I speak.

There are certain individuals, of course, who look upon university training as a means of avoiding hard work. In some countries, especially, the universities are crowded with men seeking degrees as prerequisites to holding soft official jobs. One of the depression's chief services to higher education in the United States has been

its effect on this attitude. More and more the young people in our colleges and universities are being forced to realize that the mere holding of a degree leads nowhere. Only the developed intelligence behind the degree can do any work or enjoy any rights. Without that developed intelligence, the degree means nothing.

The university graduate's right to added work operates first in the field of his profession. A profession is usually defined as a calling which is based on scientific principles, which demands a high level of skill, and which requires adherence to a code of ethics. In that sense every job which a university graduate undertakes should be a professional job. If the job is not well founded on the principles of the related sciences, the university graduate as a part of the added labor which is his right should work to improve the job in that respect. If the job does not now demand a high level of skill, the university graduate should work to raise the level of performance. If the job does not involve adherence to a high standard of ethical conduct, it is the right and the privilege of the university graduate to work towards the setting and maintenance of such a standard. The world needs as never before men and women in medicine, law, teaching, business, engineering, and the other callings followed by university graduates, who are keenly conscious of the special demands of their jobs and who have that particular regard for quality of service in their jobs which is characteristic of the highest professional spirit. To such people any job is a profession. To such people any job is an opportunity for exercising their right to work harder and more effectively for the public welfare.

The university graduate's right to added work also holds in the field of the civic and cultural activities in which he engages outside his profession. That right is by no means so commonly exercised as a sound public policy should demand. In politics, for example, one sometimes hears a university trained man say, "I refuse to be a candidate for a political job because I will not take the abuse and the grief that goes with the candidacy." Of course, no one can quarrel with this position when it is taken conscientiously as a result of weighing the different types of service that a man has to perform, but it seems clear that the university man who is true to the obligations conferred upon him with his degree should not refuse a work of public service merely because it is hard or disagreeable. Some university graduates put in enough extra time on bridge and golf, over and above the amount which they need for normal recreation, which if devoted to the public service would be sufficient to carry out a significant number of hard and disagreeable tasks.

In this connection it is well to remember that the educated man is preeminently the man who knows how to do the things his community needs to have done and who has the courage and the energy to go ahead and do them. By this criterion many a man without very much formal schooling is educated, and some men who have papers indicating that they are holders of the very highest academic degrees are almost illiterate. Degrees are granted by universities, but an education is something which every man has to give himself. All educated men are self-educated; some of them have merely had better and more convenient tools with which to work than have had their less fortunate fellows.

This field of the public service in civic and cultural affairs is much broader and of vastly greater import to the state and its people than any one professional field can be. It involves a loyalty to something far greater than a specific occupation; it gives rights of higher dignity than those attached to any particular profession; it extends privileges which make those of a special vocation appear relatively insignificant, and finally it imposes duties of tremendous weight and urgency.

The second chief right granted by a university degree is the right of continuing to learn. There is an old and fallacious notion abroad that only those adults need to learn new things who have some deficiency in their education as children and

young people. A particularly depressing variant of this doctrine holds that the university graduate in particular has had all the education he needs; he learned answers to a large number of questions in the university, and now all that he needs to do is to repeat those answers when their related questions arise.

Those of us who are responsible for the administration of higher educational institutions in this country and for the purposes and methods of the instruction given in those institutions must bear no small part of the responsibility for this attitude on the part of some of our former students. We cannot blame too much a graduate who thinks he knows all the answers and does not want to consider learning new ones, if the instruction given to him in his undergraduate days was shot through and through with the pernicious doctrine of professorial infallibility and inspired textbooks.

When I was a junior colleague of the great Professor Cubberley, professor of educational administration and dean of the school of education at Stanford University, I heard one of his former students say in an argument on a certain question of educational policy, "I don't care what evidence you pile up to the contrary, I will tell you right now you won't change my opinion. In this matter I am following the judgments of John Dewey and Ellwood P. Cubberley, and what is good enough for John Dewey and Ellwood P. Cubberley is good enough for me." Jokingly and without mentioning the former student's name, I recounted this statement to Dean Cubberley. The old gentleman's pleasant, smiling manner faded as he listened. His face expressed a deep sorrow and concern. "I am ashamed," he said in simple sincerity, "that any student should ever have passed through my classes to a stage of such intellectual bondage!"

Just because the university graduate has had an opportunity to understand in some detail the most pressing questions which his community has to face, and just because he has been able to observe more of the possible answers to these questions than he could have done without university education, just for those reasons he has the right and the privilege and the obligation to keep on learning long after his degree has been granted. In the institution with which I am connected, the Center for Continuation Study at the University of Minnesota, we have had eighteen different groups of adults studying some particular professional, civic, or cultural problems during the last six months. Some of these groups included only those who had received a university education in a particular professional field. Others included a number of people whose formal education had been limited to secondary school and in a few cases only elementary school work. On the average, the groups with the highest previous educational experience learned more than did the others. They learned more for three main reasons: first, they had a broader basis of precise, detailed knowledge upon which to build their new learning, second, they were familiar with the methods of intensive study, and third, their motives to study were stronger since originally, I suppose, they came from a group of young people who were willing to study hard enough to finish the long and arduous course necessary to the taking of a medical, engineering, or other professional degree.

In considering this right of the university graduate to keep on learning, we should not be deceived by such well-known proverbial statements as, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." The researches of the educational psychologists tend to show very clearly that when you do find that you can't teach an old dog new tricks it is more because he doesn't want to learn new tricks than it is because he is unable to learn new tricks. The adult who really wants to learn can do so with surprising efficiency. The university graduate who doesn't keep on learning must charge his failure to lack of time, lack of energy, or just plain laziness rather than to a lack of ability to learn. He has already demonstrated his ability to learn before he got his degree - all he needs now to do is to demonstrate his willingness to learn.

The educational psychologists have discovered another important principle which bears on this question of the continued learning of the university educated man. That principle indicates that the best way to retain your ability to learn for a long time is to exercise it. Consider the case of two men of equal intellectual ability at the age of twenty-two. We test them and find that one of them can learn just as rapidly as the other. They are both completing their work in the university at the present time. They have been following the same curriculum. For sixteen school years they have had approximately equal pressure placed upon them to make them learn. They go out into a business or a profession. One does his work day by day and spends his spare time in any interesting activity he can find which does not involve learning. "I sold my books and forgot them as soon as the final examinations were completed," he may say. The other keeps on learning. He learns so enthusiastically that he may find that he is getting an education of a comprehensiveness and an exactitude of which he never dreamed in his undergraduate days. "My university work merely gave me some tools which I could use in really learning something," he may say. Can you doubt which of these two men will display the greater learning ability when the psychologists measure them at the age of thirty-two? Or forty-two? Or fifty-two? Or for that matter at any age before they die and the cells in their central nervous system cease to be modified by new impulses?

The third chief right granted to the possessor of a university degree is the right to teach. I am not referring here to the state license to engage in work as a professional teacher in the schools which is granted to the holders of university degrees who have met certain definite curricular requirements. I am referring rather to the general right to teach the whole community in the sense of modifying the community behavior so that it will be a better and happier place in which to live.

The reason why many university men and women neglect to exercise this right is their misunderstanding of what good teaching of a community really is. Again, the fault in this matter must be charged in large part to those of us who are administrators and instructors in the universities. We have tended too often to imply in our instruction that the thing to teach is subject-matter, facts, data, and that this is about the only thing to teach. The university graduate, educated in such an environment, therefore tends to think of teaching as a lecture on facts or theories and of a teacher as merely a kind of animated textbook.

The truth which is here neglected and which is of vital importance to the university graduate who must carry on the kind of teaching which is called community leadership, is that the most vital element in successful teaching is usually not the imparting of facts but the building up of attitudes. Not the matter of what-to-do so much as the matters of why-to-do and want-to-do - these are the things that make great leaders.

These then are my equivalents of the Roman farmer's three basic issues, the right to added work, the right to keep on learning, and the right to teach in that particular fashion called community leadership. Ladies and gentlemen of the class of 1937, I beg you, say something and do something about my three goats.