

“Excellence-- What Is It?”

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I AM HAPPY to be with you today, and it is my pleasure to join you in honoring those who are being saluted for accomplishment. You are now reaping the rewards of diligence and devotion to your studies, and I congratulate each one of you. You have ahead of you a future of great promise.

I also wish to congratulate your teachers, who inspired and guided you, and your parents, who created the correct climate for superior educational experience in your home.

I would also like to address myself to those who are not among the “honored” this afternoon. Not all of us can win, nor can we all be leaders. In fact, it seems to me, with the state this world is in, we could use some intelligent “followers.”

We cannot expect everyone to be a superlative performer. Our kind of society, however, calls for the maximum development of individual potentialities at all levels. We must recognize that the current demand to educate everyone up to the level of his ability and the demand for excellence, are not incompatible. Not all of us can achieve high academic goals.

However, it is in every one of us to realize our full potential as a human being. Ultimately, of course, what you get from your education depends on you. As one mid-west professor has said, “You can lead a mind to knowledge, but you cannot make it think.” Bryant College has provided you with a fine education. The faculty has attempted to direct your attention to the sources of knowledge. But only you can determine whether you will have an education and justify all the effort put forth by others to assure the opportunity that is yours.

There is much sweat and tears and hard work involved in intellectual activity. As all of you who have worked hard for honors know, a student’s day is never done, for there is always more he could do to prepare for class, there is always a little more polishing that could be done on the term paper, there is always another article he could read or an additional review of class notes that would help

on the next examination. Being a student is a vocation just like being a newspaper editor, a business executive or a lawyer. It is a full-time job.

Let us hope that many of you will get that inner spark which leads you to work on and on and learn more and more for the sheer joy of learning, not, as is so frequently the case, to satisfy a teacher, to pass an examination, or to gain another honor.

The proper goals are not only grades, honors, diplomas, or degrees; these are but symbols, useful for purposes of motivating students. But the ultimate goal of education for free men in a free society is wisdom—the ability to make wise, independent decisions based upon accurate facts, clear reasoning and understanding.

The educated individual is one who can choose between good and evil, truth and falsehood, the beautiful and the ugly, the worthwhile and the trivial. He can choose a good book, a good painting, or a good piece of music; his education will have prepared him to make the many decisions necessary in planning a good life and in conducting it properly.

Soon many of you will enter the business world, others will be studying for advanced degrees. Your mind will learn in the company of other lively minds. You will be encouraged to doubt accepted standards, raise pertinent or impertinent questions.

In other words, your thinking will continue to be stimulated, your viewpoint will change, your mind will stretch. It is here that you will begin to develop into the man or woman of responsibility, the thoughtful person who is so useful to society. Hopefully you will become the educated individual who is prepared to remake his world by making sound decisions in the home, on the job, and in the voting booth.

The educated individual makes his education “matter” by attempting to make this a somewhat better world than the one he inherited. Always bear in mind that while your college career, your job, your family are important, you also have a deep obligation to participate personally and fully in the life of your community.

Remember that education is not restricted to the so-called cultural subjects. John Milton said, “I call a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly, skillfully, and

magnanimously all the offices, public and private, of peace and war." It should be part of your plan from the beginning to take an active part in your church and in all the service and welfare organizations you can handle—yes, and even in your government on the city, state, and national level.

To be an informed citizen is your duty to your country. We live in exhilarating times. Boundaries are shrinking. Our men can live in space for days at a time. The sum total of the world's knowledge is greater than all recorded history. The acquisition of a well-rounded education is within the grasp of everyone. Let us resolve to use this opportunity to make ourselves better members of society, to prepare now to give a portion of our time and energy to the problems of government.

Since we see fit to retain in our own hands the basic power of ruling ourselves as a democracy, we must make every effort to do so intelligently. It has always been a matter of keen concern to me that the very people who bitterly criticize every manifestation of government never raise a finger to participate on any level of politics. I always think of Lincoln's famous remark, "He who has the right to criticize should have the heart to help." A useful, educated citizen should continually study and act on behalf of his community and his country.

These are high aims and will not always be fully achieved. But these should be our goals, for this is the meaning of excellence.

