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Text of Commencement Address

by

J. David Grissom

May 14, 1977

President Downing, Members of the Board of Regents, distinguished guests and ladies and gentlemen.

I am highly complimented that I was asked to be here today...to be with you at these commencement exercises...and to share with you some things that I hope will be of interest to you.

I'd like to talk with you today about a few of the things the Council on Public Higher Education is doing to help Western in its pursuit of excellence beyond that which it has already achieved...about the kinds of education we should provide for our college students...and, just briefly, about some of the responsibilities you graduates are assuming as you leave this beautiful campus today.

Please don't expect me to reveal any mystical secrets about life and higher education. I'm not sure I have any to reveal. And I'll try to avoid being the speaker who can solve everyone's problems but his own in just 10 or 15 minutes. Instead, I'll try to be like Mark Anthony, who said:

"I am no orator as Brutus is,
But as you know me all, a plain blunt man,
For I have neither wit, nor worth, nor words,
Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech
To stir men's blood; I only speak right on."

I'll speak right on by saying...today higher education, in which all of us here have varying degrees of direct or indirect interest, faces some very difficult questions. Many of the questions are essentially the same ones we faced a decade ago. And there are many new questions which have risen out of different demands created by a changing economy, changing attitudes toward higher education, and changing educational philosophies and purposes.

Those questions include...

...Who is to be educated; what should be the characteristics of student bodies; what will those characteristics require of the institutions of higher learning?

...What should be taught, what should be learned; is the issue of vocational or career education versus general or liberal education a real issue?

...How will courses be taught; where should they be taught; who will do the teaching?

...What can be done to meet the changing demands for different types of educational programs; are current methods the most rational and most economical?

...How will we achieve full higher education opportunities for all Kentuckians; to what extent must we make those opportunities available; where should they be available?

...Are there workable methods which permit us to decrease undesirable duplication in higher education; will these methods allow proper balance in programs and in easy accessibility of our young people to our colleges and universities?

...What can we do to decrease the rate of inflation in higher education--to both the institution and to the student; what is necessary to adjust to relatively less and less state support without decreasing the quality of instruction?

...How can the public's confidence in higher education in general and its accountability in particular be restored to the level of the 1950's and 1960's?

And the questions and problems go on and on. All of us realize, of course, that these are serious questions... Finding answers or solutions to them will not be easy. But we have taken a giant step toward making the solutions and answers easier. That step was the recently completed development by the Council on Public Higher Education of revised role and mission statements for Kentucky's eight state-supported universities.

Simply stated, these revised roles and missions specifically address the function of each institution within a "system" of higher education. These clarifications will result in a better coordinated balance of programs and responsibilities... and provide the basis for answers and solutions to the long list of knotty questions I posed a moment ago. I fully expect these roles and mission statements to result in better higher educational opportunities... because they are intended and designed to help the institutions, not hinder them.

That doesn't mean that there has been complete agreement with my assessment of the impact of these new mission statements. There have been a number of fears expressed about what the effects will be upon various institutions. Most of you have probably read articles in the COLLEGE HEIGHTS HERALD, THE PARK CITY DAILY NEWS, or THE COURIER-JOURNAL relating concern over what Western's revised mission will mean.

I'd like to tell you exactly what it will mean. In my judgment, it will mean that this institution, with its tradition of excellence in education and service to western and southern Kentucky, will continue that tradition. It

will mean that Western will continue to have strong liberal arts programs, teacher education programs, and arts and sciences programs...along with strengthened basic technical programs. It will mean that this university--with some carefully considered program modifications to make it a part of a broad system of Kentucky Higher Education--will continue very much as it has in the past. Western will continue to provide high quality educational opportunities and be easily accessible and available to students from throughout the Commonwealth.

This role and mission of Western Kentucky University reflects the Council's philosophy that Kentucky's universities must be places of higher education...not merely places of higher training. We recognize the need for career education, but we also recognize that training responds to the world in which we live.

I have a fear, a disturbing fear which frequently haunts me as I study with the Council the issues of higher education in Kentucky. And that is that the great preoccupation with jobs, the acquisition of skills, earning power, and upward social and economic mobility threatens all of higher education. If our universities settle for the lesser utility of providing merely for the job market and the social ladder, higher education stands to lose an important distinction. That distinction is what makes institutions such as Western so importantly separate and apart from most of the other institutions of higher learning.

Those of you whom we are honoring today who have spent just about 20% of your lives worrying about whether a course will be closed before you are registered, burning the midnight oil, and being haunted by the specter of exam blue books might be thinking..."Hold on, I came here to prepare for productive employment and to get ahead in the world!" Good enough, But I hope that you also came here to prepare for something far broader...your role as a citizen of this great nation which necessarily involves acquiring a perspective which will enable you to make a contribution toward a better quality of life for all Americans.

Such preparation is possible only through universities that educate people...not merely train them. Such preparation is possible only through universities that realize that readying one for his or her career as such is not now the only or even chief value of higher education and it will not be in the future.

Such preparation, I know, occurs here at Western and is reflected in the faces I see before me. In your faces I see readiness for productive employment and the desire to achieve. But I also see a wide variety of intellectual skills and habits...the ability to think logically and analytically...attitudes which are essential for the maintenance of our freedoms...the capacity for clear expression...and a readiness to act and react with reason. I see faces that hold the promise of becoming heroes for the next generation. In short, I see educated people.

In the play, "Green Pastures," Noah says to the Lord, "I ain't much, but I'm all I got." Well, you have an advantage over Noah; you've got you and you've got a college education.

I'd like to go back a moment to my reference to heroes. The word "hero" is derived from the Greek word heros which meant "embodiment of composite ideals." Much has been written about the absence of heroes in our society today and the vacuum of leadership in every field of achievement. Critics argue that our sorrowful experience in Vietnam dispelled the myth of military heroes, that Richard Nixon's breach of faith with the American people has relegated politics to the lowest rung on the ladder of public opinion and even in sports, the financial demands and pouting of the superstars have largely eliminated the sport hero from our daily lives.

Joe McGinnis, in his book Heroes refers to the apparent lack of heroic figures in our society today and writes, "the truth is, we do not have heroes anymore because there are no heroic acts left to be performed."

How tragic and how inaccurate! Of course, there are heroic acts to be performed. Will not the man or woman who rids our society of the dreaded disease of cancer be a hero? Will not the political leader who can restore government to a position of trust, humility, integrity and responsiveness to the needs of all people be regarded as a hero? So long as our society has significant needs for improvement and growth, there is a role and a need for a hero.

As you truly begin a very important part of your life today, I would challenge each of you to renew your belief in heroes and to recognize that this nation will always need a Charles Lindbergh, a Babe Ruth, a Neil Armstrong, and a John Fitzgerald Kennedy, if its tradition of extraordinary achievement is to be maintained and enhanced.

Your life, like that of the fine university that gave you the opportunity to learn, can be richer, better, and nobler than it has been. Today, both Western Kentucky University and its spring graduating class of 1977 are on the threshold of new beginnings. I am pleased and grateful that I have had the opportunity to participate in both... and I know that this institution and its graduates will fulfill all of the promise that these new beginnings so hopefully offer.

Thank you.