

Commencement Address

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The University of Michigan's  
112th Commencement

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Saturday, June 16, 1956  
5:30 P.M.

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Dr. Nabor Carrillo  
Rector, National University  
of Mexico

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"A New Responsibility  
of Universities"

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## A NEW RESPONSIBILITY OF UNIVERSITIES.

It is with a deep feeling of gratitude that I accept today the honor conferred upon me and the opportunity to address the people of the University of Michigan, not only in my own name but also in the name of the University that I have the privilege to represent.

This honor is particularly significant to me, because the University of Michigan has given us great help in the scientific field. Peaceful uses of the atomic discoveries have brought us together. Some of your most distinguished professors have been our guests, and some of our students and graduates are here to learn facts of science for the benefit of man.

It is my duty to acknowledge this cooperation. And it is my privilege to discuss a topic for which, I believe, this University is a proper tribune.

My subject today is indeed ambitious: "A new responsibility of universities".

A university is, almost by definition, a concentration of human intelligence. Perhaps it is proper to say that the most intelligent people of any country are generally found in the universities. And intelligence is responsibility.

Universities show great differences. The universities of Cambridge, of Paris, of Michigan and of Mexico are certainly different. Not because the intelligence of English, French, American or Mexican scholars should essentially differ, but because a university is also, by nature, a reflection of the psychology and the conditions of the country in which it lives.

A brief review of the background of our western universities may be pertinent.

Perhaps the origin and source of our idea of a university is found in Athens at a brilliant moment of humanity, when Plato established his famous Academy and Aristotle his no less famous Lyceum. Both institutions were highly speculative. Today they would be research institutions. Both were basically interested in ethics, perhaps more so than any of our modern universities. Both were deeply interested in metaphysics. Today, perhaps, they would stress physics and mathematics. Plato's Academy was in fact interested in mathematics, while Aristotle's Lyceum stressed the interest in nature. Besides, both schools were keenly devoted to politics.

Both, Plato and Aristotle advocated practical activities as a complement of intellectual disciplines. And their schools had close contact with the realities of their time; perhaps closer than any university today.

The beginning of the formal idea of a university took place in the Middle Ages. In fact, the mediaeval Latin word "universitas" at first referred only to a community or corporation, not necessarily of professors and students. The mediaeval university was basically church centered and scholastic in the Alexandrian style. No real research or speculation was encouraged. It was mostly conservation and re-demonstration of church dogma. The creative skills and disciplines had a secondary importance. This first type of university was mainly theological, and eventually became an ivory tower.

The second general type of university developed as a consequence of the Renaissance period, when the influence of Descartes and Galileo stimulated profound scientific speculation and keen interest to discover the truths of nature by direct experiment, destroying prejudices based on traditional conceptions.

This second type of university was dedicated to the search of nature and was to produce a miraculous scientific revolution. It influenced the development of our modern universities, whose many types I will not discuss.

A new type of university is now being envisaged, as the representatives of higher learning begin to realize their responsibility to get busy with the appalling problems of our time. To contact our realities in the Athenian way.

Yes, universities do change.

My own University of Mexico has gone through those various stages since the year 1551, when it was established as "Real y Pontificia" (Royal and Pontifical) by the Emperor Charles V; through the colonial times in which its structure was of a mediaeval type; through its apparent death shortly after the Independence of Mexico, when it was considered too indifferent to the problems of our people, and until its final reorganization as the "Universidad Nacional Autonoma", a consequence of the Mexican Revolution.

I have said that a keen sociologist could tell by the mere analysis of the history of the University of Mexico, many of the major trends of the history of my country.

If any university is more or less a portrait of the country in which it lives, the University of Mexico is more than that: it is a pilot plant of the social, economic, spiritual and even political problems of Mexico. If in other universities there may be danger of losing contact with the human realities of the environment, at the University of Mexico this contact is brutal and creates some of its major problems. How can higher and adequate education be offered in a faster and greater proportion to keep up with the tremendous development of the country since the Revolution? The demand of high education is increasing several times faster than our population. This old University of mine is suffering growing pains of youth. Which is good.

What can a university like this, so different from the universities of Great Britain, of France, or of the United States, tell of real interest to a university like Michigan, of such an American character? What can an old institution so rich in tradition and so closely connected to its social climate, but so conscious of its limitations of material resources, suggest to an important American university facing such apparently different problems?

In human affairs, it is good to compare views.

A poor man can see what a rich cannot. A weak man can notice what the strong cannot. Walking permits views forbidden to the automobile and to the airplane.

I say, the views are different. Not necessarily better. And mine is certainly not a philosophy of poverty, weakness or slow-motion, as preferable to richness, strength or high-speed. I say, that any man, or university, has the privilege to observe best certain problems of mankind, irrespective of wealth or strength. And that these observations may be important and relevant to all observers.

If the right attitude of sane curiosity, of spiritual humility, or humanistic philosophy is behind the purpose to understand, to comprehend, the results are bound to deserve the respect and intellectual interest of all men of good will.

With this confidence I dare talk today on a new responsibility of universities as of today. A conception of new responsibility which seems valid not in Great Britain alone, not in France alone, not in the United States or Mexico alone, but indeed in all universities of the world.

This responsibility is greater in importance than that of balancing the curricula between liberal arts and science, between scholastic training and research, between general education and vocational training. It is more important than the problems related to the social conditions of the students. It is more important, in fact, than any academic, administrative or economic responsibility.

It is the responsibility of any university towards its young to reassure them on the value of culture and moral principles at a time when this assurance is most desperately needed. To reaffirm their faith in a high destiny of humanity.

Indeed, man is suffering today from collective fear in an unprecedented degree. Professors, students, parents and non-scholars alike are victims of this anxiety and distress in a degree undreamed of by previous generations.

What is the reason for this public stress? Why is man so painfully alarmed?

Science has given to man the greatest power he ever had, and man is afraid he may not have the wisdom to use that power for his own good. Man does not trust his heart and fears his intelligence.

There are people who, in an effort to recover serenity, are not facing the facts. They say science created new and revolutionary sources of power before, and there was fear before. Fear of the machine or fear of the weapon. But people eventually overcame the effects of the evolution, and tranquility was recovered. There was always a practical antidote for the harmful effects of the new gadgets. There will be an antidote today.

No. There is no old fashioned antidote today. It is not the Chinese wall philosophy that will protect humanity from itself.

Thanks to science the world is beginning to realize that material power and strength alone may no longer be the basis for security or survival.

In fact, it seems, paradoxically, that the greater the power, the greater the feeling of vulnerability.

Other people put the blame in science for the problems of the world today, and would eliminate physics from university curricula if they had their way. As if power by itself should be a disgraceful property. As if physical exercise should not be recommended lest the athlete abuse the weak.

Science, like in the times of Plato and Aristotle, deserves the highest respect of human intelligence. No man can be afraid to think, nor can anyone forbid him the search of truth wherever this search may lead. No university can disregard the importance of scientific thinking. The importance of the respect for facts, of self-criticism, of intellectual humility.

No. Science is not to blame for our worries. In a world of so much poverty, pain and indignity, science can and will provide solutions undreamed of at present. Food, clothing and health should not always be such crude problems of man, nor the central support of social doctrines.

What then is the antidote for this state of fear?

The solution lies in the adoption of moral values to govern the relations of man to man and country to country. Fair play, not only to expect a better life after this, but to guarantee the very life that we live. Not only to deserve heaven, but earth. Not as a problem of philosophy or religion only, but as a problem of politics. Morality as a technical way of life.

I have faith that as a result of this crisis a better world will inevitably come. No other alternative except insane wholesale destruction seems possible.

I have faith that, for the first time in the history of mankind, the moral values have a real chance as the rules of the game. And that in this new game, based on the respect for the dignity of all men and nations, real peace will prevail; not the peace based on the fear of the other man's power, but the peace defined as the respect for the other man's right. The peace promised to all men of good will.

It is the new responsibility of universities as of today to reassure the youth of this generation of the paramount importance for mankind of the highest values of the spirit. It is the new responsibility of universities to remove fear from the students' hearts. For now, as always, the honest search of truth, is good and is right.

Let the young engage in noble university activities, for the world needs more than ever men of good will who are firm believers in culture.

Let the young walk with confidence towards their future.

A good, better world, is certain. There, an important task awaits the young men and women educated in the best traditions of universities, in the traditions of the University of Michigan and of the University of Mexico.