

University of Minnesota
The Graduate School

Commencement Address

“From Private Benefit to Public Good:
Conveying Insights From Graduate Education to the Public”

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What a privilege it is to celebrate together not only the individual but the collective power of accomplishment at this truly remarkable public research university.

This marks my fourth spring commencement as dean of the Graduate School, an interval that affords increasing perspective on what it takes for graduate students to reach this milestone, but also on some of the ways that graduate education is changing and needs to evolve in the future.

Over the past four years, we at the University have worked hard to increase the diversity of the graduate student body in ways that make it more representative of our nation’s changing demographics, and that draw on talent from all corners of the world. We cannot afford to overlook the rich diversity of views and experiences—and resulting original insights—that have the potential to meet the challenges that face us both locally and globally.

We have worked hard to foster the pursuit of knowledge and solutions to problems not just in established disciplines but also across disciplinary lines. It means that our graduates are no longer slotted into the well-established departments but also into interdisciplinary programs that were not on the roster of University of Minnesota degrees 10, 20, or 50 years, much less a century ago, when the Graduate School was established.

We have also advanced some bold reforms, especially in doctoral education, to increase the rates of completion and reduce the average time it takes to complete a degree. That said, we also know that individual life circumstances sometimes intervene in the best laid plans to graduate in a timely way—indeed, one of today’s degree recipients started their graduate program 21 years ago. I admire that kind of persistence.

While many graduate deans focus exclusively on the metrics—time to degree, rates of completion, and other quantitative measures—one of my goals as dean has been to strive for more *joy* in the course of pursuing a graduate degree.

Graduate work, after all, is fueled by passion, and the idea I bring to this is that the many rituals and requirements of a degree program should liberate a person's creative energy, not beat them down. Joy should not, and cannot, be deferred until commencement day. For that reason, we've been working closely with our Council of Graduate Students to ensure that we attend to students' experience of graduate education, not just their performance.

Today I want to share some thoughts about unfinished business in graduate education: specifically, about the importance of translating the public's perception of graduate education as a private benefit—that is to say, as an investment in individual human capital—into graduate education as a public good that has wider public benefits for society.

If it's true that it takes a whole village to raise a child, it certainly takes a very large one to see a graduate student from the initial application process, and orientation, all the way through to commencement. Everyone assembled here today knows the truth of this statement. Yet this collective endeavor sometimes feels as though it divides us from one another.

Family members and friends, bursting with pride for your graduate, also may find yourselves wondering exactly when it was that he or she learned to "speak another language" that seems like English but is otherwise incomprehensible. Asked what they've been working on, graduate students utter words like "discourse" or "hyperpolarization" and phrases like "active transport" or "Bayesian network." Indeed, these terms appear in the dissertation titles of some of the 700 graduates seated before us this spring.

Parents: Remember the old days when you asked your children, "What happened at school today?" Today marks the end of the longest school day! It has ranged from an average of two-and-a-half years for the master's students to more than six years for Ph.D.s, and significantly longer in many of the social sciences and humanities disciplines. As you gather around the dinner table later today, someone's going to ask, "So, what did you learn at school—if not today, exactly, then over the past 3, or 5, or 7 years at the University of Minnesota?"

The pride we feel in the son or daughter who has achieved a level of education that in many cases surpasses our own may very well be complicated by the difficulty of understanding it in any detail. Work that has kept them away at school on evenings, weekends, and sometimes even holidays makes for difficult dinner table conversation when you finally get some time with them. Naturally, there are some mixed emotions here, since our deepest desire is not only for their success, but also to be able to continue communicating with them about the things they care about. As a parent whose 15-year-old daughter now does math at a level I cannot grasp (and I'm no slouch), I will freely admit to that mix of pride and humility as she races beyond what I considered possible. As I watch this process a thousand-fold from my vantage point as dean of the Graduate School, I see it a little differently. I'm not sure we've succeeded fully in preparing graduates who are able to communicate the knowledge they possess in all of the public venues needed to address the challenges before us in the State of

Minnesota, the nation, and the world. Whatever the graduate degree pursued, our students probably need better preparation to articulate how the subjects they've come to care about matter, and what, exactly, needs to be done in order to convey insights from graduate education to multiple publics.

We've too often seen graduate education as a personal and private investment in individual development, as opposed to an investment in our shared future through the research, discovery, knowledge creation, and improvements in professional practice that an advanced education enables. My hope is that the degree is not just a ticket to a job, which in itself is no small thing in this difficult economy, but that it also serves as a passport to active participation as a global citizen who brings expert knowledge to bear in solving the problems we're facing in this society and the larger world.

One of the consequences of the historic focus on graduate education as a private investment is that graduate education at public research universities like ours—especially doctoral education—is not yet sustainable financially. We haven't secured adequate funding for the multiyear packages that allow extraordinary students—whatever their personal or family circumstances—to engage in the deep period of study in their chosen field and the intense research, scholarly work, or creative apprenticeship required to attain mastery. We haven't yet persuaded the public, much less our state legislatures, to invest in it at the necessary level . . . not only to turn out our future leaders, but to drive the knowledge economy. So we do it by hook and by crook, when a planned approach is needed to put it on a firm footing.

To produce the kinds of change that are necessary, students and faculty will be at the center of it.

One part of gaining public support for graduate education is developing the ability to explain its public benefits. If we can cut through the woolly and obtuse language that has become associated with academe, I suspect we may make some progress. A quick review of some of the capstone projects that earned our graduates their diplomas over the past six months are illustrative.

- “Spatial Vegetation-Environment Relationships and Distributional Changes in the Presettlement Minnesota Prairie-Forest Boundary”—TRANSLATION: Describing changes in Minnesota's prairie and forest regions, and the boundary between those two landscapes.
- “General Outcome Measures of Beginning Handwriting Development”—TRANSLATION: Finding ways for grade-school teachers to know *when* students need help in learning the critical skill of handwriting, and ways to know which methods work.
- “Analytical and Numerical Studies of Dark-Matter Halos”—TRANSLATION: Exploring how galaxies change by measuring the impact of invisible matter on those things we *can* see. (This woman is a Sherlock Holmes of outer-space investigation.)

- “Determinants of Oral Medication Compliance in Osteoporosis: The Role of Medication Beliefs”—TRANSLATION: Understanding the relationship between what people with severe bone loss believe about medicine—and whether they take their medicine or not.
- “Pronouns in Kumyk Discourse: A Cognitive Perspective”—TRANSLATION: Understanding a very old, complex language that is spoken in a small but critical location of the world near the Caspian Sea.
- “Rethinking Reprogenetics with Arendt and Heidegger”—TRANSLATION: How two important 20th century philosophers can contribute to clearer thinking about the prospect of selecting our children’s genes.

Not every piece of work can be explained in everyday language. It is not even in our interest to make every form of graduate education socially relevant. Some has more *practical* benefits than others, and I’m still old-fashioned enough to believe in the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Moreover, some forms of graduate education help us to gain *critical perspectives* on our culture, such as an American studies dissertation that examines the depiction of working-class families in television sit-coms. We see differently the societies and cultures in which we are immersed as a result of these projects. We all recognize the importance of advancing technological innovation, finding cures for life-threatening diseases, and promoting greater reflection on quality of life and the strengthening of our neighborhoods, communities, nations, and world. Clearly, graduate education reaches beyond the planet to the stars—not just metaphorically but literally.

But I believe that we could do better—as educators—to prepare our students to communicate the significance of the work they’re doing in terms that most people would appreciate and, heaven help us, understand. This is *not* to dumb down complex topics or to soft-pedal controversial issues. It’s to widen the audience for the extraordinary insights and powerful discoveries that arise in and from graduate education, so that those who undergo advanced study are not talking only among themselves but also engaging with the wide array of individuals and communities that stand to benefit from what they know. By so doing, we will not only make your celebratory conversation over dinner this evening more enjoyable—and your relationship with your master’s or Ph.D. graduate smoother sailing—but translate what has for too long appeared to be private benefits into resources that serve the public interest.

Faculty and educators: We must insist not only that graduate students are well prepared to speak to other experts but that, in their passion for their work, they are able to engage multiple audiences in clear terms. It’s simply not sufficient to train graduate students to talk only with other scholars or professionals, or to teach only undergraduate students. Our graduates need preparation to speak (and listen!) in multiple settings, including in industry, community settings, and political venues. This is why, two years ago, we in the Graduate School organized the first interdisciplinary research showcase for doctoral students,

where they can practice talking about their work to peers, faculty members in other fields, and industry representatives. We observed how, over just two hours, the participants improved and shortened the time it took to describe their research, from ten minutes or longer to two or three. We need more opportunities of this kind, in a range of venues, to be woven into the fabric of graduate education.

Students: You are now leaving the academy. Seek out opportunities to talk to non-experts, to write in forms that reach broader publics, bridging the communication gap, from household to planet, between what you've learned and what others need to know. You've heard our advice to develop an "elevator speech," but we're talking about more depth here. I hope you will identify the action steps required to transform your education from a private benefit that gets you a job, into a public good with societal benefits. This might include writing a letter to the editor on a subject you know a whole lot about; adding online comments to debates in your local paper; transforming your dissertation topic into a local museum exhibit; or presenting what you've discovered at the Lion's Club or Rotary Club, in a high school classroom or library speakers series. The opportunities for contributing in public venues are limited only by your imagination. By taking personal responsibility for translating what you know in terms that reach wider audiences, your actions will contribute to change. In this way, you expand your reach as a citizen professional who provides leadership—hopefully combined with active listening skills!—wherever you go.

Loved ones of today's grads: Persist! Don't give up! Keep asking, "HEDJ-eh-mony, or heh-JEM-ony? and what does that mean again?" and "Nucleation: Is it something that happens in a cell or a power plant? or both?" We're counting on you to press our graduates to communicate in terms we can all understand. In so doing, you will help them to question their own assumptions, and remind them that they are now in a wider community that doesn't necessarily share their fondness for polysyllabic words or their familiarity with certain acronyms. It's a way of saying, "Come down from the ivory tower, at least for a few minutes, to the land where the rest of us live" But it also carries kinder intentions, namely that: "We want to know more about the things you've learned," and "The things you now know are needed to make the world a better place."

Those of us at the helm of graduate education will continue to reform our curriculum to make these skills formal and informal parts of the learning process, as our vision expands beyond seeing graduate education as private benefit that prepares individuals for the professions into a resource for the future that has far-reaching public benefits.

Thank you, and congratulations, graduates.