

Remarks to the 2016 Spring Convocation

Eminent Chancellor, graduands and families, honoured guests: I thank the many people who are here today to be part of this moment in the University of Saskatchewan's history. In particular, I want to acknowledge the many faculty on the stage who are the heartbeat of the university, today's Elder, the Buffalo Boys drum group, our honorary degree recipient, and the MLA representative. Your presence demonstrates the significant place the University of Saskatchewan holds in the hearts and souls of the people of this province, this city, Canada and beyond.

We're here to celebrate a milestone in the lives of the graduands who will soon cross this stage – we're proud of them, they're proud of what they've done – life is richer when we collectively acknowledge success and hard work and rites of passage such as this one today.

We're also here because this university has brought us together. A university is a wonderful thing – a great experiment in the ongoing conversation we call democracy. And when I read the news each day, and when I see how fast the world is changing, I am convinced that universities are needed now more than ever before -- that the University of Saskatchewan is needed more now than it ever has been – that what the people crossing this stage today, strengthened by what they've learned here, go on to do in their lives will matter immensely to our collective futures.

You're getting your degree today. You've succeeded in that. And take the time to enjoy it, revel in it, boast about it, even feel a little smug about it.

But once those five minutes are up, take a lot more time to thank your spouses and partners, parents and grandparents, friends, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, communities, elementary school teachers, highschool teachers, the professors you appreciated or your classmates who helped you out – because you don't achieve something this big without a lot of help along the way.

Lots of graduands are sitting in seats like you are, in auditoriums like this one right now, across the country getting university degrees. But let me say a few things -- on the threshold of the university celebrating its 110th anniversary next year -- about a U of S degree.

This is the home of the Cobalt 60 radiation therapy technology that revolutionized cancer treatment 65 years ago and saved the lives of millions of cancer patients around the world. Right here. An autobody shop around the corner built the casing – U of S medical researchers built the concept.

Some of the country's most formative political leaders got their degrees here: PM John Diefenbaker, Governor General Ray Hnatyshyn, premiers Devine and Romanow and Calvert and Wall.

People who went on to receive Nobel prizes were here: Chemistry grad student Henry Taube and Physics professor Gerhard Herzberg.

Writers such as Sharon Butala (who wrote *Perfection of the Morning*) and three-time Governor-General's Award winner Guy Vanderhaeghe; Hilday Neatby, who wrote the controversial book on Canadian education *So Little for the Mind*; actors like Kim Coates from *Sons of Anarchy*.

Business leaders such as Brett Wilson and Murray Edwards; Aboriginal leaders like our chancellor Blaine Favel, former Chief of the FSIN, and Lester Lafond – a formidable influence on the development of the Aboriginal business community in Saskatchewan.

Influential people in our justice system such as medicare author and Supreme Court Justice Emmett Hall, and federal chief negotiator Tom Molloy. Annie McKay, the first Metis and first Aboriginal woman to graduate from our university.

Athletes and coaches such as Diane Jones-Konihowski and Mike Babcock and Willie DeJardins and Dave King.

At last week's YWCA Women of Distinction Awards banquet, 33 of the 55 nominees were from this university.

We are seen as a research leader in the country, with Canada's only synchrotron – where we've figured out how to produce medical isotopes using high-energy X-rays from a particle accelerator rather than with a nuclear reactor. There is a huge national and international demand for these isotopes due in part to the closure of the reactor in Chalk River. We've got one of the world's most advanced vaccine research facilities at VIDO-InterVac. And a cyclotron that will shortly be providing medical isotopes to RUH – a fitting homage to that Cobalt 60 work done here over half a century ago. Our Global Institute for Food Security will help feed a hungry world; our Global Institute for Water Security will help us understand floods and droughts. Our humanities and fine arts will explore human expression and keep us interpreting.

Back in 1970 before our Crop Development Centre in the College of Agriculture and Bioresources was established, the majority of Saskatchewan's productive land was under summer fallow, generating no income at all for producers. But since then, crop diversification from U of S-developed varieties—as well as the development of [seeding](#) equipment and technologies for precise seed and fertilizer placement - [have](#) significantly reduced Saskatchewan acreage under summer fallow, increasing seeded acreage by 40 per cent. The results are three-fold: more land being used to

produce food, higher returns for farmers, and more crop choices for producers than ever before. The economic impact for the province of these innovations alone is in the neighborhood of \$50B.

All these things matter – all these things will help make the world a better place. With 17 colleges and graduate schools we have more disciplines represented than any Canadian university of our size. This to me is a crucial feature of who we are – because although we do not know what the solutions are to the major challenges facing us today, we do know this – that none of them will be solved by a single discipline or a single person, but by many people from many disciplines working together. We are poised to help do that, with faculty who are at the cutting edge of research, scholarly and artistic work.

For these reasons and more, we're one of the top 15 research-intensive medical doctoral universities in the country. On his trip out here to begin his work as our first president in 1908, Walter Murray wrote that “we are building for centuries” and that's what we will continue to do – to be a leader in developing local solutions to global problems.

I don't say this to boast – entirely – but to drive home that the degree you've worked hard to receive today has tremendous value. Many employers tell me that when they see an application from a U of S grad it gets noticed – because the quality of the university is so high, and because of its graduates' work ethic that's part of our prairie roots. And also because you haven't just learned a particular area of study – you've learned how to be adaptive in your thinking – to be resilient – to be able, someday, to solve problems we can't even foresee today. You've learned about excellence, and excellence is a transferable skill.

And like anything that has tremendous value, it carries with it a great responsibility. In the end, most people in the world can only dream of getting to where you are – educated, well read, supported, self-reliant, networked, plugged in. This is not to say there aren't huge challenges – but you've worked hard, and others have helped, to get you to a point where you can now do – what?

A few thoughts on that:

You didn't get here by following what everyone else did, agreeing with everything they said, doing everything they asked, and taking the road of least resistance. You weren't here doing all this just to absorb received wisdom. You've done all this work to find your own voice, not to mimic someone else's. Trust yourself now to sing with it.

Also, you got here by taking risks, by failing at some things – maybe many things. Even going to university at all was a risk. You didn't do all this work so that you'll live a failure-free life. You've done all this work so that your future failures will be

for more important causes – and so that your successes will have more important impacts.

And finally, you came here with at least some slight thought in the back of your mind that a university degree will lead to a great job and a lot of money. It's true the chances are a lot higher that you will have those things with a degree than without one. But I've always liked this sentence from Chris Hedges' book *The Empire of Illusion*: in the end, the measure of a civilization is its compassion, not its ability to consume. And the compassion is not just for others – it's also for yourself. Help out those with less than you've now got – and take it easy on yourself while you're at it. The two go hand in hand, it turns out. And if you do get a great job and make lots of money, show even more compassion, make even more of a difference.

So, in the end, what's all this that you're achieving today about? Only you can actually answer that for yourself. But part of it is about being able to contribute – to your community, this province, this country. They need people with degrees in your discipline to help build a more sustainable world; a more equitable world; a world with the courage to embrace diversity, not build a wall against it; a country that responds to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action – because as Justice Murray Sinclair (now Senator) stated at the U of S last fall, education is the key to reconciliation. And I am very proud that the U of S is graduating more Aboriginal students this year than it has ever graduated in its history.

Think of all of those who can't even imagine having the education you've got. What would they do if they had it? What will you do now that you've got it? How can you give back to everyone who's helped you get it?

For me, it has always been about a passion for the idea of a university – a radical experiment in human culture – a place where we learn to be humble servants of a democratic society and respectful critics of it. For the John Diefenbakers and Roy Romanows and Gerhard Herzbergs and Blaine Favel and Hilda Neatbys and Emmett Halls and Annie McKays and today's honorary degree recipient, it was about something else. None of them, while at university, knew exactly where they were headed – you can't know that because the world changes fast – but they knew to listen for some passion to follow, and that became an endless journey. For you, it will be something else. Doesn't matter exactly what it is – just that you're passionate about it and that you use it for good.

That's a long way of saying – congratulations to our graduands today, and to all of those who helped them. And to the families and friends here today -- you can be proud that your sons or daughters will not only succeed in their careers but will contribute to Canada and the world.