

Remarks to the Graduating Class of 1975

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Thank you. I am deeply honored to join the class of 1975 in the recognition ceremonies here today. I count myself and you, the members of the graduating class, fortunate to receive a degree from Grand Valley State Colleges because these are colleges very much in touch with our times. There is a spirit of inquiry and innovation here that searches constantly for a better way. And that is a major function of all education. For individuals as well as the broader society, education should help us to find better ways of doing things and better ways of developing ourselves. But too often we have settled into educational traditions that are more acceptable for their familiarity than for their effectiveness. The youthful Grand Valley State Colleges have so far resisted that temptation. Let us hope that these colleges will retain their flexibility and their stimulating search for better ways to teach and to learn.

Commencement messages are notoriously rooted in the present as they attempt to look toward the future. A collection of them, year by year, would reflect the folkwisdom of how people of an era perceive relationships between past, present, and future. Let me perpetuate that tradition.

Presented upon receipt of the Doctor of Humanities Degree by Grand Valley State Colleges, June 7, 1975.

I look at myself and the parents in this audience as products of yesterday's education; at you, the members of the graduating class, as representatives of today's education, and at your future children as products of tomorrow's education. I suspect that the changes in the college educations of these three generations will be greater than anything we have seen in the history of higher education, and indeed, greater than anything we can reasonably expect in the future. In other words, I see the class of 1975 as a pivotal class between unusually extensive periods of change in higher education.

The student body of the colleges of the past generation consisted mostly of 18 to 22 year-olds who were enrolled in residential colleges as full-time students. Except for the atypical World War II years and their aftermath, the college students of your parent's day devoted themselves quite fully to the relatively isolated world of the college campus with its classrooms, dormitories, sororities, social functions, student government, and other distinctively collegiate activities. The college experience represented four years of detachment from the everyday concerns of jobs and families. Some in this audience today may be looking back with nostalgia to their own graduation that symbolized a sharp transition from life on the campus to life in the world.

Your graduating class is different. You represent important transitional years for you sit on some 50th percentiles that represent significant shifts of balance in higher education. Whereas less than 50 percent of the youth attended yesterday's colleges, more than half are entering college today. Whereas less than half of the students of your parent's generation were working students, more than half of

today's college students are also workers. As recently as 1972, colleges crossed the 50 percent line, from a majority to a minority of full-time students. That trend will accelerate, for today the most rapidly growing segment of college enrollments consists of married and working adults over the age of 22; college is only a part of their lives.

There are other 50 percent milestones represented by your class. For the first time in history women are beginning to constitute half of the college student population. The profile of the college student is beginning to look more and more like the profile of the American citizen. It now seems quite certain that your children will attend colleges that offer learning experiences to rich and poor, black and white, young and old, male and female, campus residents and commuters, workers and scholars. In short, colleges will probably become centers of learning where all kinds of people move in and out of college throughout their lifetimes.

The chances are extremely high that whether you go to graduate school or not, you have not seen the last of your formal education. Already, almost one-third of the adults between the ages of 18 and 60 are engaged in some type of formal learning experience--in adult schools, colleges, professional workshops, churches and community agencies. Tomorrow the majority of adults will be continuing their education, and college-level study may be as prevalent among 40 and 50 year-olds as among 18 and 20 year-olds. Since college graduates are the most eager educational consumers of all adults, there is a strong probability that you and your children will be pursuing academic study together--on the campus, in your home and in worldwide and local learning communities.

Your degree here today signifies not the conclusion of your formal education as you may have thought, and perhaps even hoped, but the commencement of lifelong learning. Welcome to the Learning Society. I hope that it will serve you well and that you will serve it well.

6/1/75