



Spring 5-3-2015

Commencement Address: The Power of Connection

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Recommended Citation

Robb '78, Hon. Elizabeth, "Commencement Address: The Power of Connection" (2015).
2015 Highlights. 1.
https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/comm_2015/1

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Commencement Address

by Hon. Elizabeth Robb '78

May 3, 2015

The Power of Connection

President Wilson, Members of the Board of Trustees, honored faculty, members of the administration and staff, graduates and their families and guests.

When President Wilson called me he had recently announced his retirement and I thought he wanted to compare notes with me about the difficult decision it is to leave a career that one loves. I was astonished when he asked me to give the commencement address.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak at the last commencement over which President Wilson will preside. In the past 10 years in which I have come to know President Wilson and his wife, Pat, I have seen how much they care about this university and I want to thank President Wilson for steering the ship through difficult financial times, leading a very successful Transforming Lives fundraising effort to ensure the financial viability of this institution.

After being asked to serve as the Commencement Speaker, I researched who else is giving Commencement Speeches across the country this spring. Richard Engel, Chief Foreign Correspondent for NBC news will speak at Stanford; Vice President Joe Biden at the Naval Academy; Ken Burns, the documentarian, at Washington University; Jon Bon Jovi at Rutgers University; and Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google at Virginia Tech. Today at IWU, you have me. Not the star power of those other commencement speakers. Had you attended one of those institutions, you would have a much better story to tell your children and grandchildren about who spoke at your commencement. Sorry.

However, you would not have received a better education at any one of those institutions.

President Wilson suggested that I might want to use the Academic Theme for the Year which is “Walls & Bridges” as a guide for my remarks. I want to focus on the **BRIDGES** half of the theme. And may I briefly digress to point out that the Academic Theme for this year pays “homage” to Dennie Bridges who retires after spending 50 years at IWU. Congratulations Coach Bridges.

A **bridge** is defined as something that is intended to reconcile or form a **connection** between two things. And a **Connection** is defined as a relationship in which a person, thing, or idea is linked or associated with something else.

As you leave Illinois Wesleyan, strive to develop BRIDGES in all aspects of your life. When you do, you will experience an undeniable POWER which will sustain you in both your personal and professional life.

1. Build Bridges to enhance success in your Professional Life

Perhaps you selected IWU because it is a university dedicated to the tradition of a liberal arts education.

I certainly did not focus on that aspect when I selected this school—it was not until long after I graduated that I really came to appreciate the value of a liberal arts education.

I view the opportunity to interact with students and professors from a variety of disciplines as a hallmark of a liberal arts education. Foster diverse relationships and connections in your professional life. It is easy in this setting. You are required to complete course work in many departments and in so doing you have had the opportunity to interact with fellow students who have passionate interests in other fields. Whether you appreciate that right now, know that those interactions—those connections—have enriched your education.

It may not come so easily to you as you enter graduate or professional schools or begin working. As you delve deeper in your specialized field or profession, you narrow your focus and your opportunities to CONNECT with others who are not like you or who think like you. You will need to consciously strive to move outside of your comfort zone in seeking to establish relationships, CONNECTIONS, with those who are different from you or who spend their lives in vastly different fields. Do it. Your research, your professional work, your life will be better for it.

I discovered this in my own professional life. I recently retired after serving for 22 years as a trial judge. I spent many years hearing criminal cases, juvenile abuse and neglect and delinquency cases. It doesn't take too long to realize that the law is limited in its ability to adequately address the needs of individuals who commit crimes or abuse their children. 75-80% of the people who are incarcerated in our jails and prisons, both adult and juvenile, suffer from behavioral health disorders and substance abuse. And after their release from jail or prison they re-enter their communities having received little or no treatment for those disorders, little assistance in developing pro-social behaviors, obtaining an education, or proper vocational skills.

It was only when those in the legal profession began to collaborate with treatment providers, mental health professionals, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers that we became more effective at changing the behaviors of these justice-involved individuals and increasing the likelihood that they would become successful, law-abiding citizens.

We developed RELATIONSHIPS---we built **bridges** with those in other disciplines and brought them into the criminal justice system to enable us to be more effective. In so doing, THERAPUETIC JUSTICE was born. Therapeutic Justice is a philosophy that recognizes that the law alone is not adequate to address the needs of those entangled in the criminal justice system. Applying Therapeutic Justice enriches the lives of not only those criminal-justice involved individuals, but those of us who work in this field. I became a better judge when I began practicing THERAPEUTIC JUSTICE.

And frankly, I became a much happier and satisfied person when I had the opportunity to interact, to CONNECT and BUILD RELATIONSHIPS with those in other disciplines in order to improve the profession in which I chose to spend my life. If you establish a diverse set of social, academic and cultural connections in professional life you will honor this institution.

2. The Power of Connection in your personal life

As students at IWU, you **connected** with others. In college, you are almost required to develop these connections. You are thrust together with roommates and floor mates, team members, musical and theater groups, sorority and fraternity

members, and lab partners. I'm sure you have been assigned at least one "group project" these past four years.

These past 4 years are some of those most important in your life. You certainly are not the same person you were when you arrived on campus four years ago. You have developed your core values, your moral compass which will guide you through the challenges you will face in your life. And your relationships with other students, professors, coaches and administrators and staff have shaped you.

Reflect on these connections. Not all of them will remain as strong and as important to you as they are today. But many will. Some will sustain you the rest of your life.

Recently, I read about a study conducted by Brigham University which has been published in the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. The study centered on the effects of Social isolation and suggests that social isolation may be the next public health threat in our country, comparing it to obesity and substance abuse.

The researcher, Julianne Holt-Lunstad, noted that maintaining meaningful and close relationships-- as well as a "diverse set of social **connections**" is key to a healthy life in a variety of areas—in managing our stress, improving our immune systems and giving meaning to our lives. She noted that "more Americans are living alone than ever before, and technology like texting and social media has made it easier to avoid forming substantive relationships in the flesh and blood".

Now, I am a member of the baby boomer generation---and when I started college we did not have laptops or cell phones or Ipods with earbuds. I felt very fortunate to have an electric typewriter with an erase key—and I was one of the few who did. I spoke by telephone with my parents once a week—Sunday afternoon was our designated time to talk—and I called them on one of the three phone lines we had from the telephone room of the Sigma Kappa house.

I love my cell phone and the fact that I can communicate quickly and endlessly with family and friends through email and text. But honestly, I do worry that those of your generation will not form substantive relationships in the flesh and blood. A good percentage of the work force now telecommutes. This provides great flexibility in one's professional life. But, it can be both professionally and socially isolating and limiting.

This wonderful college environment encourages social connection with others. So, as you move to a large city or a new campus or venture to a new country, take this advice to heart. Nurture the friendships you have made here at IWU, and consciously work to form new ones wherever you go. And don't rely on Facebook, or Match.com or Instagram or Twitter or whatever else you use as your only social connection. Spend time IN PERSON relating to another.

3. The Power of the Illinois Wesleyan Connection

Finally, I want to talk about maintaining a CONNECTION to IWU.

With the exception of 3 years at law school in Chicago, I have lived within 5 miles of IWU since I graduated. I now live 3 blocks from the campus and have been so grateful for the opportunities my affiliation with IWU has given me.

While at IWU, I was involved in student government and joined a sorority. It was the 70s, and I declared myself an American Studies major and was able to craft my own set of courses, which at that time was pretty unusual.

After graduating from law school, I returned to B/N, served on the IWU Associates Board, taught Business Law for a few years on a part-time basis, and have attended countless sporting and cultural events. I supervised IWU interns for 25 years, and for the past 10 years have served as the judge for the Trial Strategies Mock Trial. When I ran for Circuit Judge, Steve Wannemacher, an IWU Trustee and alum was my campaign manager. Over the years, IWU Presidents Eckley, Hess, Myers and Wilson have written supportive letters on my behalf when asked. Many IWU professors became my clients. And some of my closest friends are IWU alums. All of these RELATIONSHIPS—these CONNECTIONS with IWU have enriched my life. When an IWU graduate sends me a resume, or calls to ask for help in finding a summer internship or a full time job, I eagerly assist. And of course, I contribute financially to support this school and its mission because I believe that what happens here on this campus should continue to flourish and be available to future generations.

This is the Power of the IWU CONNECTION. USE this POWER. The professors, Career Center staff, coaches and others who have advised you and written letters

in support of fellowships, professional schools and employment will be thrilled if you stay connected with them and share with them your successes.

And whether you live 3 blocks or 3000 miles from campus, know that IWU—the wonderful people who make this university a “jewel” in the heartland—will serve as a BRIDGE, A CONNECTION for the rest of your life.

Congratulations to each and every one of you today on your achievements—and thank you to President Wilson and the members of the Board of Trustees for the honor of serving as your commencement speaker.