



5-5-2019

## Address: "Scientia et Sapientia"

Stephen L. Ondra '80

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/commencement\\_docs](https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/commencement_docs)



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@iwu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@iwu.edu).

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

# IWU COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Stephen L. Ondra, MD

May 2019

## *Scientia et Sapientia*

It is an honor to share this graduation day with all of you.  
It seems like only a century ago that I was in your seat.

I want to begin by considering the motto that is emblazoned on the seal of Illinois Wesleyan University; *Scientia et Sapientia*.  
In many ways, it describes what you have been doing these past years on this campus and what you will be striving to do for the rest of your lives.

As you probably know, the motto is in Latin and translates to “knowledge and wisdom”. Now those two things sound a lot alike but the difference was explained to me in a simple clear way many years ago:

- Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is actually a fruit.
- Wisdom is knowing it does not belong in your fruit salad.

Before looking forward, I want to take a moment to look back to when you were first deciding where to go to college.

That is always a challenging decision but it was an especially difficult one for all of you. You are the generation that grew up in the shadow of the great recession of 2008 and 2009; with 10% unemployment and millions of families under personal and financial stress. It was an event that in some way impacted all of us and continues to shape our thinking and culture in many ways.

It focused families on job security, and many still question the value of a Liberal Arts education, believing that the primary goal of college should be to help secure a specific career and job after graduation.

The fact is, a Liberal Arts education has never been more important to your future and there is no better investment in time or money that you and your families could have made.

Past generations rarely shifted careers and changed jobs infrequently. Your generation is likely to have multiple different careers and switch jobs multiple times within each career.

That is in large part due the pace of change that is continuing to accelerate at a dizzying pace.

One of the reasons, is the increasing rate in the accumulation of knowledge. At the end of World War II, human knowledge was doubling every 25 years. Today, our knowledge of the world doubles every 12 to 13 months. Within your lifetime, it will very likely be doubling every single day. Take a moment to wrap your minds around that.

The result will be that many professions and entire industries will fundamentally transform in a single lifetime. Just think of the ways that artificial intelligence will transform the work of professionals, in similar ways to how automation and robotics changed the jobs of industrial workers.

With that in mind, it is clear that the skill of continual learning, that is at the core of a Liberal Arts education, isn't just a nice thing, it will be an essential thing. It will allow you to reinvent yourselves when needed, to not just cope with changes in your workplace or the world around you, but to embrace and take advantage of the opportunities that will open up in ways that none of us can imagine. That is just a part of how a Liberal Arts education has helped to prepare you for success in business and in life.

I know because that's what it did for me.

In fact, I learned very early in life how curve balls can come your way, change everything that you thought would happen and then, how to find the strength to take a new path and start again.

My first curve ball brought me to Illinois Wesleyan; quite literally by accident. My first college was the United States Military Academy at West Point. I was recruited to play hockey and fully expected to be a student athlete, Army officer, and then go to medical school as a military physician.

All was going well until I was injured in a terrible training accident. Struck in the side by a bayonet, I almost died from hemorrhage and other internal injuries.

In one moment, all my plans were shattered.

My hockey career was over and in fact, due to an autoimmune reaction that was a complication of both my injury and treatments, I had serious ongoing pulmonary and renal problems that made it unclear how long I would even live.

After almost six months of hospitalization, I was still so weak that walking was difficult. Yet despite the odds, I believed my recovery was good enough to consider going back to college.

I also decided on continuing the dream of becoming a doctor and to start back on that journey by finishing my pre-med studies at Illinois Wesleyan. I chose Wesleyan for two reasons.

Of course the quality of the education was the top of the list but truth be told, it was equally important to me that it had a small physical size. The intimacy of the campus would allow me to physically make it across the quad in my weakened condition and get from class to class as I continued a long recovery process.

It was here at Illinois Wesleyan that I not only found a new path towards my goal of being a doctor; I was also able to open my mind to not just the sciences but also to the humanities, arts and philosophy. To explore the full meaning of being human and indeed, to better understand myself, as I healed not just my physical wounds but also the unseen wounds that so often accompany trauma.

My Wesleyan education created a desire to continually learn and reach beyond perceived limits to explore the full breadth of my humanity and ability. That spirit and those values allowed me to repeatedly reinvent myself, as the unexpected events that come in every life unfolded. Sometimes creating new obstacles but more often, offering new opportunities if one could recognize them, was willing to learn and prepare and bold enough to take the leap.

As a result, I have had an unusual and rewarding life that has spanned multiple careers. It has been a journey that led me from this quad, to the operating room as a neurosurgeon, the lab as an inventor, the classroom as an educator, serving on our nation's battlefields as an Army officer, and

as a senior advisor at the highest levels of government; first at the Department of Veterans Affairs and then in multiple capacities in the Executive Office of the President in the Obama White House.

After government, I returned to the private sector, first becoming a corporate executive in one of the nation's leading healthcare delivery systems and then in the C-suite of one of the nation's largest health insurers.

Finally, the latest chapter in a book that is far from complete, is as the founder and CEO of my own consulting company, as well as a member of multiple corporate Boards and a Trustee of this university.

Through it all, the thread that ties this work together is the desire to serve our nation and humanity.

To help create a better health system. One that will be more accessible, equitable, affordable and financially sustainable for us all.

The reason to tell you about this unusual career and personal professional journey, is to give a real world example of how the ability to absorb new knowledge, see the big picture and personally grow, can open up exciting opportunities that are hard to imagine. To assure you that you have the ability to take advantage of change, rather than be blindsided and crushed by it.

The fact is that your world is likely to change even faster than mine. That is why the education that you are finishing here today, is the best preparation and starting point that you could have for the learning that will continue the rest of your lives and the changes that will no doubt challenge you to repeatedly reinvent yourself. Doing that will not only help you continue to be successful in a tumultuous world but to also lead a life of purpose and meaning, in whatever way you define those terms.

The privilege of your Liberal Arts education also means that you have a responsibility to not only make a great career for yourself but to contribute and give back to society. You are the innovators, thinkers and leaders of the tomorrow.

It is you who will at some point take over from past generations to use your talents, knowledge and wisdom to shape and improve the world you have inherited. It will be yours to lead much sooner than you think.

By the way, you have quite a fixer upper in many ways other than healthcare, so good luck! Everything I've experienced in interacting with your generation tells me that you're up for the challenge.

So take a moment today to celebrate.

Hug your family and friends and then get a good night of sleep because tomorrow, the next chapter of your life begins.

Our nation and our world is counting on you to make it a good one for yourselves, your children and everyone's children.

Lastly, I don't want to just leave you with that all too typical commencement speech of go out and change the world.

I also want to give you a few bits of advice, and maybe just a little bit of wisdom, to help you on your way:

- No matter how busy you get, keep family and friends close. They are the cornerstone of your life and will give color, meaning and grounding to all that you do.
- Challenge your assumptions. Question what you have learned and especially what you think you know.
- Pay attention to where the dots don't connect, to the perspectives that haven't been heard, to the obvious questions that haven't been asked, much less answered.
- Build a network of relationships, especially with your peers.
- Listen to people more than you talk.
- Respect others and really try to understand them, especially those that are different from you.
- Be kind to everyone and at the same time, cautious to trust.

- Treat famous people like they are regular and regular people like they are famous.

Life is exciting, challenging and sometimes hard.

When it is hard, don't forget to look around and take in the wonder.

When good fortune smiles, don't forget those for whom fortune has not been so kind and help them as much as you can.

Never forget that, family and friends will sustain you in times of struggle and make the times of joy all the richer.

Whatever life brings, I have great confidence that Illinois Wesleyan has prepared you for it.

In conclusion, always remember the university motto.

It was probably one of your first and it is now your last lesson here at Illinois Wesleyan.

Congratulations graduates!

Go out and make a great fruit salad.

END