

Superior Commencement - December 2011

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Thank you Chancellor Wachter for inviting me to participate in this commencement. Distinguished graduates, faculty, staff, and guests. It is my honor to be with you all here today. Over the past year I have spoken in London and Dubai, I have presented at the FBI Academy and the White House, and I have appeared on CNN and National Public Radio. But today, there is no other place I would rather be, than to share in this momentous occasion with you.

I have to start by saying that you are in good company because some of the best and brightest to have attended this fine university graduated during the December ceremony. My parents are in the audience and I am not sure if they are more proud of me today or that day in December, 13 years ago, when I walked across this stage.

You see, my path to UW-Superior was somewhat accidental. I didn't take middle or high school very seriously and some at my school didn't think I was college material. My senior year I took mostly carpentry and metal shop classes – not exactly college-prep courses. The night before taking the ACT, I was on the phone with my girlfriend until 4 in the morning – and we weren't exactly studying.

Growing up I wanted to be a police officer because in my small town in northern Minnesota the cops never seemed to arrest anyone – they just drove around town in their cars and were at all of the fun community events. In elementary school my friends and I used to chase them down the street because they would hand out cards with Viking football players on them. One of my hockey coaches was a police officer.

And because I didn't take high school all that seriously, I waited until late into my senior year to apply to college. I had planned to go to Alexandria Technical College, one of the top "police academies" in Minnesota, but due to some serious procrastination, I was put on a waiting list. Then my high school cross-country running coach told me that I really needed to get a 4-year degree, saying that it would give me more options when I graduated. I thought about it for a while and applied to UW-Superior.

At the time, my sister--who is 364 days older than me--was attending UWS, so I already had a connection. Well, my sister mentioned to the cross-country coach at UWS that I was a runner and that my high school team had won the state meet the previous year. He became very interested in me and gave me a call. A college coach was calling me? Little did he know that I was like the 9th best runner on the team and didn't even actually run in the state

meet. But that didn't matter; I felt like I was being "recruited" and I immediately decided that I wanted to go to UW-Superior.

That was one of the best decisions I made. When I arrived on campus in the fall of 1995, I immediately felt welcomed. To me, UWS was a "big school" because there were more students here than the entire population of my small town back home. Of course we know that UWS is the smallest of the 4-year universities in the UW system, but it was just the right size for me. Any bigger and I would have been lost among the masses; any smaller and I wouldn't have had as many opportunities for personal and intellectual growth.

I took to UWS like a fish to water. I ran for the cross country and track teams and got involved in many student organizations and extra-curricular activities. I committed myself to academics and with the faculty support that was readily available, I excelled. It was professor Gary Keveles who talked me into applying to graduate school. Former Chancellor Julius Erlenbach wrote one of my letters of recommendation. "It's another beautiful day in Superior, Wisconsin," he always used to say. As it turns out, I had such a good time at UWS that I wanted to make a career out of college.

I went on to Michigan State University for my graduate degrees and have taught at UW-Eau Claire for the past 7 years. I like to tell my current students

that I earned my undergraduate degree at the “Superior” UW institution.

They think I am just joking, but you all know the truth.

For over 10 years I have been studying what teens are doing online – the good, the bad, and everything in between. I focus primarily on cyberbullying and online social networking--and my professional passion is to equip teens with the tools necessary to make good decisions online. I also spend a lot of time working with parents, teachers, and others who interact with young people, helping them to understand the complicated intersection of teens and technology.

Now, I couldn't tell you who delivered the speech at my graduation back in 1998, and no doubt none of you will remember my comments--or even my name--13 years (or minutes?) from now. But you will remember this day – and your time at UW-Superior. For example, I remember studying statistics at 3 in the morning at Perkins, while eating a bread bowl and searching for the bottom of a bottomless glass of Mello Yello. I remember vying for a spot on the Residence Hall Association because there was talk that the campus was going to prohibit lofts in the dorm rooms. I remember addressing the Superior City Council to protest a proposed change to a truck route that would have directed 18-wheelers to drive right near campus. I did a lot of running on the streets of Superior, including at least one middle-of-the-night jaunt wearing little more than sneakers and a smile.

I remember my first date with a brown-eyed girl from my American Lit class who was also on the Student Senate with me. A little over three years after that date we were married across the street at the Cathedral of Christ the King. We had our reception at the Rothwell Student Center, may it rest in peace. So you can see that UW Superior has had a significant impact on my life. And I hope that you will look back at your time here just as fondly.

In a few moments you will officially become members of an exclusive fraternity – Superior Alumni. I travel to schools throughout this fine state--and across the country--and whenever I encounter a fellow Yellowjacket we share an immediate connection as if we have known each other for years. In fact, earlier this week I was speaking at the middle school in Milton, Wisconsin, and ran into a couple of alums. We talked about the cold breeze off of the Big Lake in February, and warm summer nights on Wisconsin Point. We also talked about how much the campus has changed in such a short time.

There is a new wellness center, a new student union, a new academic building, and major renovations have been done to the library. A few buildings that were here are now gone.

The physical layout of campus isn't the only thing that has changed over the

years. State support for public higher education has been declining steadily. In 1998, for example, the state covered 34% of the cost of the UW System budget, this year the state covered just 21%. When I graduated from UWS the cost for one year of tuition plus room and board was about \$5,500. This year it will cost students over \$13,000. A college education is becoming financially unreachable for too many in this state.

Wisconsin used to be the envy of the country—if not the world—for our high quality educational institutions at all levels from pre-k all the way up to graduate and professional schools. Decades of decreasing state support is wreaking havoc on that reputation. And just so we are clear, this depreciation has occurred under the leadership of both Republican and Democrat decision-makers.

In the words of President John F. Kennedy “Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education. Our requirements for world leadership, our hopes for economic growth, and the demands of citizenship itself in an era such as this all require the maximum development of every young American's capacity. The human mind is our fundamental resource.”

We need to prioritize public education once again in this state and you can do your part by putting your Superior education to work. Spread the word to others about the value of an educated population.

As much change as there has been, some things have remained constant. UW-Superior is still one of the best public liberal arts colleges in the Midwest. You will come to appreciate your preparation, and the University's remarkable regional reputation, as you enter the job market and working world. It isn't the best time to be looking for employment, but I can guarantee that you are significantly better off having earned a degree from UW-Superior.

This leads me to three areas that I want you to think about as you cross this stage and move onto the next leg of your life's journey.

First, never abandon your curiosity. Keep learning. Whether it's graduate school, a UW Extension course, or independent work at the local library, stretch your mind on a regular basis. The more I learn, the more I realize how little I actually know. Whatever you do, wherever you go, always seek to better yourself and those around you by continuing to engage in the pursuit of knowledge. Read a newspaper. Watch the news. Ask questions. Don't accept conventional wisdom – demand the facts.

Voltaire says that we should “judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers.” Ask the tough questions, questions like: Why does hate exist in this world? Why do so many children have to go to bed hungry tonight? Why

do people still die as a result of preventable diseases? And finally, ask yourself what **you** can do to solve these problems.

Second, get out of your comfort zone. Take risks. I don't mean to suggest that you should risk your life or safety, or that of others, but you should be willing to risk your ego, your heart, and your reputation for a good cause. As John Gustafson said in the classic movie Grumpy Old Men "The only things in this life that you regret are the risks you didn't take."

In my first semester of graduate school, I attended a dissertation defense. This is where a student stands before faculty and their fellow graduate students to defend what they did during years of research for their final project before earning their PhD. The student, who I didn't know, gave a formal presentation to about 40 people. After concluding his comments, tough question after tough question was lobbed in his direction. He handled it pretty well and eventually did earn his degree. But I thought to myself at the time that there was NO WAY that I would be able to survive such a gauntlet. I have always been a pretty social person, but at the time I didn't consider myself to be much of a public speaker. I never would have predicted back then that I would be delivering a commencement speech here today.

Since then, I have spoken to tens of thousands of people. I've presented to audiences as large as 1200. I've been on live TV and radio many times. When I spoke at the White House earlier this year, I could feel my heart pounding in my chest—and you can probably see the evidence of this on YouTube—but my education, starting right here, in the same classrooms as you, prepared me for all of these experiences.

I've also learned not to take myself too seriously. A couple of years ago I presented to about 600 technology company CEOs at a black tie event in New York City. I started my comments with a joke. I spent about 5 of my allotted 20 minutes setting it up. As I hit them with the punch line, there was complete silence (except for the crickets in the back of the room). It bombed. But I didn't quit. I continued with my presentation that evening, and vowed to work to improve my jokes so that I didn't end up in that uncomfortable position in the future.

By the way, did you hear about that guy who got his whole left side amputated? The good news is that he is all right now.

The point is, take advantage of opportunities to push the boundaries of your comfort zone when it comes to public speaking or other occasions to inspire or encourage others. Don't be afraid to embarrass yourself. Even if you fall

flat on your face, or if the joke bombs, at least you can relive the story with your friends, and fellow Superior alums.

Finally, and this in my view is the most important, I want to encourage all of you to live your lives with honesty, integrity, and a strong moral compass. You worked hard to get where you are today. Don't sacrifice all that you have accomplished by compromising your values. Integrity is doing the right thing even when nobody is looking. Keith Nord, a friend and former walk-on captain of the Minnesota Vikings says that to have integrity is to do the right thing when it costs you. It costs you your time, your money, your reputation, something.

A little over a year ago I was invited to appear on a nationally syndicated talk show to discuss cyberbullying. It is one of those shows that can lead to a lot of major opportunities. I had to decline the offer because I had already committed to speaking at a school in southern Wisconsin on that date. It was really hard to say no, but deep down I knew it was the right thing to do.

Sometimes it can be difficult to always do what's right – especially these days when it seems we are surrounded by people—famous people, smart people—who are choosing lust over loyalty, or convenience over commitment. Thomas Paine said that “Reputation is what men and women think of us; character is what God and angels know of us.” Always do what

your heart tells you is right and you will minimize the number of regrets you carry with you through this life.

So in sum: keep learning; be willing to risk your reputation for the things that matter; and live your lives with honesty and integrity, and the rest will fall into place.

You never know where life will take you when you walk out these doors. You could lose your job or your house or your life's savings, but nobody can ever take away your degree from UW-Superior (unless, of course, it is revealed that you copied your senior thesis off of Wikipedia). You can rest assured that your strong foundation in the liberal arts will serve you well: as a teacher or a police officer or a sales specialist. Even if you decide to spend the summer on the Klondike digging for gold, or the winter on the Bearing Sea chasing Opilio's – whatever you do, do it with excellence. Do it with pride. Do it better than anyone else. Or at least give more effort than anyone else. In grad school we used to say that if you didn't know the night custodial staff by name, then you weren't working hard enough.

Look at me: I'm just a small town kid from the Iron Range of northern Minnesota who would rather be on a lake or in the middle of the woods somewhere than reading or writing anything, and yet my fourth book will be published this spring. That's what a Superior education did for me and I am

confident that you will turn your academic preparation into something great as well.

UW-Superior not only prepared me for graduate school, but instilled in me a lifelong vocation in the art and science of teaching and learning. Both of my sisters attended this university, and I found the love of my life here. So, you see, I owe a lot to this place and I will never forget. I encourage you to continue to maintain a life-long connection to your alma mater. We are now linked, you and I, by our common experiences on this campus that is on the shores of the greatest of the Great Lakes, and together we can make the world a better place.

Thank you, and congratulations!