

Address by University of Washington President Michael K. Young at the 2011 Freshman Convocation, at Hec Edmundson Pavilion, in the Alaska Airlines Arena, on September 25, 2011, 10:30 – 11:30 a.m.

[President Young comes to the microphone wearing a black cowboy hat.]

Regent Blake, thank you.

You have no idea what a great day this is. I have spent my whole life wanting just once to be applauded on a basketball court. Thank you.

I am delighted to be here and honored to have an opportunity to speak with you. As Regent Blake remarked, I'm new as well. This is my first major academic ceremony and also an opportunity for me to pause with you and reflect for a moment and I'm thrilled to be embarking on this new venture with all of you.

It's an exciting time for both of us, made all the more so by the fact that we're celebrating the University's 150th anniversary – another opportunity for us to pause and to reflect. And the path that each of you has taken is different, one from another, and probably different from me. I've taken a little longer time to get here and it'll probably take me a little longer to leave. But nevertheless we've arrived at the same exciting point in our UW experience.

As Ed mentioned, 25,000 students hoped to be sitting where you are today. But we salute you. You were selected because they saw something extraordinary in each of you - abilities, commitment, drive, intelligence – something that the graduates of this university have been known for for 150 years, and we're thrilled and delighted to welcome you into that group.

But it isn't just your high test scores and your brilliance. It is that dedication, that passion, that commitment that we saw. Our admissions officers read every single application and they see something in each person sitting here with us today that is exciting.

But even with these impressive attributes I don't think any of you got here alone. Each one of you has someone, sometimes several someones, who helped on that long journey. And another great Husky attribute we're going to talk about today is gratitude. So I'd like to take just a moment today to thank those people.

Could I get all the mothers, grandmothers, anyone who's feeling motherly or maternal towards a student to stand up today. Would you students let them know how much you appreciate them. Now you may not notice, each one of those with a little tear in their eye nevertheless are sketching out the use for your room as soon as they go back home.

But fathers are also important and if we could get the fathers and grandfathers and anyone feeling particularly paternal towards a student today – if you'd stand as well and let us thank you and let your students thank you. Thank you.

We will do this again in four years and do understand, Conor notwithstanding, we want you out of here in four years. We love you, having you here, and we really want to see you go as well. But in four years we'll have a chance to thank again, as that reflects the attributes that are important in a Husky: gratitude, a sense of generational connection, just one of the many traditions that have been true of this university for so long.

I want to talk today about two other traditions that you have now adopted as you have become Huskies. As many on this stand will tell you, wearing a cowboy hat is not one of them. You're welcome but it really isn't a Husky tradition. But I'm doing it with a reason and the reason is, I want to be just a little autobiographical. I want to talk today about how I ended up where you are and how I ended up here.

I remember I grew up in the 1950's and as all young boys my age, particularly in my small town of 3,000 people, we grew up watching Roy Rodgers, and the Lone Ranger, and Gene Autry, and saw those vistas and saw the wonderful opportunity to chase the bad guys, to round up cattle, and I thought nothing could be greater. I really wanted to be a cowboy. I thought that would be a terrific opportunity.

My mother wasn't so sure that that should be the full reach of my aspirations and tended to give me books from time to time and in the process she gave me a book about lawyers. She gave me a couple of books about lawyers - Louis Nizer's book, F. Lee Bailey's book. And I was excited and challenged by what I read. I thought how great it would be to have those kinds of exciting opportunities and to use the skills they had developed to actually help people, to make their lives better, to solve disputes, to see justice done to people to whom injustice was being done. I thought that would be very exciting.

As I got that excitement, my mother helped me understand also that it was not likely that I would get there if I simply focused entirely on horses. And she stressed education. And she stressed that by doing that it would give me an opportunity to do something different in my life. My mother herself had

reinvented herself a number of times. She grew up in an equally small town in Utah but had decided she wanted to become an airplane pilot and indeed ended up doing precisely that and was, in fact, a bomber pilot in World War II. Your mother wears Army boots is not an insult actually in my family. It was a compliment at the time.

But she stressed to me that if I saw different horizons than the one that Roy Rodgers was riding into that I needed to do something different with my life. I needed to think about the place that would give me the opportunity to develop the capacity to do that.

And so, at the end of the day, she at that point stressed education.

Now, I put this hat on [President Young takes off the cowboy hat and puts on an academic tam.], which my wife describes as a left over throw pillow from my grandmother's couch, to tell you how extraordinary education was. It gave me an opportunity to explore, to learn, and to prepare – and to prepare for the unexpected. And my life has been very full of the unexpected.

I went into school intending to be a lawyer, and I came out a law professor. I then had an opportunity to be a diplomat, something I'd never anticipated. I knew a great deal about Asia. I thought, "This is my comfort zone. I can deal with Asia." The very first assignment I got was to serve as the lawyer for the U.S. delegation that was working on the unification of Germany. I'd never even been to Germany before.

Then I became dean of a law school. And of course like all great professors I disdained deans. I couldn't imagine that one would become a dean. One is at the highest quality as a professor. But I became a dean.

Then I became a university president, knowing virtually nothing about science, dropped into one and now two of the great scientific universities in the world and, yet again, found myself nominally in charge of something about which I knew nothing.

But the opportunity to do that, the capacity to do that, was something that came because of education. You, each of you sitting out here, will have at least three careers. Not three jobs, but, on average, three careers in your life. You will wear three different hats at least during your life.

Now this is the great Husky tradition, which is this is a university that offers an opportunity to you to prepare; and you will find yourself preparing in ways you never anticipated. You will find loves and you

will find interests and you will find skills and you will find capacities that you never thought you had. Go into the deep end of the pool. Go onto the tightrope without a net. Learn who you are – what you like, what you want. The University of Washington prepares you for that and this is exactly, as professor Wadden told you, a place that can do that.

This University was ranked number sixteen in the entire world. It has 250 plus majors and programs that you can explore. You've heard some of the extraordinary work that goes on from the deepest depths of the ocean all the way out into the far reaches of outer space. And there are many, many other UW faculty who are literally conducting research in everything you can possibly think of. I promise you, if you look, you will find something that interests you, that engages you, something that really will transform you and I encourage you with as much vigor as I can possibly muster to do that.

We also, as Conor suggested, have 700 clubs on campus: academic, cultural, political, social – all different sorts. Unlike Conor you can't join all 700. But join some and join some that are unusual. Find out things that you love that you didn't think you would love, that you would like. These represent wonderful opportunities for you to engage your fellow students. And don't ever underestimate how important your students are to you. I promise you they will teach you every bit as much as your professors do. Engage them, befriend them, find out what their interests are and what their passions are and learn from them.

Over the next four years you'll have opportunities to study abroad as well, for service learning, for internships, for research, for mentorships, for connecting to remarkable communities. Do it. Do that. No matter where you turn, you will find these opportunities at the University of Washington.

Now, we've been quoted from early philosophers, John Dewey in this century, and even a little bit in the past. But let me take you all the way back to Gautama Siddhartha, the founder of Buddhism. He made a very simple statement that I think guides. He says, "Your work is to discover your world and then, with all your heart, give yourself to it." [Then repeating:] Your work is to discover your world and then, with all your heart, give yourself to it.

Now, that gives us an opportunity for the last great Husky tradition I want to talk to you about. This is a great opportunity, a tradition and an opportunity and a privilege, to have this kind of an education. But with this education comes a responsibility, as responsibility, as you prepare yourself and find your passions, to use those skills, to use that drive and intelligence and commitment to make the world

around you a better place, to make the lives of those in your communities, in your nation, and your world better.

So, what we want to do at this point, is we now roll up our sleeves, once we graduate and learn these skills and we put on our work clothes. [President Young takes off the tam and puts on a purple hard hat with the block UW on the front.] We loosen our ties, and we put on our work clothes. This is the great Husky tradition. The responsibility that comes with a great education will be yours. And the world needs that.

If you look out in the world today there are many positive signs. Poverty is reducing. There are more people living now comfortable lives by the hundreds of millions than was true two decades ago. But at the same time the gap between the richest and the poorest is increasing dramatically. Extreme poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa, and that means living on less than one dollar a day, while percentage-wise has reduced slightly, has increased dramatically because of the number of people down there. There are one hundred and forty million additional people living in poverty.

And while higher education has become more and more available around much of the world, at the same time, in Sub-Saharan Africa one is now seeing a dramatic decline in the number of people who have educational opportunities. Poverty, as you may have read in the paper recently, in the United States alone, is up significantly. In addition there are certain groups during this latest recession who have lost between 50 and 75% of their net worth. This is a time for people who are serious, who are engaged, who are capable to do great things.

Health has improved around the world in many ways. But still, if you look at Sub-Saharan Africa, they have 20% of the world's children and 50% of the deaths of children under the age of 5. The same is true in inner cities in our own nation. The same is true in Seattle.

Education: Primary school enrollment has gone up rather significantly in many, many ways, but not in Africa. Fewer than half the children in school in Burkina-Faso, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia even go to school and the educational gap in our nation between various ethnic groups is increasing, not decreasing.

Access to information: Over half the population of the developed world, almost three-quarters, now has access to the internet. About one percent in the 50 least developed countries has access to the internet. There is much, much, much to do out there.

So in conclusion this is a time where we have an opportunity and a responsibility. But solutions to these problems aren't easy. They're complex, they're difficult. We don't always have enough information, enough infrastructure, enough organizational capacity, to deal with these problems – enough ideas, enough science, enough technology to really make a difference yet.

It is a time for serious people. The day of the loud mouths, the day of the Michael Moore's, and the Sean Hannity's and the Glenn Beck's and the Bill O'Reilly's is over. We need you. We need you to take this education and do with it what you can do and what Huskies have done for 150 years – competent in your discipline, data driven, knowledgeable, capable of turning your educational opportunities into real solutions to real problems, but doing it because you have a commitment and a passion. And that is the last great Husky tradition.

Now like all of you, I too am a Husky. So I can put on yet one more hat. [President Young takes off the hard hat and puts on a UW baseball cap.] I relish the thought of spending the next four years with you, sharing in your growth, your preparation, your excitement as you discover the world and as you find your passions. What an honor it will be to be with you during this journey.

Go Huskies!