

Commencement Address
Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine
The Peninsula Hotel, Chicago, Illinois
Monday, May 21, 2018
Smithsonian Secretary
David J. Skorton

Thank you, Dr. Neilson, for that introduction.

Provost Holloway; distinguished members of the faculty and staff; family and friends; and most of all, graduates of the class of 2018: congratulations!

In my former life as a university president, I was involved in many commencement ceremonies, so I know how meaningful this moment is to everyone here. I'm grateful for the opportunity to share it with you.

I have a lot of meaningful and very positive memories from my time at Northwestern, both as an undergraduate and a medical student. As an undergraduate, I remember the friendships I made on and off campus and the rhythm and blues band in which I played saxophone around Evanston and Chicago. I remember one particular dance club on the south side where we were thrilled to perform. And we were pretty well received. But... the club was shut down just a few months later.

Now, I hope the scientists here will back me up: cause and effect has not been established.

We played... the club closed down... this is merely a correlation.

And the sample size is very small.

Yes, those undergraduate days were terrific... oh, and I took some classes, too!

And my days at Northwestern University Medical School – before it was Feinberg – were among the most memorable of my life. The extraordinary quality of the faculty, the high level of medical care, the holistic curriculum, the friendships forged in classrooms, labs, and at the bedside.

But when I think back to my experiences at this distinguished medical school, the one that comes to mind first is actually one of the most challenging. During my first year, I was dealing with a severe family illness back in California, where I grew up. And as you can probably imagine, I was pretty distracted from my studies.

Then, as now, first-year medical students took their classes pass-fail. And that year, for the first time in my life, I failed a class.

That was a real blow to my confidence. It made me doubt whether I was on the right path. But it turned out to be a blessing in disguise – because the professor of that class took me under his wing. He invited me to spend some time in his lab where he tutored me until I mastered the material.

I bring this up now because, to me, it's an example of the student-centered culture that makes Feinberg, and Northwestern in general, so special.

It's also a reminder that you can make a difference in people's lives – as this professor did in mine – simply by showing them empathy and understanding... in other words, by being human.

And that brings me to what I'd like to discuss today.

A BROAD UNDERSTANDING

During your time at Feinberg, you have received a world-class education.

But a lifetime of experience has convinced me that success in the biomedical disciplines – whether direct patient care, research, education or health care delivery – requires more than the scientific education we get in school. It also requires a deep understanding of people and of the greater society. And, more broadly, a career in science and medicine has convinced me that we will not solve our thorniest problems as a society through science alone.

Of course, science remains essential. From genomics to immunotherapy to advanced imaging and many other areas, scientific and technological progress has radically transformed aspects of health care since I was a medical student. But as an internist and cardiologist, I have also been reminded again and again of the importance of skills that you can't learn from a textbook – the ability to relate to patients' fears, communicate openly, and to offer not just care... but compassion.

It's also the case that some of our most complex medical challenges – including debates over end-of-life care and physician-assisted suicide – are not just medical questions, but fundamental questions about what it means to be human and who we are as a society. Most recently, we have all seen the devastating personal and social consequences of opioid and other addictions – a national crisis that will take a combination of research, public policy, and compassion to even begin to solve.

This makes clear that, as you look to the future, it's not enough just to be an expert in a particular discipline. You are some of the most highly educated individuals of your generation. But to

achieve and to contribute all you can, you will also need a broad understanding of the social sciences, arts, and humanities. These are the disciplines that foster communication, empathy, and the ethical mindset that our professions – and all of us – require.

The good news is that these are not contradictory goals.

BRANCHES FROM THE SAME TREE

If you've looked at your programs, you might have noticed that the title of my speech today is "Branches from the Same Tree." It comes from an essay that Albert Einstein published in 1937. Einstein wrote:

"All religions, arts and sciences are branches of the same tree. All these aspirations are directed toward ennobling man's life, lifting it from the sphere of mere physical existence and leading the individual toward freedom."

What Einstein was saying is that he viewed science and the arts and humanities as deeply connected. It therefore shouldn't surprise us that he had a deep passion for music. In fact, he often played Mozart sonatas on his violin while he was trying to work out a theory.

Of course, Einstein was also a genius. But countless historical figures have also blended their passions for the arts, humanities, and sciences – including medicine.

Consider Anton Chekhov and William Carlos Williams. Both were physicians who continued to practice medicine throughout their literary careers. Like Einstein, they didn't see any contradiction between these pursuits. As Williams wrote in his autobiography, "When they ask me, as of late they frequently do, how I have for so many years continued an equal interest in medicine and the poem, I reply that they amount for me to nearly the same thing."

And there are similar examples today. For example, Rita Charon, who founded the Program in Narrative Medicine at Columbia, is both a general internist and a scholar of English literature.

As for me, I may not be on the same level as Chekhov. But as much as I treasured my stethoscope, my favorite instruments were always my saxophone and flute.

THE CASE FOR INTEGRATED EDUCATION

To be clear, I'm not suggesting that everyone should aspire to publish a novel or pursue an advanced degree in the humanities – although some of you might!

But while the people I just named are clearly extraordinary, their combination of interests and talents across disciplines does not – in my opinion – make them outliers. Rather, I believe that

the sciences, arts, and humanities are fundamentally connected – and mutually reinforcing – in ways that are relevant to all of us and will become more relevant in our collective future.

I recently had the opportunity to help test that proposition. I chaired a joint study that was released this month by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. The study is entitled “The Integration of the Humanities and Arts with Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in Higher Education,” and it can be found on the National Academies Press website.

As a committee, we set out to explore the relationship among the disciplines by evaluating how integration affects student learning outcomes. I’m not going to go into all the details now, but there are two findings that I want to share.

First, we found compelling evidence that integrating the sciences with the arts and humanities strengthens critical thinking, communication, and collaborative skills.

And second, when it comes to medical education, we found that integration is associated with improved visual diagnostic and auditory observation skills, as well empathy and resilience.

This is why many of the world’s leading medical schools have introduced elements of the arts and humanities into their curricula. It’s why Feinberg’s curriculum includes seminars in the medical humanities, applied arts, and bioethics. Indeed, I was pleased to hear that some of you are actually receiving a joint masters in the medical humanities and bioethics – which is exactly the kind of integration I’m talking about.

My hope is that that our findings will inspire more institutions to recognize that an integrated education is the most effective way to prepare students in every discipline to succeed on day one after graduation and for decades after.

I agree with Harvard’s President, Drew Faust, who has said, “The best education is the one that cultivates habits of the mind, an analytic spirit, a capacity to judge and [to] question that will equip you to adapt to any circumstance or take any vocational direction.”

I’m sharing this with you for a couple of reasons.

For one thing, it means those visits that some of you made to the Art Institute to look at paintings and sculpture were actually a productive use of your time – as Feinberg students and as people.

To varying degrees, many of you have experienced an integrated education – whether here or in your undergraduate studies – and that’s going to make you more successful in whatever you do next.

But even if you didn't, that's okay. Because while one phase of your education is ending, you're never finished learning. I'm not finished learning, and I've been out of school for over 40 years. So you can still apply these principles in your lives and careers.

CONCLUSION

Today, you are setting out in a world that is defined by constant change, rapid progress, bewildering challenges, and exciting new possibilities. To make the most of those possibilities, lifelong learning is a must.

It's also a world in which your career paths will be varied and – in many cases – unpredictable. This is not something to fear. When I sat where you do today, I never imagined that one day I would lead the Smithsonian. But I continued to learn broadly, and followed my curiosity and passions, and now here I am.

So my parting message to you is this. While you've acquired incredible, valuable knowledge during your time at Feinberg, you have only just begun to learn how you're going to apply it. Life is an education. And starting today, you get to choose what to learn.

As you embark on the next step in your journey, I have no doubt that you will continue to gain expertise in the fields you have chosen. It will happen naturally and, because of the education you received here, you will excel.

But I also hope that you will broaden your horizons. Learn new things—in new ways. And explore the full spectrum of what it means to be human.

If you do, it will not only make you better at what you do.

It will enrich your lives in ways you can't possibly imagine.

Thank you and, once again, congratulations!

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