

Academic Excellence and Social Responsibility

by

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Fellow students, colleagues on the faculty, honored guests. I accepted this invitation to speak to this honors banquet because of its special significance. To me, it is very important for minorities to demonstrate a capacity to meet the challenge of surviving, indeed achieving, in the context of the mainstream institutions of society. This not only is proof that refutes the incorrect idea that there is a mental deficiency suffered by colored minorities, but also it contributes to the transformation of institutions in such a way that more minorities can take advantage of the experience. This is especially true in institutions of higher education, and therefore I take this task quite seriously. You have proven a lie to the Jensens and Shckleys of the academic world who would argue that blacks and minorities are mentally inferior, and (by your excellence) you have substantially contributed to increasing the enrollment of minorities here at the University of Illinois, and to that I say thank you.

The theme of my talk, Academic Excellence and Social Responsibility, as many of you know, is the theme of the Afro-American Studies and Research Program. It is a theme that can usefully be considered in this context. Your experience represents excellence in at least four main ways. First, the act

of enrollment in the University of Illinois identified you with an institution that stands for academic excellence. In this way you identified yourselves with and took on the challenge of achieving the academic excellence required by this institution. Secondly, your choice of a major defined the academic context and the criteria that you would face in achieving excellence in your own work (in concrete and specific terms). Some of you have majored in the sciences, the social sciences, the humanities or the arts. In any case, all of these areas are academic areas, and all have their criteria for achievement. Third, you've achieved excellence by virtue of your ability to survive the institutional demands placed on you. This is a large bureaucracy. It is an impersonal formal organization, and all too often individuals cannot make the transition from the more intimate environment of their home community to a big major massive university environment. By virtue of your sitting here you have demonstrated excellence in being able to survive your adjustment to this major institution. But fourth, and perhaps the crowning achievement of your academic work so far, is your ability to make grades and achieve excellence in the actual curriculum that constitute the core of your academic program. This constitutes the major aspect of your achieving

academic excellence.

You had to get into this institution, you had to settle yourself into a specific academic program, and survive the overall demands of the institution. All three of these things are important general manifestations of excellence, but within the institution, the crowning standard of achievement is your ability to consistently make excellent grades. Courses differ, faculty and individual faculty members differ, lower divisional and upper divisional courses differ by virtue of the various requirements placed on you, depending on your program and what college you're enrolled in. The important thing is that you have made the grades, you stand tall among your peers.

But lets return to our theme of academic excellence and social responsibility. It's important to point out that from our point of view academic excellence is not the most important of the two aspects of our theme. The most important is social responsibility. The fact is, that each of the four ways that you've achieved excellence is based upon a social/political process of change that has had to be struggled for over the course of the last century so that you might have the opportunity to compete for academic

excellence today. First, to enroll in the institutions of higher education took a great deal of social protest and struggle through the courts and through the legislature (up to and including Congress) to give Blacks and other minorities an opportunity for higher education. Lots more needs to be done here. It is important to note that Illinois ranks fourth in the overall enrollment of college students and Blacks in higher education (after New York, California and Texas), and while the population of the State of Illinois is 15 percent Black, only ⁴ 3 percent at the University of Illinois-Urbana is Black. So that the struggle for enrollment is a struggle not couched in the academic but rather couched in the social aspect of bringing change.

Second, there is a similar relationship between your choice of a major (your specific academic program) and what you will be able to do with it once you graduate and go out into the society looking for a job. That is to say, the choice of a major is connected to occupational opportunities. Over the past 10 to 20 years, rapid transformation has occurred in the United States such that a new opportunity structure exists. Occupations previously not opened to Blacks or minorities now represent viable alternatives, and therefore, you are correct in choosing the majors you have.

Third, your adjustment and survival capacity in this institution is a function in part, in large part, of a class and cultural-orientation that you bring to this institution and that this institution itself represents. In the society at large there was (and is) a great deal of intolerance toward Blacks, and other minorities whether it was life-style, form of dress, informal use of language (any number of aspects), but the fact is, that you have become bilingual, have become bicultural, have been able to master the bureaucracy in the institutional life while at the same time continuing to survive with your own identity and your life-style.

Your ability to make grades, while certainly resting with your individual skills, are also rooted in what kind of high school, what kind of family support and what kind of attitude the society has translated to the institution about your capacity for intellectual achievement. My argument is that it is the fight for a better society, or it is our social responsibility, that creates the context, that creates the possibility, that creates the necessity if you will, for academic excellence, and it is in the context of this fight for a better society that academic excellence means the most.

The sum of this might well be clarified with the words of W.B. DuBois regarding his notion of the talented tenth: "The Negro race like all races is going to be saved by its exceptional men. Men, we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools—intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it. On this foundation we may build breadwinning, skill of hand, and quickness of brain with never a fear less the child and man mistake the means of living for the object of life." What this says, is that DuBois believed that it was the development of expertise, of exceptional people, of people who were able to achieve academic excellence, that we as a people should turn in order to have the leadership necessary to make progress. This is not vocational training, but a liberal arts education, what we stand for in this College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. DuBois called for a noblesse oblige, a term which means one's rank imposes obligation. In other words, it was the people who had achieved the capacity to contribute, and the status associated with that achievement, such as college graduation, such as going on to graduate school and professional school, then moving into a

significant and high status and highly responsible job, who would carry out an obligation to work to make this society a better place to live in. You see DuBois was not talking about a talented tenth that would end up being selfish and self-serving, but rather one that would have a social conscience, one that would contribute to society. Now this does not however, mean that he was talking about philanthropy, mere giving.

In other words, basically, the key to my application of DuBois' ideas here is to understand the notion of generational reciprocity. You are here at the University of Illinois having achieved excellence in your academic work because of your family, and because of the social forces of change in society that provide the basis for new programming, for new approaches to admissions, to academic programs, and to survival in the institution. You will contribute and reward those who fought for you by maintaining your fight for academic excellence inside the institution, and continuing it in the society so that the society will be a better place to live, so that you will keep doors open behind you, and you will contribute to more and more people from your community being able to take advantage of the strength of this academic institution of national, indeed world

importance.

Many people believe that special programs developed for minorities represent not only a costly welfare program, a luxury if you will, but that they provide an unnecessary opportunity for people who are academically unprepared to survive, much less achieve excellence, in the context of this institution. To merely have this banquet demonstrate that, that is not true. You are indeed having one of your finest hours here at the University of Illinois and it is well deserved.

But I must call upon you to understand the necessity to transform education from simply bureaucratic institutional achievement, to becoming a celebrated cause, a movement, a burning desire that can engulf all young people to fight to achieve what you have achieved. You are a beginning. It is a beginning for your life. It is a beginning of our renewed fight to maintain the programs that you're a part of in this period of financial austerity and cutback. It is a beginning because life itself has a unique capacity for reaffirmation and regeneration, and therefore, it is a beginning in part, because you want it to be.

I am pleased to have been at this banquet. I am pleased to have spoken to you about academic excellence and social responsibility. You have achieved excellence. I hope that you can continue to uphold the standards of social responsibility as represented by those who fought for you and the needs of those who need you to fight for them. Again, you are to be congratulated for your academic achievement. You have made all of us proud. Thank you.