

Faculty Commencement speaker: "Find passion, embrace civility, enhance community"

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<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/18943/faculty-commencement-speaker-find-passion-embrace-civility-enhance-community/>

The following is the text of the full University of Wisconsin Oshkosh 138th spring Commencement address delivered at the May 12, 2012 morning ceremony by UW Oshkosh Professor and Department of Philosophy Chair and new director of the University Honors Program Laurence Carlin:

"Graduates: When I was invited to be the commencement speaker, I was honored and excited. So, I accepted the invitation. Shortly thereafter, panic set in: what will I say?"

"Unsure what I would say, I did what many of you would do: I sought advice. Here is some of the advice I found:

"1. Don't be too abstract, for you will bore them. This could be challenging, for I am a Professor of Philosophy.

"2. Do not be too serious. This could be challenging, for I am a Professor of Philosophy.

"3. Don't be too funny. Not so challenging, for I am a Professor of Philosophy.

"I am a Professor of Philosophy. I am not famous. And I am not sure that I have a great story to share, or a life-altering piece of advice. So, why am I speaking to you today? Who am I?"

"The best answer, I think, is this: I am you! I have been where you are today. I took that long journey to a college degree. I stayed up all night studying and writing in frustration, sometimes frustrated with a professor. I was on the athletic field, and I was in the student clubs. I know what it is like to have a roommate with whom you do not always get along, and I know what it is like occasionally to want a break from the food at the cafeteria.

"So, I speak to you today, not as a celebrity, and not even as a Professor of Philosophy, but as a co-traveler: I know what you just went through, and because I am a few years ahead of you, I have some idea of what lies ahead for a lot of you. That is the perspective from which I address you today.

"My co-travelers, here is what I have learned: your ultimate responsibility is to make your head a happy place to live. Of course, you will want to get a job, you need to make some money. But it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that those are your only responsibilities. Your most important responsibility, I suggest, is to make your head a fun, happy, rewarding place to reside. After all, you cannot move out of it.

"I submit to you that making your head a happy place to live involves doing a lot of things, not just

working and making money. I can only speak from my own experience, but here are some things that I have learned make for a happier head:

"Lesson #1: Find Your Passion, Even if it Involves Making Uncomfortable Choices. You never know when passion and inspiration will strike, so you should attempt an interest in pretty much anything. When I started college, I believed I was going to be an accountant, so I began taking business classes. Thanks to the general education requirements, I decided to take a philosophy course. Much to my surprise, I loved it. And when it came time to graduate, I planned to become a philosopher — an uncomfortable decision, just ask my parents. But it paid off, and in fact this uncomfortable decision paid off even bigger than I could have imagined. In order to go to graduate school, of course, one has to take the Graduate Record Exam (GRE). I was on my way to the GRE that day, when I ran into the only other person late for the GRE that day. It was a girl I knew from freshman year, but had not seen in years. Thanks to that fateful encounter, that girl and I have been married for 15 years, and have three really cool children. Now, I cannot guarantee that will happen to you. But it was the result of a very uncomfortable decision, and I can guarantee that if you make such uncomfortable choices that are right for you in a search for your passions, they will lead you too to surprising places, and you will find happiness.

"Lesson #2: Take Out the Trash. Like all of you, my college roommate and I ate a lot of pizza. We each stubbornly refused to take the pizza boxes out, each of us insisting it was the other's turn. It was not long before the landlord knocked on the door to inform us that there was a roach infestation in the building and that they had tracked it to our apartment. That was not my proudest day, and it did not make my apartment a happy place to live.

"Similarly, I have learned that it is easy to let trash build up in your primary residence, your head. If you let anger, resentment, and self-doubt pile up in your head, you will not be happy, no matter how well you do in your career. "Civility works," we say here at UW Oshkosh, and I would add that it is the only thing that works. Get rid of the negativity, and when you have to, get rid of the fear. That brings me to my next point.

"Lesson #3: Use Bravery. I have learned that you can experience great joy when you exercise courage. But let's be honest about something: no one is brave all the time. Each of us has many fears. If we didn't the notion of courage would be vacuous, for what is courage but the triumph over fear? In my view, Matt Damon said it best in his classic film, *We Bought a Zoo*: "All you need is 20 seconds of insane courage, and I promise you something great will come of it." I think that captures the truth about bravery: you don't need it all the time. You just need insane spurts of it. Whether it is a job interview, a speech, an appearance before a school board, or asking someone out on a date, find that spurt of courage, and your head will be happier.

"Lesson #4: Do Something for your Community. My personal favorite is to work with children. Anyone who has worked with children knows there is something magical about it. It is one of those engagements where everyone comes away with a happy head. You will feel happy, the kids are happy, the parents are happy (because they got a break), and it is great for the community. On Monday, I will again participate in College Day for Kids, another fantastic program sponsored by our University in cooperation with the Oshkosh Area School District. I will teach Philosophy to 5th graders. My University students ask me about the differences between teaching them and teaching the 5th grade. The biggest difference is noticeable as soon as I walk in the room. Early in the morning, when I walk into the room full of

University students, they are half asleep and no one is moving. When I walk into the room full of 5th graders, no one is sitting still. I teach to a room of bodies in constant motion, and yet somehow they still grasp everything I say, not finding it at all distracting that there is a rave-like atmosphere in the room. Another difference lies in the questions asked: my University students might ask me about the moral considerations behind Socrates' decision to remain in prison; my 5th grade students will ask what he had for lunch in prison. Of course, I have no idea, and that might show how ill-prepared I am to teach the 5th grade. But I do it anyway, because it is an uncomfortable choice that gets me out of my element, is good for the community, and it makes my head happy.

"So, there you have it, graduates. Those are some of the things I have learned about meeting my ultimate responsibility, making my head a happy place to live. Your path will, of course, be very different from mine. Still, my advice to you is the same: never lose focus of your ultimate responsibility, and use good will, intellectual inquiry, and lots of humor along the way.

"I suppose what I am saying is this: Don't just get a job. Get a life! Read interesting books; build something for someone; throw a block party; climb a mountain somewhere; visit a foreign country; watch a cooking show and try to do what they do; help out your neighborhood; fill your head with the liberal arts, and along the way outwork a bunch of people. And for goodness sake, if you ever get the chance to become a graduation speaker, you should do it, because this is fun!

"But don't go get a life today. Today, celebrate, for as a co-traveler, I know all too well that you deserve to celebrate today. This is your day, class of 2012. Congratulations! I wish your heads forever filled with happiness.

"Thank you."

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- [First-ever doctoral grads make UWO history May 12](#)
- [Eighteen honored with Chancellor's Awards for Excellence](#)
- [Class speaker to class of 2012: "Feel proud of your accomplishments"](#)