

Keynote speaker: Keep in touch with campus

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<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/1561/keynote-speaker-keep-in-touch-with-campus/>

William Wresch, professor of management information systems and associate dean for undergraduate programs at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, gave the commencement address at the University's midyear ceremony Dec. 13.

Here is a transcript of his speech:

In 1904 Rufus Halsey was president of this institution. As students graduated that year, he asked them to write him twice each year to tell him about their jobs and their lives.

And they did.

Those letters are now in University Archives, so we have a pretty good sense of how our graduates fared one century ago. Most of the graduates in those days went into teaching, and they went into teaching at a very special time in America. We were in the midst of a large immigration wave, and the results were not always pretty for the new graduates.

One new teacher in Theresa, Wis., reported back, "The people are pleasant, but that is about as far as it goes. The saloons draw too much. With a population of about 400, the town supports eight saloons and two breweries."

A new teacher in Elkhart Lake said, "The town is entirely German, and I can neither speak nor understand German. Besides this, the place is so decidedly immoral that I do not care to stay."

Another teacher, starting off in Sheboygan, said her students were all foreigners and could not speak a word of English. "Some came from Russia only a few months ago. I have no American children."

Besides students and parents who could not speak English, teachers had other problems. In Abbottsford, one new teacher was attacked by the village clergyman because some students had become interested in evolution. And in Dunbar, the teacher complained there was "no house to live in that is not overrun with vermin."

Also in those days, it was routine for women teachers to be paid less than men, and in fact during this period they earned 44 cents for every dollar that a man earned. If it seems like men had a better deal, think again. One young graduate reported the Catawba, Wisconsin, School District wanted to save some money, so they fired all the male teachers, including him.

Now I take you back to those days 100 years ago for two reasons — first to remind you that others have gone before you, and whatever concerns you may have about the current job market, you will not have to worry about a house overrun with vermin, towns where no one speaks English and clergymen beating you

for teaching modern science. I am not sure we actually have fewer saloons than we did a century ago, but in general I think we have to admit that we all live better than people used to.

The second reason I mention Halsey's request is that he really speaks for all of us: We want to hear from you after you graduate. We are more modern these days, so we will send you periodic surveys to learn about your current activities, and we will learn a great deal from those surveys.

Once you are out of school and working for a couple years, you will have a new view of the courses you took here. Some you will find are much more valuable than you expected, and other courses may be fine, but you will see additions that could be made. We review those surveys every year, and we use them to improve our courses.

But as much as we value those surveys, they aren't the same as the letters Halsey used to get. They really aren't any substitute for you dropping us a line about your latest job or your upcoming marriage or any event in your life.

Because, you see, we will miss you. You are probably right that we will forget your name soon enough, and if you change your appearance a great deal, we may even have a bit of trouble recognizing you if you come back to campus, but in some manner or form, we do remember you. And we care about you.

And nothing brightens our day like having a former student come back to campus to speak at one of our clubs or in class or just to wander down the hall and say, "Hi."

Send us an e-mail. Invite us into your LinkedIn network. Stop by Pollock Alumni House or send a note through the Alumni Relations' Web site. But somehow, some way, find a way to stay in touch.

I have now been teaching 34 years. I can tell you I forget campus committee meetings about 30 second after I walk out the door. Hearing that a research study of mine is being published makes me feel good for a couple days. But an e-mail from a student — I will smile about that for weeks.

So on behalf of all the professors and all the staff on campus, I congratulate you on your graduation. We wish you the best in your careers and in your lives. We hope you avoid the vermin of Dunbar and the saloons of Theresa, and we hope you find a few minutes to write or call and let us know how things are going.

We will miss you. Good luck!

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