

Liberal Arts Education in an Uncertain World¹

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I am honored to be invited to deliver a speech at UIC's Graduation Ceremony and I wish all the graduates a bright future.

Unusually, I am giving this speech via video stream. Facing this global pandemic, we have responsibilities to reduce the risk of viral transmission and to protect ourselves and those around us. The COVID-19 pandemic threatens and impacts all aspects of medical care, the economy, our daily lives and international communication. This is a great challenge for everyone, especially for you who are at this turning point in your lives. I would like to extend my best wishes to all of you setting sail into an uncertain future.

There is a saying that runs, "The only thing about the future that we are certain

about is its uncertainty." In recent years, technological evolution has accelerated and international disputes have increased, resulting in the future becoming increasingly unknown to us. We are experiencing a time of social change. Finding possibilities and certainties during these uncertain times is a challenge for us all, and it is a test of our wisdom and courage.

Education is the key to addressing these social issues and shoring up the foundation of society's future development. The education that we provide and the people that we nurture today will decide the future that we will have tomorrow.

Education builds consensus and shapes civilizations. It is particularly important in times of crisis. In today's world, we must

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reaffirm the common values of mankind, consolidate common ideals, and seek solutions to the pandemic as well as to on-going disputes. Without education, the human community will not hold together and we will be unable to shape and perpetuate our best values.

Futurology may be useful for examining the current dynamic social situation and helping people to explore how to predict, choose and create a better future. People are no longer waiting in silence and adapting passively. Rather, they are choosing to actively pioneer, create and seek certainties amid uncertainties. Education, and only education, will help people see the outcomes of these uncertainties and lead us to confront what will come in order to create certainties.

I recall a meeting I had with the President of Pomona College, Dr. G. Gabrielle Starr, in Hong Kong in March of 2019. She noted the trade conflict between China and the United States at that time, as well as the technological revolution that had brought about conveniences while also spawning various social problems and creating a sustainable development crisis that humanity must face together. Dr. Starr explained how she believed that a traditional liberal arts education, as a solution to an uncertain future, could help students understand the issues and contribute to

solving these problems. More than two years ago, the President of Wesleyan University, Dr. Michael S. Roth, and I met in Shanghai, and we discussed the value of a liberal arts education. During this pandemic, he has voiced his opinion and stressed the importance of integrating traditional education with the current trend of online education, while also firmly asserting that education and life on campus remain indispensable.

The Presidents of these two top liberal arts colleges conveyed the same message: a liberal arts education cultivates students' inner qualities and this is the most effective way to train future progressive talents to address the most pressing issues. You are fortunate that UIC is the confluence of the East and the West, and that you have learned both Chinese culture and international perspectives, as this will give you a unique vision for problem-solving.

Why is a liberal arts education so significant? I believe there are three reasons.

Firstly, a liberal arts education allows you to guide yourself. Confucius said, "A gentleman should be versatile." Liberal arts education pursues truth, virtue and beauty as well as cultivating a whole person with broad knowledge, a decent character and a refined aesthetic. Therefore, such an education is not just a tool to acquire qualifications or a means of earning

a living. The whole person cultivated by liberal arts education should have broad-based learning and solid values with a considered outlook on life and the world.

Secondly, a liberal arts education fosters people who will lead communities. A person educated in this way will not isolate themselves from society or apply their professional skills selfishly. Thus, a liberal arts education integrates a humanist ethic into professional and technological fields. It not only emphasizes the consequences but also considers the social impact of professionalization and technologization on the broader community. Ultimately, a liberal arts education focuses its holder's attention not on their own future, but on their community's well-being as a whole.

Thirdly, a liberal arts education promotes dialogue. It embraces diverse cultures from the East and the West. Chinese culture values virtue, while the spirit of truth-seeking has animated the Western sciences since the Enlightenment. The combination of these two can fill social gaps and resolve conflicts. At this moment, as we are confronting a global crisis, you need to be courageous and assertive in projecting the values of your liberal arts education into your vision of the future.

A liberal arts education is not only a course of learning but also a set of values

that can be carried throughout your life. When you leave campus for this world of information explosion and uncertainty, you must remember what the liberal arts have taught us: sharing, cooperation, responsibility, patience, courage, rationality, and more. These are at the core of a liberal arts education and they are the true meaning of education in general.

When the famous historian Leften Stavros Stavrianos talked about why we needed a global history for the 21st century, he explained that *Homo sapiens* now is engaged willy-nilly in a search for an alternative to *Homo economicus*, or more precisely, for an ethical compass to direct our rampant technology. This represents a great challenge to the human species—the greatest in its meteoric career. Humanity is confronted now with the novel challenge of achieving transcendence from the intelligent *Homo sapiens* to the wise *Homo humanus*—in short, from intelligence to wisdom.

Dear graduates, you need to understand where we are going and prepare for our shared future. Each new era is created and defined by a new generation. Although the future is full of uncertainties, it is also open to beneficent change. Let us advance towards what is good and use our thoughts and actions to create a better world. Good luck!

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