

*Commencement speech, University of Maine, May 13, 2006 – David W. Townsend
(given annually by the Distinguished Maine Professor for that year)*

Thank you, President Kennedy, *etc.* It is an honor to be invited to speak to you, the graduates, today and to “*celebrate academia*”. ... But, not being too sure what this really means – this *celebration of academia* – and because I was too embarrassed to admit it and ask someone, I am going to assume that I am standing here today to celebrate with you your *academic achievement* – your *graduation* from this institution – and *all that that means* (but, don’t worry – they’re giving me only five minutes to do it).

I am also going to assume that the *cause* for celebration today is not just the fact that you’re finally finished, but, that in your 4 years here (or 5, or 6...) you took a lot of classes (and, I trust, you actually *attended* quite a few of them), and as a result you *learned a great deal*. You got that “*college education*” you’ve been hearing about since you were a toddler – and *that is cause for celebration*.

But before you get too smug, think about this: If I were to ask each one of you to take a yellow pad and write down everything you think you learned here, I’ll bet you would be surprised how quickly you would run out of things to list – because the truth is: *You’ve forgotten a lot of what you thought you had learned*. It just ... flew out of your brain – somewhere – never to be recalled (it’s really gone; trust me on this one!).

Now, actually doing this little experiment would probably *depress* a lot of you – even though I just said we’re here to *celebrate*... In fact, your parents and family must be wondering – if this is true – what it was that they, and you, paid so much money for? (and I suppose my bosses are squirming a little right now, listening to this admission... [they’re seated behind me, by the way])

But don’t worry about it. Why? Because you have learned. What I mean is: You and your brain have changed – it’s just that, right now, you can’t put your finger on *what it is that has changed* (and don’t look down at that yellow pad for help...). While *you* may not see it yet, the *people around you* will notice the change (not your classmates sitting beside you right now – they’re not noticing anything). But *your family* will see the change.

And, perhaps most importantly – with our attention glued these days to issues of *Jobs and the Economy* – employers will notice. In fact, it’s probably this notion of “*job training*” that convinced you to go to college in the first place... You’ve heard it all your life: “To get a better job” you’d have to go to college. And having done that, you’ll now be able *to earn more money* – a *lot more money* – not just in your first job, but over the course of your lifetime.

But, if you really did forget so much of what you learned here, why would anybody hire you? Did you get any “real job training”? Well, some of you did, of course. But the rest of you are probably wondering... Look; like most universities, we offer about 90 or so different majors here at UMaine. Does this mean that there are only 90 possible jobs in

the world? Of course not. In fact, a lot of us majored in disciplines that aren't even remotely related to our current jobs... Take a look at your own transcripts and you'll notice that some 60-70% of the classes you took here were NOT in your major – like all those *Gen Ed* courses, etc... Ever wonder why we made you take them?

The point I am trying to make is this: It's actually OK to have forgotten a lot, because, for one thing, your employers will teach you the details of what you need to know (this message doesn't apply to medical school graduates, by the way; I don't want *my* doctor to have forgotten anything!). You see, the real reason employers seek out college graduates – whether they are willing to admit it or not – is because of that “*change*” I just spoke about. *You have changed*. You are ready to be taught new and complex details by your employer because you have a different mind now, one that processes information differently. Even if you are unaware of that difference, it's real. And because of it, you will *continue* to learn and understand in ways you were unable to do a few years ago. Quite simply, you no longer look at the world the way you did when you first came here. *And that's what a college education is all about!* It may take a few years, but one day you'll see what I mean...

So, after today you'll either go on to do graduate work, or get a job...whatever. But consider this: You are about to join an elite group. Only 23.7% of Maine's adults hold a 4-year college degree, and in a few minutes, you'll be one of them. *Only one in four adults in Maine have the degree you are about to receive!* – and there's the rub: *1 in 4!* The New England average is closer to 1 in 3! (it's 30%).

State-by-state across the U.S., *per capita* income is positively correlated with this percentage of adults with a college education – which means that Maine has to find a way to catch up to the rest of New England...

For one thing, we have to find ways to convince you to stay here in Maine. And we have to lure back to Maine your counterparts who get degrees from out-of-state institutions. *Retention, Return* and even *Immigration* will all help...But most importantly, this university, and the state's university system in general, will have to ratchet up the pace at which we generate graduates like yourselves if we are ever to reach that 30% mark. And that will take significantly greater state investments in public higher education, which will require a gut check by our state's leaders.

A college education is worth so much more than most people seem to realize... In fact, one of the biggest challenges facing higher education these days, in my view, is the narrowly-focused notion that *a college education is job-training* – which, I have tried to convince you, isn't always the case. That way of thinking – this *commercialization of higher education* – is forcing *change* in America's colleges and universities – for good or for bad – and it is becoming more important every year. Universities across America are being pressured from all directions to emphasize their role in creating jobs and stimulating the economy – especially *through R&D* – which, by the way, our faculty and graduate students here at the University of Maine do very well indeed, and of which I am very proud. But remember: The *products of research* – *ideas* – are important whether

they have commercial value or not. ... While we do it well, we do much more than research – we teach. And I am even prouder of the quality of teaching by our faculty, who are sitting here in front of me... That’s because, in my view, it is higher education itself – a *college education* – that is really the economic engine that Maine must promote and enhance. This is a *frustratingly simple*, but nonetheless *exceedingly difficult* message to get across! Maine, and the nation, need so much more than just a “trained work force”... a trained work force to work for whom? And to fill what jobs? We need fresh, new mind-power – we need more of *you* – to invent the jobs of tomorrow. And we need an educated population capable of making intelligent and informed choices that affect our future – regardless of your political leanings.

Not accepting this challenge could spell trouble; in the absence of quality higher education, as the late Carl Sagan put it (with respect to science literacy): “*We risk becoming a nation of suckers*”.

So, welcome to our “elite” *club*. I congratulate you on your achievement; it is indeed cause for celebration. Today is your day – so enjoy the moment...just don’t do anything stupid tonight.