
Planning for an Uncertain Future

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Members of the Brown University Corporation;
Dean Estrup and other members of the Brown administration;
Distinguished faculty members;
Esteemed namesakes of Brown's 10 new graduate teaching awards;
Honored family and relatives, especially parents and grandparents,
Alumnae and alumni, friends, and guests;
And most important of all today, the group of which we are most proud, the members of
the 1997 graduating class of graduate students:

It is a privilege to have the opportunity to speak to you today, especially to address the
graduating class on what should be one of the most memorable days of your lives.
Memorable for a host of good reasons, including pride in a hard job well done, and
celebration with family and friends. Memorable, too, I am sure, for such peak
experiences as preliminary exams and oral dissertation defenses, fond recollections for
many of us, to be sure.

Let me begin by telling you, the graduating class, who you are. Does this sound
presumptuous of me? I'm sure it does, but my friend Joan Lusk, Associate Dean in the
Graduate School, has been keeping close watch over you for many years. She has
whispered in my ear some interesting facts about you that I want to pass along.

First, do you know where you have come from? It is a fact that almost 70% of those
receiving your graduate degrees from Brown today, including those who could not be
with us this morning, are US citizens. The remaining 30% come from no fewer than 40
different countries. Foremost of these is China, from which 29 of you have come, almost
twice as many as the next country, Korea, a country that has entrusted Brown with 15 of
its finest. Korea is followed by India, Taiwan (9), Japan (8) tied with Canada (8), Italy
(5), Greece (4), and Turkey (3) tied with Russia (3).

There are 148 of you receiving Brown PhDs today, and 172 earning Master of Arts,
Master of Arts in Teaching, and Master of Fine Arts.

Today's graduates earned baccalaureate degrees from at least 196 different colleges and universities.

The institution serving as the largest single source of Brown graduate students has always been Brown itself. This year is no exception, with 31 of today's graduates having earned Bachelors' degrees here. The next most prominent undergraduate colleges represented today are Cornell (10), Harvard (8), Seoul National University (7) tied with Rhode Island College (7), Dartmouth (6), and a five-way tie at 5 among UC Santa Cruz (5), Smith College (5), Peking University (5), UC Berkeley (5) and Yale (5).

I am pleased to report that we are granting PhDs this year to 10 minority students. We are also awarding Master's Degrees to 40 minority students, more than half of whom intend to go on to the PhD. With regard to gender, over half of the MA, MAT, and MFA recipients are women, as are 44% of the PhDs, although only 26% of the Master of Science recipients are women.

On the seniority front, or should I say experience front, the average age today of those for who will leave with the Master's is 30, while those who are taking their master's today and continuing on at Brown to the PhD average 27 years old. The average age of the PhD recipients is 32.

How long has it taken our new PhDs to earn their diplomas? By national standards, eight years to finish the PhD is not exceptionally long. The average PhD recipient finishing at Brown today was enrolled for a total of 5.6 years. The longest time to a PhD awarded today is ... 21 years from first enrollment in 1976 (I won't ask you to stand up...you must be very tired), and the shortest time is 3 years (only one student). 13 PhD graduates took more than 10 years to finish, and 7 have finished in only 4 years.



Now that I've told you about yourselves, we have come to the part of the program where I am supposed to transform myself from one of your older but mere colleagues, into a sage and a visionary. From this position, I am supposed to complete your Brown education by giving you words to live by for the remainder of your lives.

My title for this modest effort is "Planning for an Uncertain Future." I chose that title because, as we all know, commencements are more about thinking of what lies ahead than about remembering what has past. These are exciting, heady, and scary times. Some of you have firm ideas of where you are headed when this morning's festivities have concluded. Others of you may not know yet, or may not have decided. But few if any of you know where you will be ten years from now, or what you will be doing, or with whom you will be working, or with what tools you will do your job.

And, as you have heard from the futurists, you are likely to have several jobs, or careers, in your future, not just one. Such is the state of the world, and of higher education and

research in particular. I have no privileged knowledge enabling me to give you a roadmap into the next millennium. We are living in a whirlwind, a state of brisk and exciting change. That makes planning both more important to do and more difficult to do.

For those of you contemplating careers in teaching, I applaud you. I encourage you to pursue that goal, even though the field of education itself is balanced on the threshold of drastic change. Change not only in what is taught but in how it is taught, as the combination of shrinking budgets and rapidly changing technology promises to alter fundamentally and forever what goes on in the classroom.

For those of you contemplating careers in research, scholarship, or the arts, similar uncertainties face you as changes are in store in how these activities are conducted and how they are financed. Our libraries, laboratories, and studios are on the cusp of a metamorphosis, and in the future may scarcely resemble those that are so familiar to us now.

If I could give you just one piece of advice, as you plan for an uncertain future, what would it be? I will not suggest to you that you work hard. You already know how to do that, or you would not have gotten where you are today. Still, I cannot resist relaying on the wisdom of the mother of Alva Way, Brown's Chancellor Emeritus, who warned Al that "today's peacock is tomorrow's feather duster."

Neither will I suggest that you be clever, or cautious, nimble, bold, or original, because you already own those traits.

No, the challenges facing new graduate school graduates today lie elsewhere, and those challenges are rooted in questions directed at all of us who are scholars, who are academics, are teachers, or are researchers. These are hard questions about the contributions we make to the world that surrounds and supports us. If I had just one piece of advice I could give you, it would be to make yourselves as useful to others as possible. For if you are useful to others and to society, you will not only make yourself valued, but you will also assure yourselves that you will make a positive contribution to the world. Those two goals in tandem make a formidable, winning combination.

Why do I single out usefulness? I do so because of growing perceptions, among members of Congress, among business-people, among workers, and among parents who pay for their children's education. The concern is that much scholarship in academe and elsewhere benefits few people if any beyond the scholars themselves. These people, most of whom have the best of intentions and are successful in their own fields, believe that those of us who pursue research, scholarship, and the arts may have become spoiled. They fear that we may enjoy the luxury of our pursuits free from many of the hardships and pressures that others in the real world face. That in our libraries, labs, classrooms and offices we are buffered from that world and feel little sense of accountability or obligation to return much of obvious value to the world that pays for our efforts. The usefulness of lives of those of us with graduate degrees in particular is being questioned,

more widely and more frequently than happened in the past. At the same time, we see closely coupled concerns about an oversupply of PhDs. This trend is evident for scholars across a wide range of disciplines spanning the social and natural sciences as well as in the arts and humanities. The concerns result in part from a society, a country, that feels itself under financial stress and that has come to demand quick answers and fast fixes.

Those are strong words that are firmly held by those who voice them, and we ignore these words at our own peril. For my part, I know that many of these sentiments are based on misperceptions and misunderstandings, but in other cases I believe there is a grain of truth there that we must confront.

Is this a new concern, as our society feels itself stressed to new limits? No, neither is it new, nor has our society ever been in a better position to afford to support scholarly pursuits. Let me read you a passage that I suspect some of you have never heard.

... institutions for liberal education are highly beneficial to society by forming the rising generation to virtue, knowledge, and useful literature, and thus preserving in the community a succession of men [and women] duly qualified for discharging the offices of life with usefulness and reputation...

This passage is not from this year, this decade, or even this century. It's from The Charter of Brown University, dated February, 1764. So I believe that the concerns about usefulness are probably as old as organized higher education. But the concerns are manifesting themselves in new ways, with new levels of impatience and shortsightedness that are becoming more difficult to combat.

And so now, 233 years after the Brown Charter was written, we are hearing unprecedented demands that we in academe, we in scholarly, research or artistic pursuits, demonstrate up front that our efforts will be useful. In other words, that they will lead in some clear and direct path to benefits to the larger community, preferably financial benefits and preferably soon. This mindset, I argue, puts us all in peril, especially those of you who are receiving your graduate degrees today and who are hoping for gainful employment in your chosen fields. At the same time, it puts in the greatest jeopardy the future that our children and grandchildren will live to see.

One of the more striking and immediate casualties of this mindset is a scientist named Alan Hale. No reason that you should recognize the name – he's not connected with Brown in any way of which I am aware. Alan is just another recent PhD from another university (1992, New Mexico State). He is having problems finding employment at a decent salary and so is being supported at the moment by his wife, who is a nurse. What makes Alan Hale noteworthy is that he is the co-discover of the Hale-Bopp comet that dominated the news recently. If Alan is having trouble, doing first-rate work in a field that is filled with tremendous excitement, what does this mean for the rest of us?

I use Alan Hale, a scientist, as an example for the main reason that traditionally, the usefulness of science to society has been the easiest to demonstrate. It is certainly a far

easier task than in the social sciences, the humanities, or the arts. We all have heard from tax payers who balk at being asked to finance art they find offensive or literary analysis they see as having little bearing on their lives and their places of work, places that in many cases have been downsized for economic reasons. Now this thinking has spread to support for basic research and scholarship from the Federal Government, in virtually all areas save for health. The view is that now that the cold war is over, we no longer face a pressing need to fund basic science. Given the culture wars that are evident in the arts and humanities, they feel there is even less reason for the public to underwrite efforts there.

We are witnessing a short-term mentality here, a regrettable overemphasis on the quarterly statement, an impatience for quick, quantifiable results. Short term thinking is not the way research and scholarship best progresses, as most of us know well here. I think we are seeing in this trend a short-sightedness for which future generations will pay. Indeed, I believe this sorry trend holds true even in the better-off areas of biology and medicine, where budgets have been benign. Many of the most significant advancements in medicine, such as MRI that is revolutionizing diagnosis and treatment, have had their origins in basic science, including physics.

There are several reasons for this shortsightedness, some of which are in fact the fault of academe, some really no one's fault. Clearly the principal driving force has been the mounting pressures to balance the U.S. Federal Budget. But why would investments in research (and education) be targets for reduction? For one, it is notoriously difficult to pinpoint specific links between basic research the ultimate payoffs for society. The lags between breakthroughs and tangible applications are often 20 – 30 years, with longer lags tending to go along with more basic research. This means that dollars not invested in research in 1997 will result in a shortage of applications around the years 2025, when it will be too late to wind back the clock and do it over again right.

For another reason, scholars and researchers, including professors at universities often are perceived to be aloof, seeming to take for granted their freedom, lack of accountability to others, and generally living comfortable-seeming lives, showing a degree of disdain for those who ask what relevance their work might have. Those of you who are receiving your degrees today have seen and worked with faculty close-up, and I hope you have witnessed yourself how hard-working and caring most faculty in truth are. But appearances and occasional abuses can do a lot of damage, and that in turn can jeopardize future funding for our work.

In Waxahatchie, Texas, for example, there stands a monument to academe's inability to explain to the larger population the importance and usefulness of what we do. The cost of this monument approaches \$10B, but you may not have seen it because it's underground. I refer here to what is now left of the now infamous superconducting super collider, a monstrous subterranean cavern and probably a total waste of the billions spent on it. Even its web site is now shut down.

There are some positive signs of improvements on this front, however. For one, the National Science Foundation recently commissioned a study whose results show clearly the impact of federal funding on breakthroughs in industrial innovations in this country. In brief, the study, as reported by William Broad, revealed that “73 percent of the main science papers cited by American industrial patents in two recent years were based on research financed by government or nonprofit agencies” rather than by private companies.

In addition, many in Washington and in the media, even deficit-conscious Republicans, are getting wary of the government’s declining investments in research and how that may affect both our competitiveness in the international markets and the quality of our lives in the near future. David Gergen, Editor at Large for USN&WR and a prominent figure in the Bush Administration, has joined others in “expressing alarm that research investments as a function of the Gross Domestic Product are approaching a 40 year low”! What is surprising and delightful is that leading the charge to reverse this trend is the Republican Senator from Texas, Phil Gramm, who wishes to see federal support for basic research at the National Science Foundation and elsewhere doubled in the next decade. I wish Gergen and Gramm Godspeed, and I hope their success is contagious and spreads to the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities.

Whatever may be in store for us at the national level, I see some good news for research and graduate education on the local front. As Brown University prepares for its future, which in most ways is no less uncertain than your own, we are guided by six recently completed Task Force reports that form a key step in strategic planning. Highlighted among the recommendations in those reports is a renewed interest and investment in our graduate programs. Particular worthy of notice here are the newly-announced Joukowsky Fellowship programs, which will phase into Brown 15 new fully funded Fellowships for graduate students who are in their dissertation years. I think all of you getting PhD this year would confirm that financial support during that difficult period would be a wonderful addition to this institution. I especially wish to thank both Brown’s Chancellor Art Joukowsky and also Professor Martha Joukowsky, for the gift that has made these new fellowships possible.

Of course the improvements that are coming are ones that will benefit your successors and not you, at least not directly. Such is the way it usually goes, with students watching developments on campus, such as the construction of MacMillan Hall right behind you, developments that will come to fruition only after you are gone. Still, these investments are important to you, as alumnae and alumni, if for no other reason that no matter what else happens to you in your lives moving forward, you will always be alumnae and alumni of Brown University. But there are other, deeper reasons, to take pride in progress at Brown. As Bill Moyers noted so movingly yesterday, even old people plant trees, knowing they themselves will never see them fully grown.



In closing, my theme has been to urge you, as you plan for your future, to attend closely to the usefulness of what you do, to the contribution you will return to your society. But what exactly does it mean to be useful?

This is a difficult problem that I have struggled with harder than any other issue I have touched on today. I have come to the conclusion that there may be no single definition of usefulness that would apply to work in all the fields represented among us here. Perhaps usefulness, like beauty, lies in the eyes of the beholder. In the final analysis, I am telling that if you are seeking a life in which you seek knowledge and experience for its own sake and for your own betterment, I applaud you. But at the same time, I caution you not to believe for a moment that the world owes you this life. Even if the world will benefit from your pursuits in ways you but not they can foresee, it is your obligation to give full thought and consideration to exploring these benefits yourselves. Whatever else you do, avoid at all costs the arrogance that some have shown; that is demeaning, it is wrong, it is unworthy of us, and it is also not in our own self-interest. People from all walks of life are being asked, for better or worse, to justify what they do, to be accountable to others, and in principle this is neither unfair nor a bad idea. Be prepared for it, assemble your best arguments, and take the opportunity to paint for others a picture that is both true and inspiring about how the work you might pursue could benefit others beside yourself, sooner or later. Those who would be asked to finance our lives of the mind will respond affirmatively if your imagination ignites a spark in theirs. If you doubt this, simply compare the sorry fate of the Superconducting Super Collider with the truly stirring, massive outpouring of public support two decades earlier to put a man on the moon.

In planning for the future with an eye toward the useful, we must not forget what we in academe know well, namely that the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's own sake is a prized goal, of enormous importance to the quality and meaningfulness of our lives. My message is not for you to lose sight of this but for you also to keep in mind the goal of leaving the world a better place than you found it. Be flexible in your expectations. Be prepared to meet the world halfway. Look to fill the dreams of others as well as your own. Be mindful to show respect for those in society who would finance your dreams. Do not give up on the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake, but do recognize the need to draw a recognizable connection between that effort and the benefits that will derive to a world beset with real and immediate problems.

I urge you as well to refuse to hide behind the jargon of your discipline. Instead, be willing, even eager, to engage in a dialog with the larger society to make the excitement and the value of your chosen intellectual pursuits known and understood beyond your field. At Brown in recent years, we have emphasized the value of interdisciplinary efforts, at the edges between traditional areas of inquiry. In that same spirit, I would argue that much excitement and utility can be found as well at the edges where your discipline makes contact with the broader society, so I urge you to do your part to initiate and sustain that dialog as well.

Thank you Dean Estrup, thank you all for listening, best of luck to each of you in the graduating class as you plan for your uncertain future. We are proud of you, and we want you to remember that you are always welcome back to your alma mater, Brown University, so please return soon and often. Congratulations to you all!

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