Remarks by Dean Gerardo M. Gonzalez

Convocation Recognition Program, IU School of Education Bloomington

Saturday, May 9, 2015

Good afternoon. First of all, to our graduates, congratulations! This is certainly a day to celebrate your accomplishments and reflect on your achievement.

(Recognize graduates and their families)

This is a special day and one of new beginnings. Many of you may already have jobs lined up. Many of you may not; if you’re among those, I’m sure your parents hope that you have one soon. We are confident that you will!

Let me offer a bit of advice for whatever new endeavor is ahead of you. There will be a bit of a learning curve wherever you start. You can expect the unexpected.

Take for example, the story of a new teacher at a middle school. The principal walking through the hallway noticed that this teacher was outside his classroom, leaning his forehead on a locker. The principal heard him mutter “How did you get yourself into this?” The principal sensed a moment to offer support to the teacher. He knew that the new teacher not only had to adjust to his new job but was assigned a particularly challenging class. So he leaned over and asked “Are you okay?” and added “Can I help?” The teacher lifted his head off the locker and said “I’ll be fine as soon as I get this kid out of his locker.”

That should also be a lesson that appearances can be deceiving. Those of you who are going to be teachers, educational administrators, counselors or researchers know that it takes diligence to improve teaching and learning. Education is not a profession where decisions can be made either lightly or “off the cuff.” All of you receiving your degrees here today have learned well the need for very close and careful work on the challenges that will confront you. It is the unfortunate truth that we face: for the toughest problems in education there are no easy answers. Anyone who promises a “can’t miss” solution to our biggest problems is, at best, misguided.

This is challenging work. This is difficult work. As we have said often in the materials we use to recruit new students, the IU School of Education is for “those who dare to teach.” Many of you sitting here have taken that dare. I am sure it will pay dividends for you and for those you touch in your career.
Something I have said many times over the years that I still believe to be true is that education is the great equalizer. It is true that if you want to change the world, education is the key. It is why many of you have seen throughout this semester 14 remarkable African women here studying to change their own world. The IU School of Education had planned a program through the United States Agency for International Development that would take our faculty to the world’s youngest country of South Sudan for a program focused on improving education for women in that nation. While Sudan had suffered through a 20-year civil war, it was thought that matters had calmed down enough in early 2014 to start the program there.

Unfortunately, they had not. New fighting broke out just before the first of the year and the program had to be scrapped. But because of the importance of its mission, our faculty and USAID revamped the program to keep it alive. That is why these women are here. Instead of IU going to South Sudan, South Sudan came to IU. They are studying to earn master’s degrees in secondary education, focusing particularly on education in emergencies. Subject to completion of their master’s thesis, all of them were conferred their degrees at yesterday’s graduate commencement.

Persevering with education in the midst of an emergency situation is something these women know very well. One speaks of her own education, interrupted and disrupted by the two-decades-long war. She was forced into a refugee camp in Uganda, where stones served as seats, the school roof was the sky, and the teachers and their resources were quite limited.

Now she and her colleagues will complete their studies in the coming weeks and return home. Even as the latest conflict still smolders, they have a very clear charge: they will take their new knowledge of educational leadership to help prepare more teachers and especially help educate more women and girls in South Sudan. They will also be equipped with new peace building and conflict resolution skills that are so important at this time in their country -- and, sadly, I’m afraid in ours as well.

Because education is the great equalizer, they have come here. It is no accident that the 14 women represent 10 different ethnic groups from across the country. Perhaps coming from different backgrounds, they go back bound by a common experience and a shared belief in the power of education. That power is necessary to overcome ignorance which is in turn can overcome conflict and war. As the great South African leader Nelson Mandela said, education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.

Their work is so critical to the future of South Sudan that we are honored today to have among us His Excellency Garang Diing Akuong, The Ambassador of the Republic of South Sudan to the United States. (Recognize Ambassador Akuong). Ambassador Akuong is accompanied by Counselor Aban Pagan Othow.
Of course, I can attest to the power of education personally, and not simply because I happen to lead one of the nation’s top schools of education. At age 11, my family and I arrived in Miami, finally allowed to leave our home nation of Cuba but only taking the clothes we wore and, believe it or not, two bottles of Bacardi rum. I guess that was a way for the Cuban government to promote its products despite the chilly trade relations between the U.S. and Castro’s Cuba -- relations that are now changing.

When I first came to this country I was like many of the students many of you may see in the classrooms where you will teach. I spoke no English. I had little understanding of how the American educational system worked. In short order, I found myself in trouble for reasons I didn’t really understand. To avoid punishment, I made a decision to keep quiet and become invisible within the school system.

That plan worked, sort of. I graduated high school and got a job working in a men’s clothing store soon after. But then came the time for me to re-evaluate everything. The economy went into recession and the store closed. I truly did not know what to do. Through the suggestion of a friend, I entered Miami-Dade Community College. It was there that a whole new world opened to me. The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn. I simply could not get enough as I studied great works of literature and other topics I had barely been exposed to. It drove me to pursue a bachelor’s and graduate degrees at the University of Florida. I rose through the faculty ranks to become associate dean and interim dean at the College of Education at Florida, leaving that role to become dean of the IU School of Education in 2000.

That is the short version of how I got here, but I can assure you that the many details are fresh in my mind as I stand before you today on the occasion of my final convocation ceremony as dean. I will conclude 15 years of service as dean of education at the end of next month and return to the faculty. Envisioning today’s scene in my mind as an 11-year old Cuban immigrant was truly impossible. It was still impossible to imagine as I entered Miami-Dade Community College. But it was that powerful weapon, one I did not fully understand at the time, which changed my world.

That was more than 50 years ago, but just last week one of the leading presidential candidates said that the immigration issue, which is certain to loom large in the 2016 election, is fundamentally an education issue.

Education changed my life and it will continue to change yours. Your charge is to make sure it changes that of others as well. You are equipped with a fine education and solid credentials. You have a love for learning that is the soul of any great educator. And like me, those many years ago, you can’t possibly imagine all the things that lay ahead as you begin the journey you start here today. But because you are well-prepared a, we expect you to make a
difference. As I said, there are no easy answers and no quick solutions to education problems. You’ll work hard and you will encounter failure as well as success.

Still, the magic of education is that you’ll get to see how successful you’ve been in the years after a student has walked through your classroom; perhaps when you make a discovery or uncover a solution that leads others to find their own way. As the author C.S. Lewis put it, “The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles, but to irrigate deserts.”

In other words, your charge is to go forward and help quench the thirst of a world in need of the transformative power of education. It will not be easy, but it will be rewarding. And you will, in fact, change the world.

Congratulations on your achievement.