

"A NEW UNITY FOR THE HOUSE OF LEARNING"

An Address by

Henry T. Heald,  
President  
The Ford Foundation

at

the 114th Commencement,  
The University of Michigan  
Saturday, June 14, 1958

The University of Michigan News Service  
3564 Administration Building, Ann Arbor  
Telephone NO 3-1511, Ext. 2623

"A New Unity for the House of Learning"  
Henry T. Heald, President, The Ford Foundation  
University of Michigan Commencement  
Ann Arbor, Michigan, June 14, 1958

This is a memorable day for you, and it is an honor for me to share a few minutes of it with you.

You are honored, too, by the proud distinction of successfully completing a course of study in one of the world's leading academic institutions. Do not take your honor lightly.

Your accomplishment is a tribute to your conscientiousness and maturity. But in another and, perhaps, deeper sense, it is a tribute to a handful of far-sighted citizens who, a century and a half ago, recognized the need for higher education in Michigan twenty years before Michigan was admitted to the union as a state.<sup>1/</sup>

Michigan in 1817 had only 7,000 inhabitants, and they were more concerned with recurrent outbreaks of cholera and Indian rebellions than with higher education.<sup>2/</sup> But a few revered learning, and they looked ahead to Michigan's educational needs of a half-century later and founded a great university which became the pattern for others as the nation moved westward.

Your university has been first in many things over the years -- the first true university west of the Alleghanies,<sup>3/</sup> the first to be governed by regents elected by the people, the first to admit women, the first to admit students solely on the basis of high school diplomas, the first to offer courses in education, forestry, dentistry, pharmacy, marine design, and aeronautical engineering.<sup>4/</sup>

These are reflections of your university's historical and imaginative dedication to public service. This tradition continues in full

flower today, as all of you know. Until now, you have been mainly beneficiaries of the Michigan tradition. But as you receive your degrees, you become its trustees as well. For implicit in your degree is the obligation to direct your new reservoir of knowledge and understanding into socially constructive channels.

A moment ago I urged you not to take your honor lightly. I urge you now not to take your responsibility lightly. You have benefited from a first-class education. You have been judged by only one criterion; your own ability. For what society already has provided to each of you as an individual, you each owe a more than ordinary responsiveness to the demands of useful citizenship.

What does society expect in return for what you have received? What, in other words, are the responsibilities you will be expected to assume? For your city? For your nation? For the rest of the world -- which affects and is affected by them?

Most of you are already engrossed in the responsibilities immediately ahead -- selecting, preparing for, or undertaking a career; perhaps making plans or reaching decisions about your family life. The importance of making a good beginning in these matters is clear to you.

But no matter how absorbed you may become in your individual problems and aspirations, there are other problems and other goals equally important and inescapable. For you to fail to try to know and understand the complex problems of your time would be a denial of the leadership potential that is implicit in the degree you are about to receive.

The major fact of your time is that nothing is simple any more. Every problem is related in some way to a host of others. And this inter-relatedness rules out simple solutions. It is virtually impossible

to isolate any major problem and deal with it alone. Something else always impinges on it.

But, at the risk of oversimplifying for the purposes of these remarks, let me suggest that the problems you will face fall into two main clusters -- the domestic and the foreign.

On the domestic scene, our most important goals are the retention and extension of our democratic way of life, the strengthening of our economy, the amelioration of social ills, bridging the gap between scientific advances and humanistic values, and the upgrading of our intellectual and cultural life.

In all of these areas, education plays a vital role. And I mean not just the acquisition of facts and the development of skills, but education in the broadest sense -- understanding, enlightenment, and independent, creative thinking.

In all of these areas, each of which consists of dozens of specific problems, each of you -- depending upon your ability, your inclination, and your own personal goals -- can contribute significantly to their solution.

First, by continuing, formally or informally, your own education.

Second, by helping educate others, either as a teacher yourself or by helping to provide the climate that supports education.

And third, by willingly and constructively participating in local, national, and international affairs.

On the international scene, we have a world-wide struggle between two systems of ideas. The target is the mind of men. The prize is the future.

The old issue of isolationism has been resolved by the advances of science. The world is small today, so small, in fact, that a

political sneeze in one part of the world causes politicians everywhere to scurry for their diplomatic handkerchiefs.

While nations vie for military superiority, we approach a paradox never before seen in history: the state of military science is such that the use of force has a doubtful advantage to anybody. Perhaps for the first time, rational people will no longer see anything to be gained by a war which can end only in mutual destruction.

The world-wide competition takes a new turn. It moves from the military field, despite the advances of science -- perhaps even because of them -- to the cultural and intellectual fields. For the first time, it is the whole of our national life that competes, not just the material side or the military side, or the diplomatic side.

This does not mean that we can stop expenditures for military purposes or that we can ignore science. In fact our hopes for avoiding war in the future depend upon our maintenance of a military capacity as great as that of any enemy.

Today science is a part of the culture of our society. It influences our lives as never before. Tomorrow it will influence them even more. We must learn to live with it, to utilize science not only for its intrinsic values but for its relative values as it affects the non-scientific aspects of life. In other words, we must not deny science but find ways and means of bringing about a mutually beneficial partnership between the scientific and the cultural; between the technological and the humanistic; between, if you will, the machine and the man.

In the struggle between opposing ideals, with their political, economic, and social implications, the decisive force is not military power but educational vitality. Now and in the long run, the advantage will go

to the side that best succeeds in developing the intelligence, competence, and insight of its people.

In this respect the United States and other free nations are facing severe competition. We believe that true learning is always constrained and perverted by authoritarian subjection, while it flourishes under conditions of maximum freedom. But the Russian example shows what can be accomplished even in an authoritarian society when education receives high priority.

Russia has given education first priority and borrowing the capitalistic system of rewards, has put teachers near the top of the scale -- something that we have never been willing to do.

In America priorities are determined by the sum total of individual decisions of the citizens. If we are to excel in education, it will come about only when the people have sufficient belief in it to be willing to provide education the resources it requires.

Learning does not take place by itself or in an atmosphere that is indifferent to it. It requires strong institutions and devoted teachers and scholars who believe in what they are doing and who are supported by a public which values them.

Thus, of all the responsibilities you will encounter both as private persons and as citizens, there is perhaps none more important than that of strengthening America's means and institutions of learning.

Those of you who have the ability and the desire can fulfill this responsibility directly by seeking careers as teachers and scholars.

Those of you who enter **business**, the professions, the arts, or other fields can serve education through your recognition of its needs and your leadership in meeting them.

All of you, regardless of your career choices, can help strengthen learning by contributing to the atmosphere and the conditions which will give the pursuit of knowledge a new vibrancy, esteem, purpose, and unity.

In a sense, of course, your basic responsibility is to yourself.

This means to fulfill to the limit of your capabilities your particular talents, skills, and ideals.

It means striving to achieve the excellent, not smug satisfaction with the mediocre.

It means steady and painstaking effort toward worthwhile goals, not taking the easy road that leads to second-best or third-best and the eventual loss of all standards.

It means being true to what you believe to be valuable and right for you, not taking on the ways and ideals of others because it is fashionable, comfortable, or safe to do so.

Finally, it means an earnest desire and effort constantly to grow and mature -- intellectually, culturally, and morally -- so that your horizons throughout life become broader, your accomplishments more meaningful, and your thinking more profound.

In these pursuits, there is no conflict between what may seem to be conflicting approaches; on the one hand, the mastery of the physical universe, and on the other, the understanding of the moral and aesthetic nature of men.

Part of your responsibility in the years ahead will be to participate in the task of making compatible the new science and technology and the concepts that give beauty to life and reaffirm its values, or synthesizing these seemingly diverse elements of life and creating a new unity for the house

of learning. For physics as well as poetry, mathematics as well as music, are part of man's experience on earth; and learning as well as life is indivisible.

It is this belief in the value of all knowledge to all of its people that has been one of the greatest unifying forces of American society. Our multiple system of education has brought together young people from a multitude of backgrounds, creeds, and races, and has given them a common culture to share.

You have benefited from an educational experience at one of the nation's best institutions of higher learning. You can best reward society's faith in you by helping to carry to higher levels of progress the culture and the learning that have come down to you. Sustained by you and others like you, America can one day achieve a civilization in which intellectual attainment not only thrives, but is honored as one of the highest aims of life.

\* \* \* \* \*

1. "General Information Booklet," 10th annual edition, University of Michigan, 1957, p. 24.
2. Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952 edition, p. 419
3. Michigan - The Story of the University, Kent Sagendorf, E.P. Dutton & Co., 1948, p. 35 ff.
4. "General Information," op. cit., pp. 22-23.