

We Are Here

May 2019 Commencement Ceremonies

University of Kentucky

Delivered by: President Eli Capilouto

More than a century-and-a-half ago, two Kentuckians shared an audacious dream.

In the midst of the American Civil War, President Lincoln, born in Kentucky, signed the Morrill Land Grant Act, making it possible for states, for the first time, to offer public higher education to a broader group of people.

John Bowman and other Kentuckians seized upon this opportunity to found what we know today as the University of Kentucky.

We are here because they boldly dreamed in the midst of our bloodiest and deadliest war and acted quickly at its end with the hope to open for the common man the heretofore locked doors to a higher education.

We are here to celebrate another generation's fulfillment of these dreams.

But the path that led us to this day has been neither easy, fully open, nor inevitable. It took dreaming more and doing more.

We are here because of the sometimes-difficult paths taken by those whose footsteps I hope you walk in proudly today.

We are here because of individual and collective leadership and courage of those who helped to assure that the promise of public higher education ultimately reached beyond the narrow restrictions of money, class, race, or gender. And we are here, because of those, who, when called, fought and died, here and abroad, to preserve freedom – the basis of free inquiry.

We are here because, in 1880, when Miss Arabelle Clement Gunn, the first woman to graduate from UK, was asked by then UK President James Patterson, a man so loved and feared, if she would want to sit on the floor with the guests and families, rather than on the stage with the men who were graduating.

Her reply was brief and pointed, "I've been through four years of classes with them, and I don't see why I shouldn't sit on the platform with them now."

Her strength and economy of words defines the character that distinguishes the UK family...the compelling combination of grit and grace that propels our success and brings us here.

We are here because President McVey refused to buckle to the devastating Great Depression, and because Sarah Bennett Holmes, then the dean of women, refused to

yield the educational opportunity of young women as young men returned home from war.

We are here because the “greatest generation,” your grandparents’ generation, who came of age in the Great Depression, united by values like duty, courage, honor, and service, succeeded against great odds and with great risk and loss of life, to free Europe from the grip of a genocidal tyrant.

More than 9,000 Kentuckians who gave their lives in World War II are remembered by name in Memorial Coliseum.

And **we are here** because every generation has pushed UK to be a more inclusive and better university.

Lyman T. Johnson—the first African American enrolled at UK some 70 years ago, bravely refused to bend to the will of an intolerant time in our history and cut a new path for so many.

He opened the door so that Doris Wilkinson and her classmates could be the first African American undergraduates at the University of Kentucky.

Following the footsteps of those who came before us, **we are here** as a family and for those in search of a better life. Among you is a graduate who fled her war-torn home country on foot in the darkness of night with a single purpose: to earn a degree to help people.

Among you is a student who returned to UK after 25 years to finish her degree, in her words, for her girls.

Among you are those with disabilities, visible and not, who refused to be left behind.

Their stories illustrate what serves us best, individually and together, in times of struggle.

That it is our humanity—our commitment to ourselves and one another—to the betterment of humankind that preserves and propels the preciousness and promise of a people free from fear, falsehoods, want, thought, and speech.

Collectively, we are a testament to what is possible.

This place is not static—it is shaped by global events and the complex questions we chose not to avoid.

Our responses have made our campus a meaningful tool for truth and a beacon for progress in the Commonwealth and our country.

We are here because it is your time to shape our future.

We are here to pass the torch to a new generation of graduates and to challenge you to propel new dreams to reality.

There are discoveries to uncover and challenges to overcome.

What you will be asked to address is far more complex than those challenges that met previous generations, and the answers are increasingly subtle.

Today, our ability to tackle any problem is undermined by what we cannot seem to find in common amongst ourselves. Our divides are exacerbated by technology, though conceived in a spirit to bring us closer together, which has morphed into impersonal hotbeds of untruths and rage.

These divisions are rooted in distrust, fueled by ignorance and fear, fed by siloed communication and it's raising our incivility, and threatening the essentiality of coming together to solve complex challenges that require diverse approaches. We are so divided we can't even agree on our biggest problems.

You can get us to a much better place. And that's why **we are here**, filled with optimism, because we know you are prepared to rise above our differences and overtake what is seemingly undiscussable, intractable, and insurmountable.

And let us never forget, **we are here** because of the love and support of those in the audience: your faculty, friends, and family.

We are here because on the days you failed, you got back up. You found the will to do so within yourself and with this community. And for your community, you chose to not define yourself by that failure, but, instead, by what you did next for others.

You stepped up. You spoke out. You found a way forward, supported by a community that refuses to leave your side.

We are here because you are more than ready to stand on today's platform—and stand tall as did those who came before you.

Those who you follow answered the call in their time. Now, it is time to answer the calls of your time. In doing so, you create a wide path for those who will follow.

In doing so, dedicate yourselves to make the world a better place, a more inclusive place, a more trusting place, a more innovative place, a more just place.

We are here because this is your time, and we are eager to see what you make wildly possible.