

**Address to the Notre Dame Sociology Class of 2014**  
**Richard Williams**  
**May 16, 2014**

I'm very glad I was invited to speak today, and that I get to speak to this group of seniors in particular. My own children recently graduated from college. Because of them, for the last few years I have felt an affinity with my students that I didn't feel for their predecessors and that I probably won't feel for your successors.

- Like my son and daughter, I'm guessing that many of you enjoyed Barney, Little Mermaid, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Power Rangers, and Beauty and the Beast.
- Perhaps, like my then-three year old daughter, you insisted that any musical tape start from the beginning, which meant that for weeks on end I would hear the first 10 minutes of Aladdin over and over and over.
- Or maybe, like my son, you reset all the radio buttons in your mother's car to the local hip-hop station, knowing that she would surely enjoy listening to something different.
- Perhaps some of the parents in this room were charged, like I was, with keeping their daughter's Tamagotchi alive when she went off to school.
- Or, maybe some of the dads got to play Barbie while the moms tried their hand at Nintendo.

- Some of you, especially the dads, may remember how much fun you had taking your preteen daughter shopping at Claire's ☹️.
- I'm sure some of the parents took pride in their children's sporting accomplishments.
  - My daughter, I'll have you know, was on the undefeated 7<sup>th</sup> grade city championship team.
  - She had some help. I have an autographed basketball from that team and it includes the name of another recent Notre Dame Graduate: Skylar Diggins.
  - Bethy was mostly a team manager, but during games she was also responsible for coming in during the final minute and preserving the 20 point lead. She came through every single time.
  - OK, granted, she may not have been the star, but getting to see her run around the court after winning the title is one of my fondest memories of her youth.
- Also, like many of you, I took my children to see the first Toy Story movie, and was pleased that 17 years later we were together again to watch the last.
  - I have to admit that the last few minutes of Toy Story 3, when Andy goes off to college, are for me some of the most moving moments in cinema history. Mom, choking up as she enters Andy's empty room; Andy's kid sister lurking like a

vulture waiting to take the place over...I don't know how they did it, but they stole that material from my family! Or maybe, from yours.

- The class of 2014 shared other experiences with my children.
  - You were young, but not so young that you weren't aware of 9/11. My son and I went to the Grotto that night; when he was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade he wrote and recorded a great song about it. But before very long, a day that most of us will never forget will be a day that my future students cannot remember.
  - Unlike me, my daughter probably doesn't remember much about Al Gore finally conceding the Presidency. But we do both remember that on that same fateful night, she was frantically searching for her beloved doll, Buddy. Just as she was about to give up all hope, her brother came home, and discovered that Buddy had somehow gotten buried in a snow drift. We have no idea how he got there! Or how Bobby found him so quickly! But I am sure that many of you were blessed with siblings who were equally helpful.

I have also felt a great respect for the students of Notre Dame, and wish that in my youth I had been more like you.

- Your work ethic is consistently good and in some cases amazing. When I see a 20 or 30 page take home exam, well researched and

with no padding, I am greatly impressed, although I fear that some of you have no social life outside my classroom.

- Many of you show a concern for issues of social justice that I was only dimly aware of at your age.
  - I have heard people complain that Notre Dame is no longer a “Catholic” University. I have to admit, I don’t know what your Mass attendance is like, or how often you say the Rosary.
  - But I do know that, unlike me when I was in school, 85% of you do some kind of volunteer service work while you are here. Notre Dame students have read to 4 year olds at the Early Childhood Development Center, tutored 6<sup>th</sup> graders at the Robinson Community Learning Center, and helped to provide shelter at the Center for the Homeless. Through the Center for Social Concerns, some have even spent their summers working with at-risk youth and victims of domestic violence.
- I see your sense of social awareness reflected in my classes.
  - One of my assignments requires that students compare the neighborhood they grew up in with another place they are familiar with. More than once, students have contrasted the rather affluent places that were their homes with the not so affluent areas they had done service work in.

- These papers have helped many students to develop or demonstrate a greater understanding of the diversity of the world they live in.
- In particular, I will always remember one of Katie Dollard's papers. (Katie, incidentally, is one of the students whose social life I worry about the most.) Katie compared the poor Chicago neighborhood her father grew up in with the very different neighborhood she lived in now. It was fascinating to see how both had influenced the kind of person she is today. (Incidentally, the paper included a picture of an impeccably groomed back yard. Katie shockingly revealed, however, that the picture had been tampered with, as her mother had first picked up all the bats and balls that normally adorned the area.)
- For many of you, service efforts will continue for at least a little while, as you head off to places like Teach for America, AmeriCorps, and the Alliance for Catholic Education. Others of you will immediately go to graduate school or medical school, or begin exciting new jobs. Some, like my daughter, will enjoy a richly deserved year off before launching into the next phase of your life.

My main hope and advice for all of you, though, is that you not forget or become too busy to employ all the talents and skills for the service of others that you have developed.

- As busy as you have been for the last four years, the demands of family, work, and possibly your own children are not going to make things any easier for you.
- It will be tempting to retreat into your own world and largely forget about the needs of others.
- But you have developed skills at Notre Dame and in Sociology that you can continue to occasionally put to good use in your community and in the service of others.

If you want to learn more about some issue confronting your community or a group you work with, you have an unprecedented ability to do so.

- Almost 20 years ago, I was asked to do a demographic profile of one of South Bend's poorest neighborhoods.
  - It took a long time because every number had to be hand-copied from a printed report into an Excel spreadsheet – not to mention the fact that we first had to learn how to use Excel.
  - That report helped a neighborhood group make plans and recommendations for its future.

- Today my students routinely produce similar analyses in a fraction of the time just by going to the Census Bureau web site.

Also more than 20 years ago I was asked to do an analysis of home mortgage lending in St. Joseph County.

- Now granted, I was a quantitative researcher, but I knew absolutely nothing about home mortgage lending. So why was I asked to do this? Because my wife was on the committee that wanted to research this. Who knows, maybe someday you too will get trapped into doing something similar.
- While it was some of the simplest analysis I have ever done, it was also some of the most striking.
  - At a glance, you could tell that different lenders, often headquartered within a block or two of each other, differed dramatically in how well they served low income and minority markets.
  - The problem wasn't that there weren't any qualified borrowers; certainly other banks were able to find them.
  - The problem was that some banks weren't reaching out to underserved markets and making them feel welcome.

- Once they received our reports and realized how much better their competitors were doing, their lending records improved dramatically.

That data took months to gather. Thankfully, some of your predecessors assisted with the task.

- They went to local banks, requested copies of legally required reports, waited patiently since many staff had no idea what these legally required reports were, and then went through the drudgery of retyping thousands of numbers.
- But today, information for the entire country – literally millions of records every year – can be downloaded off the web in 5 or 10 minutes.
- And you really don't even have to do that since the canned programs on the web can already generate most of the reports you would want.

You don't have to do your own original research either. You know how to read and understand quality work that is already out there.

- I had a student this semester, John Stabile, put together a wonderful report on ways that have been found to make homeless housing projects more effective. Since my wife happens to be working on a homeless housing project, I found his research

especially interesting and helpful. (Unfortunately for John, he was the last speaker on a day in which we had extra time, and he got about 10 times as many questions from me as most students do.)

- But John's paper is not unique. I have seen many excellent applied reports over the years.
- If there are community problems that concern you there is nothing that says you can't occasionally shake off the rust and still do that sort of research once you leave here.

Even in your day to day work and lives, your sociological background can help you.

- In our current newsletter, you can read about why Kate Spencer feels that her courses in Sociology are going to help make her a better doctor.
- In that same issue, Margaret Pickard talks about how the research she did for her Senior Thesis is helping her to understand and work with people from across the world.

I wish I had time to say a few words about every student. But since I can't possibly do that, please, spend a few minutes telling your parents and other loved ones what you have been doing the last four years. I am sure they are curious – and that they will be impressed.

In closing, I congratulate all the parents, and their children, for the accomplishments that have brought you here today. I wish you all the best of success in the future.

- For those of you who eventually have your own children, I hope they bring you the same joy that my children have brought to me, and that you have brought to your parents.
- That is not to say that there aren't a few things I could have done without. Graduates, if your parents or caregivers attended your fourth grade band concert, if they let you have a sleepover with six of your friends, or if they ever played Chutes and Ladders with you – believe me, you owe them.
- But not too much. Having kids was a great excuse to indulge my inner child; I'll admit that I enjoyed Little Mermaid and going to Disneyworld. (And if anybody wants to see Frozen this weekend, please, get in touch with me.)
- Most importantly, I got to take pride in my children's accomplishments, and today, you should all take pride in yours.

Thank you.