

Chancellor Nicholas B. Dirks  
Commencement address, UC Berkeley, May 16, 2015

Graduates, family, friends and guests, welcome to the University of California, Berkeley and to the Spring 2015 Commencement.

It is my distinct honor and pleasure to preside over today's celebration of the graduation of the class of 2015.

Graduates, today is your day. You join and renew the long line of alumni reaching back to 1868 whose lives are forever entwined with this great university. Today you become one of some 470,000 living alumni world-wide who can proudly call themselves Berkeley graduates.

Everyone here has traveled a distinctive path to arrive at today's graduation. Some of you are the first in your family to graduate from college; others are fourth generation Cal graduates. Whether you have come to Berkeley from near or far, from one of our local Bay area communities or from countries around the world, today's event has special significance for all of you.

The entire Cal Berkeley community is proud of your achievements, but today, no one is prouder than those who have stood by you with their understanding, love and support. Graduates, please join me in thanking your families, partners, children, friends and mentors, everyone who helped pave the way for your arrival at one of life's great crossroads. *(lead applause)*

Graduates, commencement is a time honored ritual, a major milestone in each of your lives, and it recognizes the transforming

experience of your time at Berkeley in the company of our brilliant faculty, dedicated staff, and your diverse and talented classmates. But, when all is said and done we gather today to celebrate your extraordinary accomplishment.

You have been educated at the world's finest public research university. I use the word "public" not because it qualifies or diminishes the pre-eminence of what is now your alma mater, and not to deny our increasing reliance on private sources of revenue such as philanthropy, which we will need all of you as alumni to remember in years ahead!

No, I use the word "public", because Berkeley's public contributions and ethos are at the core of who we are, what we stand for, and how you have been prepared—and prepared yourselves—for the world outside Sather Gate.

What makes Berkeley a public institution in an enduring sense, beyond the shifting vagaries of our funding model, is our commitment to provide our students – you, that is – with *a rigorous education focused on and informed by the centrality of the idea of contributing meaningfully to the public good*. You have learned through critical reflection on and engagement with some of the most fundamental human debates of our time; you have engaged past traditions and future challenges in conversation with some of the greatest scholars, intellectuals, and researchers in the world, and you have begun to participate in the production and development of the knowledge that is expanding our imaginative, scientific, and technological frontiers, often through the research done right here on this campus.

As Berkeley graduates, you are as well prepared as possible to negotiate a future that is being transformed so quickly by new technology, expanding globalization, changing social and economic

structures, new cultural and political challenges, and troubling environmental trends. Indeed, you will not just negotiate the challenges ahead, you, like so many before you, will be leaders and innovators in finding ways to meet and overcome these challenges. If we have done our job well, however, you all will also be committed to renewing commitments to the public good, by giving back to society and tackling the greatest challenges facing our world today.

These challenges – as well as the salient opportunities that are part of your prospects ahead – are now global in scale, whether in the form of poverty, climate change, the quest for sustainable sources of energy, more equal and widely distributed economic growth, global health, new political, social, and cultural movements, and daunting levels of international conflict.

We know how committed you are to contributing to the public good in the truest and deepest sense of the word. There is abundant evidence, however, that the very idea of the public is in serious disrepute. There has been a palpable decline in our collective confidence that government, and by extension and implication other public entities, have the capacity, or the inherent aptitude, to deliver basic services and to meet emerging needs. This, of course, stands in marked contrast to attitudes prevalent not so very long ago, when there was a broad national consensus about the efficacy and value of public institutions when it came to things like addressing poverty, building infrastructure, confronting environmental degradation, providing health care, or for that matter ensuring access to high quality education at every level.

Education is increasingly seen as benefitting only the individual, and even that has been seen as compromised by the political drumbeat that calls for us to think of our mission as solely vocational. As an unfortunate consequence of this, the fate and future of one of this

country's grandest ideas – the joining together of moral and practical education for as many of our citizens as possible, with public institutions that are every bit as elite in their research and in their teaching as any private - is under great duress.

Now, as graduates and beneficiaries of this uniquely American system of public higher education, you have a significant stake in the success of our efforts to preserve not just the university's access and affordability, but also our excellence in research, teaching, and service that supports the greater good. This means taking collective pride not only in supporting alma mater but also in finding new ways for us, together, to define and to inhabit the meaning of the public in our current age. You can be – I dare say you must be – advocates with business and the private sector, as well of course as with the public at large and our political representatives, to help us marshal the full range of intellectual, political and financial resources required to continue our mission and to ensure that the University of California at Berkeley remains not just among a handful of leading institutions of higher education and research across the world, but one that is also profoundly committed to our public mission.

This quest to secure and sustain our public mission has nothing to do with nostalgia for days gone by. We live in a time when the need to reanimate our commitment to the public sphere – a precondition for the effective operation of our democratic political system, not to mention for the development of new forms of global governance and citizenship – is more important than ever, the only space where prevailing issues of inequality, prejudice, fear, and violence can be engaged and addressed with any hope of success.

During your time here at Berkeley you have been encouraged to take on issues that matter, and now that you leave you must continue to speak out with the wisdom, perspective, and

determination. Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. famously said that, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter."

Berkeley is an institution that over its history has come to stand not just for free speech, but for critical engagement with the world, and impatience with pieties and norms, an interest in matching ideals and rhetoric with the way we conduct ourselves as individuals and as an institution.

Your task now is to use the education you have had here to help us all engage these challenges and threats in productive ways in the days, months, and years ahead. Your education here has taken place both inside and outside the classroom, but never forget the power of the ideas, knowledge and intellectual curiosity you have gained in your education here when it comes to taking on the issues you will face as you walk out into the world.

You have learned not just that education is one of the greatest gifts we have, but that education is critical both to train us for careers and to realize our full humanity. You have also learned that knowledge is power, and now the task is to use this power to address the most significant challenges of our time, including perhaps most centrally the importance of making education at all levels accessible for all members of our society.

Now, of course, as you enter the next world – whatever that world will be for you – we not only would ask you not to forget the lessons of your time at Cal, but to carry Cal with you. You are now part of the greater Cal family, whose members help sustain each other and the campus in order to ensure that the dream, the promise that is Berkeley, remains a reality for future alumni for generations to come.

May the education you have received here serve not just your lives but your society well in the years to come. May your lives be richly rewarding and fulfilling, and may you enjoy much happiness. Congratulations and good luck Class of 2015.

FIAT LUX.