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Commencement address

Ben W. Heineman

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Address of Ben W. Heineman on the Occasion of the One Hundred Tenth Commencement of Lawrence College, June 7, 1959, Appleton, Wisconsin

President Knight, and Members and Guests of the Senior Class.

Each of you, and this fine liberal arts college, together with liberal arts students and liberal arts colleges everywhere, are the protagonists in an historic debate.

Partly due to the pressures and undoubted accomplishments of cultures external to our own, and partly due to the technological requirements of our own growing and urbanized population, we live in an environment that seems to be calling for increasing and ever increasing specialization. We seem to be asking of our people each day that they know more and more about less and less.

At such a time you have chosen to postpone or forego highly specialized or purely vocational training in the interests of obtaining a broader and more comprehensive understanding of where we have been, where we are now, and what we are doing here.

It is not for me to tell you today that you or the liberal arts colleges have chosen wisely, or that the educated whole man
will necessarily triumph in the contest for leadership, either within or without our country, over the highly specialized, partly educated man so many think the space age is now demanding. That I hope and believe it—although true—is immaterial.

For so far as each of you is concerned, the potter's wheel has turned, and for better or worse you can never escape the yeasty ideas and wide-ranging concepts to which you have been exposed.

What I want to talk about is you, you and each of you, in mid-twentieth century. And in talking about you, I want to talk as much about what you should strive not to be as about what you should strive to be. One can not wholly separate the two of course, but to me it seems that today the dangers of standing for nothing are far greater than the dangers of standing for something—almost anything. It is against the pit of nothingness that I would like to warn you with whatever personal persuasion I can command.

On an occasion somewhat similar to this one, Herbert Bayard Swope is reputed to have said, "I can give you no formula for success, but I can give you a sure formula for failure—try to please everyone." I cannot think of anything with which I agree more.
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agree more.
Skilled social scientists and perceptive novelists, examining the institutional aspects of our culture, have produced such memorable images as the "other directed man", the "organization man" and the "man in the gray flannel suit."

Each of these suggests that, in our culture at least, he travels fastest who has plenty of company. In this view, the chameleon is an object of envy, and uniformity of thought and behavior are to be admired and emulated as designed to insure, and perhaps in some cases actually insuring, serenity and security.

Whether this picture of twentieth century man in the United States is larger than life size, or more peculiar to this age than to any other, I do not know. But what I do know is that if any of you, consciously or unconsciously, believes that the way to attain your heart's desire, the way to being a contributive citizen, is by being all things to all men, you are shipwrecked before you ever get aboard. For you would be irretrievably the loser. You would have lost that thing that makes you you, and not someone else. For each of you has your own special and invaluable inheritance of religious, of racial, of economic backgrounds, of home surroundings and culture.

But our society as a whole loses even more. For our society has an unlimited capacity to synthesize divergent
views and firm although violently opposed convictions, and to create from this raw material a culture that with its many and obvious imperfections still provides greater satisfactions, both spiritual and material, than any other that we presently know. The only raw material that our society can not use—that it discards as waste—is faceless anonymity.

I doubt if we have ever had a greater need for participants, rather than bystanders. We have never had a greater need for individuals with ideas, individuals with originality, and individuals with the patience thoughtfully to form convictions, the courage to adhere to them, and the energy to execute them. We have never had less need for him who takes his own personal Gallup Poll before deciding what ideas he should hold, what positions he should espouse, how he should live, or what he should be.

Who has ever said it better than ancient Polonius in bidding farewell to his beloved son: "This above all, to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."

Following this advice is not the easiest thing to do. You will be subjected to intense external pressures seeking to compel blind and unthinking conformity. These you may resist. I am more concerned about those internal and more
subtle pressures which would tempt you to deny to others the rights that I have urged you to exercise. For if there is a social utility in divergence, it must extend as well to ideas with which you disagree, which you dislike, and indeed, which you may fear or even hate. Faced with this dilemma, too many of us find it far easier to disappear into the crowd, rather than to bear witness by our own independent action, to the rights of others to follow courses equally independent, but with which we may disagree.

And now at this point of departure, so immensely significant to each of you and to your families, and symbolically so significant to all of us, I wish you Good Luck and God Speed.