

Address to Honors Program Senior Banquet on the occasion of receiving the first annual
University Honors Program Faculty Award (May 17, 2013)

Dr. Sinclair, Dean Chase, President Hirshman, Students, Parents, Families:

Thank you for this tremendous honor, and for inviting me to share this special day with you. It's a privilege to be here today, and a privilege to be involved in the Honors Program.

Of course obligation accompanies privilege. Not coincidentally, obligation was the theme that President John F. Kennedy chose for a speech he made here fifty years ago. That's right: the nation's president came here, to SDSU, in 1963.

He came to receive an honorary degree, but there was more to the visit than that. President Kennedy intended, in his presence here and his address, to commemorate the fact that the state of California, in creating and funding campuses like ours, had done something courageous and amazing.

In 1960, just a few years prior, the state's Master Plan for Education was signed into law. A key underlying principle of that plan was making some form of higher education available to every individual regardless of his or her economic standing. Many top thinkers have pointed to education as a public good; California had actually created a way to make it so.

On the day he spoke here, Kennedy said, and I'll quote, "*One of the most impressive, if not the most impressive accomplishment of this great Golden State has been the recognition... of the importance of education as the basis for the maintenance of an effective, free society.... No country can possibly move ahead, no free society can possibly be sustained, unless it has an educated citizenry whose quality of mind and heart permit it to take part in the complicated and sophisticated decisions that*" it must face. While education is certainly important to the economy, he said to his audience, quote, "*there is a higher purpose, and that is the hope that you will turn to the service of the state... the qualities which society has helped develop in you; that you will render... a contribution to the maintenance of freedom and peace.*"

In addition to economic barriers, Kennedy identified, in his speech here, racial and ethnic barriers that needed lifting. Two months later, in an address to the entire nation, the President called for legislation outlawing major forms of discrimination. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was signed into law.

We've made astounding gains in public access to education since Kennedy's time. Certainly all of us here have benefitted from the bold and very necessary decisions made in the 1960s. I know you have, because here you are, and I have too. No, I would not be here today without the access I had to California's public education system, both lower and higher.

San Diego State University, which represented for President Kennedy the promise of excellence in public education, certainly has made good on that promise. In the past fifty years, our campus has climbed to the top-end of a number of very important access indicator and research-related league charts. I won't take time here to polish the jewels in public because you know what I'm talking about. As honors students, you yourselves have contributed greatly to San Diego States reputation for excellence.

And as you have, I hope, learned, education is about more than factual knowledge. One of my favorite philosophers of education, Rudolf Steiner, advised teachers – and I'll quote – *“Our highest endeavor must be to develop free human beings who are able of themselves to impart purpose and direction to their lives. The need for imagination, a sense of truth, and a feeling of responsibility—these three forces are the very nerve of education.”*

And these forces resonate completely in the Core Values of SDSU's Honors Program—values intended for action not only in the classroom but in your lives. They include collaboration, integrity, persistence, compassion, courage, generosity, engagement, and accountability. Those are high standards. But again to quote Kennedy, *“Those of you who are educated [must now] recognize the responsibilities of an educated citizen, [we] should now concern ourselves with whether we are providing an adequate education for all Americans, [whether] all Americans have an equal chance to develop their intellectual qualities and whether we are preparing ourselves today for the educational challenges [of tomorrow].”*

Our nation, in the 1960s, did prepare itself. Led by California, it did meet those challenges. But we seem now to have lost sight of the vision for higher education that men and women had half a century ago. The notion that education is a public good has been displaced by a view of it as a market good, and in keeping with this the public's support for real education—the kind the Honors Program offers—is eroding. The system's lack of sustainability is worrisome because, as Kennedy and many others have argued, when education goes, so too does civil society.

If the Honors Program has met its mission to cultivate within student participants not only intellectual curiosity but also “an attuned moral compass, and a willingness to craft a deliberate future” you will understand where I am going with this. You are graduating from San Diego State University. You have benefitted from the vision and foresight of past leadership. It is now your responsibility to help ensure that others do so too—certainly for their own good but also, and maybe more so, for the good of the community, state, nation, and world.

I will close as I began, with the words of President Kennedy, who on this campus, said, *“I recognize that this represents a difficult assignment for us all, but I don't think it is an assignment from which we should shrink. I believe that education comes at the top of the responsibilities [list]... It is essential to our survival as a nation... and it is essential to the maintenance of freedom... . We are the privileged, and it should be the ambition of every citizen to express and expand that privilege so that all of our countrymen and women share it.”*

Thank you very much and congratulations on your graduation.