

**Graduate School of Education - Stanford University  
Commencement Address 2013**

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Dean Steele, Dean Callan -  
Honorable and accomplished graduates -  
Families and Friends –  
Dear Colleagues -

My good friend Elliot Eisner, a distinguished senior member of this faculty, likes to tell the story of his conversation with a very bright Stanford undergraduate who came to him for advice on what to do after she graduated. Elliot's answer, I thought, was right on. He told her: "Look, you are very smart. Do something really difficult. Go into Education."

That's what you have done, my friends: You have not chosen something easy, and we are here today to celebrate your having been qualified for this difficult task – as a teacher, as a researcher, as an administrator – and my colleagues and I salute you both on the choice you have made and on the distinction you have earned.

GSE Class of 2013 – Congratulations!

There are good reasons why education is difficult, and why it takes both smarts and guts to make a commitment to it. I want to talk about some of those reasons.

For one thing, education is not an island, it does not stand alone; it is intricately linked with a wide variety of social settings and forces. There is no way to even begin to come to terms with education without having a pretty good understanding of such things as family structures, demography, language acquisition, the legal system, knowledge traditions or the distribution of economic fortunes in a society. Moreover, our societies have a way of unloading their problems on education and of expecting education to solve them – from unemployment to obesity and from citizenship to crime. Education is, you might say, a profoundly contingent enterprise – contingent upon the social, economic and political conditions under which it functions while at the same time a major agent for shaping those very conditions. To cope intelligently with this kind of interaction is what makes education such a mighty difficult proposition indeed.

This, incidentally, is one of the reasons why a really good School of Education has on its faculty not only a variety of specialists in teaching and learning, but also such characters as philosophers, economists, historians, sociologists and – lo and behold – even the occasional political scientist.

But there is yet another reason why education is such a difficult enterprise. This has something to do with the fact that education, while it can be a matter of great joy and enrichment, is also a matter of controversy, contention, and conflict. That is as it should be, for education is one of the most important and precious things a society can do for itself, and it would be very surprising if such a crucial institution were to function in a

state of utter harmony. Issues of access to education, of language, of curricular choices, of quality – even of financing – are bound to be judged differently by different groups in a society, and are inevitably becoming the subject of often heated debate and contestation. You will soon enough find out if you haven't already. That is true even for what lies at the very heart of the educational process – the notion of knowledge, where cultural traditions, social norms, and personal experience have given us a very rich but often confusing tapestry of what knowledge means and how it comes about.

But don't despair. The fact that education is controversial is not only a reason for why it is difficult, it is also one of the most exciting things about it. We only deny the conflictual nature of education at our own peril, and we stand to gain a great deal from embracing it and from reaping the creative energies that come from true debate and controversy. This is an important part of why education is not only a career, but an intellectual challenge and a professional commitment.

I can well understand how preoccupied you all have been lately with finishing papers, completing dissertations, and writing job applications, and how little time you have had to think of some of these larger questions. But I am here to remind you that there is a world out there – and it is beautiful when you look at it from outer space, but it is in trouble when you look more closely. It is a world that is often too intolerant for its own good, too violent for its own good, too unjust for its own good, too utterly unreasonable for its own good. It's a world that is struggling with the challenges of poverty, of demography, of finite resources, of failed politics and of powerful technologies. And it's a world that badly needs what education has to offer – a spirit of reasoned inquiry, of probing criticism, of robust understanding and of enlightened empathy, and an intellectual culture that treasures not just the cognitive, but the aesthetic and normative domains of knowledge as well.

Now don't take my word for any of this. Ask some of your fellow graduates who are out there facing those very challenges.

Ask Jonathan Jansen (PhD '91), now the Vice Chancellor of the University of the Free State in South Africa, the first black person to hold this position in what used to be a bastion of white elites in the days of apartheid, where bigotry and racism reigned supreme when he took office a few years ago and where he is fighting relentlessly – and quite successfully – to create a climate of tolerance and understanding at his university.

Or ask Pia Wong (PhD '94), who is in charge of teacher education at Sacramento State and is now co-chairing an extraordinarily ambitious, difficult, and important effort to re-think and re-design teacher credentialing in the State of California – an effort in which she is ably supported by her fellow graduates Ira Lit and Tara Kini.

Or ask Maggie Kilo from Cameroun (PhD '94), now a senior official of the African Development Bank, where her special responsibility is the role of education in the so-called "Failed States" of Africa and where she is now helping to salvage one of those failed states, Liberia, after its devastating civil war.

Or ask, for that matter, your fellow graduates of Stanford's Teacher Education Program who have chosen to teach in Title I schools where they face first hand the stark realities of struggling families and of this country's social disparities – and where they are not quitting but staying on – for we know that the retention rate of Stanford-trained teachers is truly exceptional!

What I am trying to tell you, honorable graduates, is that you will be in very good company as you graduate from Stanford's Graduate School of Education. The Jonathan Jansens and the Maggie Kilos and your other fellow graduates around the world have been doing the difficult work of education, and they are telling you not only that it can be done, but that it is an exciting and rewarding way to go. They also bear testimony to the fact that the reach of this School does not stop at the borders of the United States. You are joining, in other words, one terrific group of people!

Let me close on a personal note. Two commencements from now, in 2015, it will be fifty years since I joined the faculty of this School as a budding Assistant Professor. Next to meeting my wonderful wife and having two great children, that has been the best thing that ever happened to me. It's been an exciting and a challenging time, and it's been an exquisite privilege to work with great colleagues and with great students like you. I am proud to be a member of this School, and you should be, too – just as we are mighty proud of you. Elliot is right: Education is a difficult task, but you've got what it takes, and you can make a difference. Go and do it, and I wish you God's speed!