MES Remarks at the 2017 Hooding Ceremony

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Let me add congratulations to you who are graduating today and express my gratitude also to all who played a supportive role in your being here right now --- your housemates, relatives, friends, perhaps even your pets.

And I am sure you can also call to mind individuals who aren’t here in this room, perhaps relatives or teachers or mentors along the way, who provided support, critical advice, or inspirations. So, another moment of gratitude for them as well.

As Kevin said, I’m retiring this year from Evergreen, so I feel as though, in a way, I’m graduating too.

I’ve been working at Evergreen since 1983. In my first year at Evergreen, faculty members Oscar Soule and John Perkins were proposing the MES program. They were showing me their plans, since I had just come from a liberal arts college back east where we had also been developing a new interdisciplinary environmental studies program, for undergrads.

So I got to be present at the birth of MES, as it were. Even back then I was so impressed by Oscar and John’s thinking;

So many Masters’ programs are incredibly narrow and rigid – but this one, from the very beginning was conceived to be broad and interdisciplinary and flexible and rooted in collaborative learning.

In the years since, I have found it immensely satisfying to see the MES program evolve, and to see what important work MES grads are doing—literally all over the world.

But teaching in the MES program and being an occasional thesis reader has been only a small piece of my work at Evergreen.

My day job has been working in one of Evergreen’s public service centers: the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education. The Washington Center has given me the privilege of working with college and university faculty throughout Washington and beyond, developing ways to improve student learning and student success….

And for the last 12 years I’ve been leading Curriculum for the Bioregion, a project specifically focused on sustainability education, helping faculty members in about 50 different disciplines and areas of study build sustainability concepts and content into their classes…

This year, I’m in the process of wrapping up my work both in the Washington Center and in the MES program and handing it off to others…so this is a special time of looking back on what’s been accomplished but also an opportunity to look ahead and consider what is yet to be done.

**What I’d like to speak to in these remarks is how higher education needs to stretch to fully meet the adaptive challenges of this century, and how WE, too, need to stretch as well.**

I realize some of this language needs a little unpacking, both the phrase, adaptive challenges and the idea of stretching….

So, what is meant by adaptive challenges?

Up until recently, our steady march of the STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) has focused on technical problem-solving. But, now, in the 21st century we live in a time of something different: adaptive challenges.

The distinction between the technical problems and adaptive challenges was put forward about a decade ago by Ronald Heifetz in his classic book *Leadership without Easy Answers.*

Heifetz who teaches leadership at Harvard’s Kennedy School… defines technical problems, as problems that are solvable with known information and expertise. The solution, or the goal, is often tangible—like “putting a man on the moon” or combining the power of a computer and a camera and a telephone into one of these (I-Phone).

JFK knew it could be done to put a man on the moon; he said so. And Steve Jobs knew that creating this I-phone was entirely possible.

These technical problems might be highly complex but addressing them was a matter of marshalling enough resources and expertise.

In contrast, *adaptive challenges* are problems whose solutions are elusive because the problems themselves are so large, so highly complex, and so continuously evolving. I am sure any of you in this room could name a dozen adaptive challenges in just a few minutes. Some that come to mind for me are:

* the opioid epidemic;
* the world-wide spread of disease;
* the rise of militant movements in all their forms
* climate change….and climate justice.

Working on adaptive challenges absolutely requires technical expertise.

But it also requires people to shift their consciousness or enter new ways of thinking and being in the world, and that requires **stretching,** going beyond our comfort zones, taking a hard look in the mirror, and changing how we go about living in the world.

So as I talk about how higher education needs to stretch to meet the adaptive challenges facing us, I’m also talking about my hopes and dreams for what will continue to be alive for YOU as you move into the next chapters of your professional and personal lives.

So, a little bit about how I got started thinking about this:

In the late 1990s, while I was teaching environmental education in the MES program I was co-directing a National Learning Communities Project for the Washington Center….I was visiting and coaching campuses all over the country as they were assembling different strategies for developing curricular learning community programs – that is different ways linking courses around interdisciplinary themes…I was getting to consult and work with the most generative and imaginative faculty members, faculty who step up to work with freshmen, to work with underprepared students, to work in interdisciplinary spaces, to revamp capstone experiences for seniors….

And these faculty were inventing really imaginative programs….but it began to dawn on me, which century are we preparing students for? The one that was ending or the one that was about to begin?

And at the same time, I came across Jane Lubchenko’s Presidential Address at the 1997 AAAS meeting, whose title was, “Entering the Century of the Environment: A New Social Contract for Science.” Lubchenko made the case that the unprecedented issues facing humanity today require a much greater commitment on the part of all scientists to devote their energies and talents to the most pressing problems of the day. Being in the thick of AAAS and governmental relationships, Lubchenko was thinking of the social contract that university scientists have with the funding agencies, and how research in turn should influence policy and really contribute to addressing humanity’s greatest needs.

I began to think about this in much broader terms: So as I was traveling around from university to university, I started asking that question, “Which century are we preparing the students for?”

And….

…given what is happening in the world and the century to come, what is our social contract? Our social contract as teachers of science, social science or literature or engineering? What should be the social contract of our institutions? I discovered that not very many people were comfortable with this question….

It was the lack of answers to this question that led me to create Curriculum for the Bioregion….

I began by convening a working group of about 25 colleagues….from 18 campuses between here and Bellingham, 9 universities and 9 community colleges -- to help plan and build an initiative around Sustainability-across-the-Curriculum.

Over the years, these individuals have become thought partners to me and each one another and also leaders of environmental and sustainability education on their own campuses.

We wanted to attract and inspire faculty from across the disciplines….and encourage them to build sustainability content into their courses…. over time if we could attract enough colleagues, we could begin to shift the cultures on our campuses and expose many more students to sustainability ideas….

….so, 12 years later, we have involved close to 2,000 faculty members in workshops, conferences, curriculum planning retreats, and field courses….and in turn there are literally dozens of new courses, new minors and programs of study, and new sustainability initiatives on campuses all over the state. It’s been impressive…

**Looking back on what we have accomplished and what is needed now, I’d like to mention four arenas where I think environmental and sustainability studies must develop and or deepen its work**

**and that university graduates as well—that’s you—might consider, going forward.**

***The first arena is a much deeper commitment to our places and to place-based learning:***

For decades, we environmental educators have known in our bones that that deep local knowledge can be a powerful platform for understanding the larger issues of environmental and global change….

AND -- that a sense of engagement and agency, locally developed around real problems, can introduce students to the larger possibilities of what it means to be a citizen, both of a community and within our biosphere.

College and university classes often stress the cultivation of critical thinking.

But, when classes immerse students in actual places -- especially when they take up social or environmental issues --- connective thinking is essential.

In this century, connective thinking needs to be brought forward as equally important as critical thinking….it is the capacity to

* tease out relationships,
* understand cause and effect,
* consider or identify unanticipated consequences,
* discern differing perspectives
* and think at a systems level – all utterly essential capacities for understanding global problems and global change.

The places around us are a kind of commons, a learning laboratory, and a rich ground for learning and practicing ***connective thinking***.

*All of this is easy to say, but where to begin, when learning in place is not the norm and sensibilities about our places, our bioregions are not really the norm for most teachers and I daresay most students. A brief story:*

When I was first planning this project, I visited all 32 campuses in the Puget Sound region and at each place I asked for a few minutes at the meeting of either the instructional team of the campus or the cabinet, just to introduce the project idea and get a little feedback. The president of one community college north of here was a colleague and friend, and he had a keen interest in sustainability, and he invited me to speak to his vice presidents, unit heads, and department chairs – so I had the privilege to speak to these 30 or so campus leaders for half an hour. First, I asked them to find their two campuses on a large bioregional map of the area….this map…..

As you can see, this map has no political boundaries, nor any place-names: it was simply a Landsat land-cover map. The individuals in this meeting got totally bogged down in arguing about where their campuses were.

Then I said, “You’re a community college. What are the most pressing issues in *this* community that every student should be at least somewhat conversant with?”

The answers came without hesitation: first, the issues associated with immigration and settlement of migrant farm workers from Latin America and the tensions that this rapidly changing demographic were bringing to all the county’s systems,

…and second, the ongoing conflicts over urban growth management and land use as agricultural land was being converted to housing developments—essentially, unregulated “rural sprawl.”

“Okay,” I said, “so where are these community issues being taken up in classes here at this college?” No response. Everyone looked around the room. “*Any* classes?” I asked. Dead silence.

One of my heroes is Rob Thayer, a professor of landscape architecture at U C Davis. In his wonderful book, *LifePlace, Bioregional Thought and Practice*, he says,

*“People who* ***stay*** *in a place may come to* ***know*** *that place more deeply. People who know a place may come to* ***care*** *about it more deeply. People who care about a place are more likely to take better care of it. And people who take care of places, one place at a time, are the key to the future of humanity and all living creatures. “*

So, given the world in which we now live, how can learning in our respective places prepare our students for a more engaged citizenship? How can we all become more connected to and more committed to the places where we dwell?

***A second arena involves teaching and using “big ideas” (or really essential concepts) as touchstones for thought and practice in environmental and sustainability matters.***

Another story: just as I was conceiving of a sustainability across the curriculum initiative, a happenstance encounter really propelled me forward.

It happened at the Seattle airport on a rainy night in the fall of 2004.

Returning from a conference, I landed, got my luggage, and took a shuttle van to the car park. I stepped up to the brightly lit glass payment booth and presented my ticket and credit card. The young woman on the other side of the window looked at the card, looked at me, and brightened. “Wow, you are Jean MacGregor!

‘Yes, that’s my name right there on my credit card that I just gave you.”

“No, I’ve met you, I know you!”

“Really? How so?”

“Yes, you visited our class!”

“Well,” I said, “In my job, I visit a great many classes. Which class was it and where?”

“At Bellevue Community College. Don’t you remember, The Power of Place?”

Of course I remembered. An imaginatively designed learning community, The Power of Place involved a humanities class (Americans and their Landscape) linked with an English composition class. Built around Winifred Gallagher’s book of the same title, *The Power of Place* was offered as a team-taught program. Beginning with the idea that we all are, to some degree, “placed,” the program began with Native Americans’ notions of place, and then move into American Manifest Destiny and the American transcendentalists and culminated with James Howard Kunstler’s important book on suburbia, *The Geography of Nowhere.* Field trips examined suburban sprawl east of Seattle and new urbanist designs in the fashionable Redmond Town Square shopping center. I had visited the class twice while doing research for a book on learning communities and, indeed, it was a “happening class”—intensely engaged teachers and students alike.

As the young woman was running my credit card, she kept shaking her head. “I’ll just never forget that class! Thinking about land use really tantalized me. I will never forget *the ideas* in that class.”

“Tell me your name,” I said, “I’ll email your teachers to tell them I ran into you. And tell me, what are you doing now?”

“Jodi. I’m in grad school now, almost done. My husband takes care of the kids and I study at night, in between flights. Just tell them I’ll never forget those ideas!”

As I headed onto the highway for the dark, rainy drive home, I puzzled out that the Power of Place had taken place seven years earlier. “Gosh,” I thought to myself, “Isn’t that what we all want in our teaching? To have the ideas we teach still be alive for our students, years into the future? Maybe for their whole lives?”

We know from decades of communication studies that people often forget details but they remember big ideas. So, to the faculty here, what are the absolutely essential ideas that college graduates, that MES graduates, need to take forward, for living in this sustainability century??

And for you, the MES graduating class, what are the key ideas that you are taking forward?

***The third arena that I think is essential and extremely undervalued and even, I have to say, overlooked by many environmental and sustainability studies program is an understanding of conflict and skills for conflict resolution.***

I don’t think we need an illustrative story here: the stories are all around us and we are witnessing them daily on our home campus, in our communities, in the nation, and on the world stage. Kevin just spoke poignantly to this.

The growing chasm between the political right and left,

this economy of growing inequality;

the constant overheated rhetoric in all forms of media—

All these things **combined** present the most immediate danger to the wellbeing of this country and all of its institutions.

All of us in environmental work need to develop our skills with working with disputes and conflicts….which begins, as Kevin says, in hard listening.

Adaptive challenges, Ron Heifetz argues, require not just deep but wide listening, especially listening to voices from below, voices from the margins, because it’s often from the unexpected places that new and creative ideas arise.

Without listening, really careful listening, trust is impossible.

We must learn the skills of listening, of practicing authentic dialogue and deliberation, and further, the leadership skills of consensus building and negotiation and mediation.

Social capital, community resilience, and indeed our democracy require these practices…these skills.

**So: How can dialogic skills and conflict-resolution skills become part of every environmental professional’s training, in graduate school or afterwards?**

***The fourth arena, and perhaps the one that will require the most stretching into new territory has to do with students’ deeper meaning-making and beliefs…***

Whether scholars come from the world of environmental studies or the world of arts and humanities, most agree that technical fixes won’t be enough to solve our global problems….adaptive challenges live in the world of moral and ethical questions, and indeed they live on moral and ethical frontiers.

As Aldo Leopold put it in his classic essay on the land ethic in *Sand County Almanac,*

“No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, **loyalties, affections, and convictions.”**

ONE LAST STORY…and this comes from my colleague and mentor in learning communities work, Patrick Hill who before becoming Evergreen’s provost in the 1980s was a professor of philosophy and a scholar of John Dewey at SUNY Stony Brooke on Long Island.

This story concerns an undergraduate student he met while he was director of undergraduate studies in the summertime. She was taking a psychology course in behaviorism from 10:00 to 1:00 and a philosophy course in existentialism from 1:00 to 4:00.

In the behaviorism course -- this was pure Skinner -- she was learning about the .67 predictability of human behavior and of the illusory character of consciousness and intentions and certainly of their insignificance in explaining human behavior.

In the philosophy course, which was focused on the early Sartre, she was learning that we are ultimately free, even to the point of being able to define the meaning of our pasts. So as Patrick told this story, (and I’m quoting him how)

I asked her which course was right. She said, "What do you mean?"

I said, "If you had to choose between the two courses, which one would you choose?"

She said, "I like the psychology teacher better."

I said**, “**That’s not what I'm asking. I’m asking you what you believe…is

correct? Which one is right, *for you,* about the nature of our human being?"

And she looked away, as if confused. And then she shrugged. And said, "Well,

I'm pulling A's in both courses."

Critical thinking? Yes

Connective thinking? Not so much.

Patrick used this story to make the point that especially in large universities, there is almost no space for integrative work, for finding the deeper meaning in one’s course-taking.

But, these sensibilities (loyalties, affections, and convictions) are always there in the classroom, lurking under the surface. But apart from religious studies and some philosophy and humanities classes, loyalties, affections, and convictions have been something to steer clear of.

Particularly for those of us trained in and teaching science, it is as though there is some kind of invisible fence—you know, that kind of underground wire that keeps dogs in their yards—an invisible fence that most of us stay away from.

But increasingly, at our Curriculum for the Bioregion gatherings, faculty have been exploring and experimenting with making spaces in their classes to allow these perspectives to emerge.

And they emerge in different ways.

For some it’s through experiential learning with community-based research, citizen science and various forms of service learning. Students encounter projects and people working in environmental care, justice work, community problem solving and in so doing are exposed to individuals making good on their loyalties, affections and convictions.

For other students and other classes, it is through examination of really complex issues, through research and discussion and dialogue with different perspectives, where they not only come to understand the complexity of a problem, they realize that they need to make up their own minds about what is right—what is right for them.

And for still others, it is through reflective and contemplative practices….. where faculty create space in class or create specific assignments that ask students to pause and take note of themselves in relation to the material, that is, to locate abstract intellectual material within their personal experience and their worldview.

In environmental studies, we study and explore habitats.

But we have inner habitats to explore also.

We need to create spaces for more pauses, pauses to contemplate wonder of the world as well as pauses to contemplate the suffering in the world.

Or pauses as Thomas Berry put it, “ to see how to make a creative response”

“No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions.”

**So, summing up, how can we not lose heart when faced with adaptive challenges? How can we stretch to meet them?**

How do we help students take responsibility for these global realities and constant upheaval without turning away or allowing themselves to be pulled into an undertow of fear and despair?

And so coming back to the beginning of this talk….

What is our social contract, now, in this hinge time?

How can we learn about our places to the degree that we care for them?

What are the essential ideas for living in the sustainability century?

How can we develop and deepen our ability to listen across differences and work constructively through conflict?

And how can we make the time and space to attend to, to explore, and live our loyalties, affections and convictions?

Taking these elements really seriously is a stretch, to be sure, but taken together, they can plant important seeds for students and for us, and I hope, in time give us a compass--and the resolve-- for navigating what lies ahead.