

President M. Roy Wilson
Wayne State University
Commencement
December 12, 2017

Good morning. To the Class of 2017—congratulations. And to the parents, siblings, grandparents, faculty members, and advisors who helped these graduates succeed—thank you for all you did to help these grads realize their best potential. And thank you all for coming here to celebrate with us.

Today is a special moment for each of our graduates here. You are passing through a threshold into the next stage of your lives. You are undoubtedly smarter and wiser and stronger than when you first arrived at Wayne State. You have been resilient, worked hard and sacrificed tremendously to earn your degrees. And I can assure you that the work you've put in and the experiences you've gained will pay dividends for the rest of your lives.

We hope that you will take your newfound knowledge and put it to use improving the lives of those around you. Wayne State Warriors have a reputation for giving back to the community, so I believe you will.

Today is a special moment in history for another reason. On this day in 1901, an Italian scientist by the name of Guglielmo Marconi engineered the first transatlantic radio signal from the Old World to St. John's, Newfoundland. In a way, this could be called the first-ever text message.

What was communicated in that signal? The letter "S." Not exactly high poetry or the most profound prose you've ever heard, to be sure, but the moment was nevertheless groundbreaking.

With the sending of the first wireless transmission, humankind witnessed a tremendous leap forward in global communications. Just think of how far we have come since that time. All you need to do is take the phone out of your pocket, and you can talk, write—or even “facetime” with people in any corner of the globe.

Yet wireless communication, it could be argued, has been something of a mixed blessing. On one hand, the explosion of technologies we witnessed in the 20th century can be credited, in part, to greatly improved connectivity in the community of scientists and inventors. But when we threw open the gates, some things may have gotten lost in the flood.

How easy has it become to send a text or an email—and even easier, too, to ignore it? How easy is it to type a question into Google—only to find a sea of misinformation mixed in with real facts? And how easy has it become for people to spread opinions and ideas—all too often divisive, untrue, or hateful—thanks to the anonymity afforded by the internet?

Something *has* been lost. I think we all know it—certainly those of us who remember a time before the internet. In an age when we are more interconnected than ever, we seem even more fractured and divided. Why is it that in the age of the information super-highway, we seem more interested in building walls to divide us, than bridges to connect us.

This has been troubling me for some time. And so this summer I set out on a decidedly low-tech listening tour of some of Michigan's less talked about communities. To talk to people I don't usually encounter face-to-face. To meet and speak with people of different perspectives. To learn what they care about, what concerns them, and how Wayne State University can better serve them.

I've been an avid cyclist for many years, and for this listening tour, which we called Road Warriors, I cycled 427 miles across the state over the course of four days. Along the way we stopped at three small towns. And in each community we visited, we invited folks to join us for pizza, beer, and open conversation.

We had some remarkably candid conversations—about higher education, about Detroit, about our state, about our country.

Between stops, the time on my bike afforded me a chance to absorb and think about what I'd heard, what I'd learned, and how Wayne State can better serve *all* Michigan communities. The listening tour was such a success, I'll be repeating it this summer.

In fact, the organizers of next year's tour—none of whom actually will be cycling, by the way—recently informed me that another community has been added and the distance will now be at least 500 miles!

Now, I'm not suggesting that all of you hop on a bike and pedal hundreds of miles around the state. But I would ask that you take the time in your lives to have conversations—*real* conversations with *real* people—whom you wouldn't ordinarily encounter, and be open-minded enough to listen to what they have to say.

Maybe this could be a way forward. Maybe we can begin to cross the chasms dividing our nation and our world by pursuing a different kind of connectedness. Not one measured in radio waves or gigabytes. But rather one characterized by understanding, and acceptance, and a willingness to engage to solve issues of mutual concern.

As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Anger and intolerance are the enemies of correct understanding." Together—through listening, and truly connecting and understanding one another—we can work toward a peaceful, more unified world. I've seen it myself. It starts that simple.

Let's do this.

Thank you, graduates. Congratulations once again, and best of luck to you.