

**Remarks of Regent Mark Bradley
to UW-Marathon County Honors Reception**

It is an honor to be here with you this evening. In fact, this may be as close as I'll ever get to an academic awards ceremony.

We gather this evening to give well-deserved recognition to some of the most accomplished students at UW Marathon County. I would like to take a few minutes to explore that connection: students of accomplishment, to be sure, but at a particular institution - UW Marathon County, one of the 13 two-year Colleges in the University of Wisconsin System.

I am not a betting person, but I would be willing to bet that each of you whom we honor this evening would be featured at an awards ceremony at almost any two-year college in the United States. What difference, then, will it make in your lives that you chose to spend the first two years of your higher education at UW-Marathon County?

The UW Colleges' motto is "the best start for the life you want!" I like that phrase because it reminds us that we have choices. And in making choices about the kind of life we want, most of us understand the importance of higher education. If you want to test that assertion, just talk to people around the world who do not have access to higher education. Fortunately, we live in Wisconsin where people since statehood have made a concerted investment in quality higher education. In making choices about where to begin your education after high school, a UW College campus is, I believe, one of the best places to start. By offering you a high quality freshman and sophomore curriculum, a UW College, like UW-Marathon County, prepares you exceptionally well for transfer to a bachelor's degree program at any number of schools.

I knew that much about UW Colleges when I became a member of the Board of Regents. What I didn't know is that UW Colleges students who transfer to other schools graduate at higher rates than any other group of transfers from other places. That is true whether you compare transfer students from UW Colleges with transfer students from other UW System Schools, the Wisconsin Technical Colleges, private colleges and universities, and even schools outside of Wisconsin. In fact, the longer you remain at a UW Colleges campus before you transfer, the higher your graduation and retention rates will be in baccalaureate-degree programs elsewhere. So, if the life you want includes successful completion of a baccalaureate degree, then the UW Colleges is indeed the best start in your life, and we have the data to prove it!

Let's examine the nature of that essential freshman and sophomore foundation offered by the Colleges. Dean Veninga would say that UW-Marathon County has been offering "outstanding liberal arts education" for more than eighty years. I know that because I saw it on his webpage! What does he mean, an outstanding liberal arts education? Does he mean liberal in a political sense, as in liberal versus conservative? No, the word "liberal" in liberal arts education means to liberate, to free the mind to be open to diverse opinions and to apply a fact-based discipline to developing workable solutions to complex problems. What does that kind of an education, a liberal arts education, do for students? What does it do for society at large?

One of the great strengths of the UW Colleges is their clarity of mission and purpose: they are committed to providing access to affordable post-secondary education for Wisconsin citizens; and they are committed to providing students with outstanding teachers in small-classroom settings.

But they are also committed to providing the kind of preparation that Wisconsin needs, and that our nation needs, as we move into a post-industrial, knowledge-based economy. That preparation is precisely what I mean when I refer to a liberal arts education: exposure to core disciplines such as math, science, economics, English and other languages, history, and psychology; coupled with the development of the intellectual and practical skills you will need to continue, whether you move into the workforce or pursue further education. The liberal arts education provided by UWMC is designed to give you critical thinking and communication skills, make you adaptable to change, enhance your problem-solving abilities, and enable you to work in, and with, diverse groups of people. This knowledge base, and these skills, abilities, and habits of mind, are precisely at the heart of what a liberal arts and science education is all about. And they are at the heart of what UWMC and the other UW Colleges have to offer students. I'm telling you with all my heart, they are the best start for the life you want.

And I'll tell you something else. They are also the best start for what future employers want. What UWMC and our other UW Colleges provide is what leaders in business and government identify as the core outcomes of what higher education should be all about.

Case in point: the National Association of Colleges and Employers surveyed employers across the country to determine what they look for when they hire new employees. The survey showed that employers focus on finding graduates with the right skills rather than the right major. By the "right skills" they mean those skills that are transferable and portable from job to job. They mean written and verbal communication skills, and the other skills I've named above. They do not mean narrow, technical

training. Almost every employer will tell you: we can give the technical training to the people we hire. Employers are looking for the higher-order skills that you acquire through a liberal arts education in general, and through the UW Colleges in particular, with a solid 2-3 years of course work that transfers so well to whatever the next step might be for you. The research shows that these kinds of adaptive skills are important for all the professions. I can tell you from personal experience that they are important for the legal profession. They are also important for engineers, for nurses, for teachers, and for business people.

Why is it so important to have the ability to adapt? Because people entering the workforce will have on average five different jobs or careers in their working lifetimes. This was not true a generation ago, but it is true now. Charles Darwin would look at this fact and say that only those employees who can adapt to changing circumstances will survive. Those of us responsible for higher education in Wisconsin need to make parents and government leaders aware of that reality. We also need to prepare students for that reality.

I don't think there is any doubt that for many traditional and non-traditional students in Wisconsin, the UW Colleges provide the best start for the lives they want. The evidence is also compelling that the UW Colleges provide incalculable benefits to the state of Wisconsin at large and to the 13 communities that host the Colleges. These benefits are economic, social, cultural, and civic. The role the Colleges play in educating the citizens who will write our future is tremendous. The faculty, staff, and administrators who work at the Colleges recognize that role. They are one of the most dedicated and creative group of people I have had the pleasure to work with. I know they

take that responsibility as seriously as they can. They know, you honor students know, and we parents, employers, and regular citizens know, that by conferring the educational foundation that students need to be successful in life, the Colleges provide an invaluable public service, one that is critical to the well-being of the state of Wisconsin.

So, honor students, when you go on to greater success in higher education and your life's work, as I am sure you will, remember the investments that your state, your parents, and your grandparents made to provide you with a first-rate opportunity for success. It will soon be your turn, which is a privilege granted to all of us who are fortunate enough to live in a free country with strong public institutions.