

## Liberal Arts Education in an Uncertain World<sup>1</sup>

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I am honored to be invited to deliver a speech at UIC's Graduation Ceremony and I wish all the graduates a bright future.

Unusually, I am giving this speech via video stream. Facing this global pandemic, we have responsibilities to reduce the risk of viral transmission and to protect ourselves and those around us. The COVID-19 pandemic threatens and impacts all aspects of medical care, the economy, our daily lives and international communication. This is a great challenge for everyone, especially for you who are at this turning point in your lives. I would like to extend my best wishes to all of you setting sail into an uncertain future.

There is a saying that runs, "The only thing about the future that we are certain

about is its uncertainty." In recent years, technological evolution has accelerated and international disputes have increased, resulting in the future becoming increasingly unknown to us. We are experiencing a time of social change. Finding possibilities and certainties during these uncertain times is a challenge for us all, and it is a test of our wisdom and courage.

Education is the key to addressing these social issues and shoring up the foundation of society's future development. The education that we provide and the people that we nurture today will decide the future that we will have tomorrow.

Education builds consensus and shapes civilizations. It is particularly important in times of crisis. In today's world, we must

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reaffirm the common values of mankind, consolidate common ideals, and seek solutions to the pandemic as well as to on-going disputes. Without education, the human community will not hold together and we will be unable to shape and perpetuate our best values.

Futurology may be useful for examining the current dynamic social situation and helping people to explore how to predict, choose and create a better future. People are no longer waiting in silence and adapting passively. Rather, they are choosing to actively pioneer, create and seek certainties amid uncertainties. Education, and only education, will help people see the outcomes of these uncertainties and lead us to confront what will come in order to create certainties.

I recall a meeting I had with the President of Pomona College, Dr. G. Gabrielle Starr, in Hong Kong in March of 2019. She noted the trade conflict between China and the United States at that time, as well as the technological revolution that had brought about conveniences while also spawning various social problems and creating a sustainable development crisis that humanity must face together. Dr. Starr explained how she believed that a traditional liberal arts education, as a solution to an uncertain future, could help students understand the issues and contribute to

solving these problems. More than two years ago, the President of Wesleyan University, Dr. Michael S. Roth, and I met in Shanghai, and we discussed the value of a liberal arts education. During this pandemic, he has voiced his opinion and stressed the importance of integrating traditional education with the current trend of online education, while also firmly asserting that education and life on campus remain indispensable.

The Presidents of these two top liberal arts colleges conveyed the same message: a liberal arts education cultivates students' inner qualities and this is the most effective way to train future progressive talents to address the most pressing issues. You are fortunate that UIC is the confluence of the East and the West, and that you have learned both Chinese culture and international perspectives, as this will give you a unique vision for problem-solving.

Why is a liberal arts education so significant? I believe there are three reasons.

Firstly, a liberal arts education allows you to guide yourself. Confucius said, "A gentleman should be versatile." Liberal arts education pursues truth, virtue and beauty as well as cultivating a whole person with broad knowledge, a decent character and a refined aesthetic. Therefore, such an education is not just a tool to acquire qualifications or a means of earning