

**Prepared remarks from David C. Wilson, Dean, Goldman School of Public Policy, UC Berkeley
Presented at the School of Education's commencement, May 18, 2023**

It's an honor to be with you today. It's my privilege and my honor to serve the dean as the Goldman School of Public Policy. I know that this is probably the most exciting day of the academic year for students, for families, for faculty, for staff. I promise not to stand up here too long and explain and talk a lot. I want to make sure we get to the finish line.

I'm very honored also because I get to be in the presence of other leaders. Thank you, Associate Dean Gutiérrez. Thank you Vice Provost for Graduate Studies and Dean of the Graduate Division, Lisa García Bedolla. Also, I'd like to thank the staff, the faculty, the families, the alumni for all that they did to the School of Education as an engine of learning and an academic enterprise.

So please thank the staff, thank the faculty for all that you do.

Finally, I want to thank my colleague, Dean Christopher Edley, who cares deeply about the school and its mission. In general, administrative leadership is extremely difficult and often thankless. People don't see or feel the day-to-day ecosystem of challenges or because there's only one person at the top, they don't really see that it's a very lonely place sometimes. As educational leaders, you'll be in that position one day. We hope to be able to thank you for your service at that time, as well. Creating spaces of change requires patience. It requires understanding. It requires resilience. And Dean Edley, through life experiences, health scares, ridiculous rules about HR policies, covid and thousands of hours of meetings, he gave it his best shot.

And if we don't recognize that, then we yield the grace and respect we all deserve when the shoe is on the other foot. Thank you, Dean Edley.

I know your incoming dean, Michelle Young, will be a great partner and champion for education, and I look forward to working with her as well.

Now to the students, this impressive, proud group that I just referred to. Today, we're here to recognize how your intellect creates community, how your values create a passion for solutions, how your identity shapes understanding.

Today, we celebrate your achievement of getting a University of California, Berkeley School of Education degree. Every commencement is a celebration, but this one is especially important because education is the foundation of our ability to create, sustain and advance our society. Nearly each and every one of you were either engaged with graduate learning, are preparing to take on the journey of graduate learning during one of the most traumatic times in our world's history.

The COVID pandemic tested our faith in one another, and our faith in our institutions. And I can't thank each one of you enough, all of you, the students, for your resilience, your commitment to growth and your choosing UC Berkeley. Most importantly, thank you for choosing education.

You're all important to humankind. You are graduates. You are leaders. You're important. When you begin your work each day, you may think you're just doing your job. But it's also true that you'll never fully realize the real measure of your impact. Your impact on toddlers, on adolescents and young adults, on nontraditional students, on parents, on your subordinates and your supervisors, and also on the lives of one another.

Your impacts are both measurable and immeasurable. It can take up to a lifetime for people to realize how much and in how many ways you actually have impacted their lives. But we can all think about at least one person or one instance in an education environment that helped us become better individuals. Not every field of study has that consequence, but every field has that importance.

Education is not just an academic subject to me. I'm standing here as dean of the number one school of Public Policy in the world. We're also number one in social policy as well. That's a big deal because we passed Michigan on that one.

I'm here because of the education I received and the educators who invested in me. They poured their life and their love into me during my most formative years. My father and mother were separated when I was 2 years old. I was raised by a single mom. My mom's struggle to provide for me and my older sister, Natalie. Mentally, I was not always school-ready.

I didn't have a framework for school and therefore I did not have a real framework for formal education. Mind you, as was mentioned before, my mother and father both graduated from Fisk University. My grandparents on my mother's side both had college degrees. My grandmother on my father's side was a schoolteacher. Higher education was present in my family, but I didn't have a formal method for learning.

The training was not passed down to me before I started school, and as we all know, a degree does not make one a teacher. School is not the same as education. Education is not the same as ability. And ability is not the same as learning. But I started in deficit because I didn't have a model for education.

A good, effective education requires talented and caring people, parents, teachers and peers. My life changed when my third grade teacher Miss Wade caught me cheating one day. I was about three months into the school year and I had just moved to Nashville, Tenn., after a failed attempt by my parents to reconcile things. Being a split home was tough.

My sister and I basically live with my mother during the school year and my father during the summer, and the split between my parents was having a toll on me. I developed this really fool-

proof idea to get out of having to do work in the third grade. The girl who sat next to me was Sarah Hawkins.

And Sarah was really smart. She had the best handwriting. She worked fast and she turned her assignments in before everyone else. Once you turn in your assignments, you can do free readings. A free reading was like comic books and baseball cards. It was like heaven. I would wait until Sarah turned in her assignment in the back of the room and then I would walk up to the assignment bin which she had just placed her work and also wait maybe for a couple of other students to drop in their work. And I would walk back and take her work to my desk erase her name and put my name on it.

In my mind, this was a fool-proof plan. My third grade education not even complete, I thought this would work. And today it sounds ridiculous, but that was my plan. And when I got caught, it wasn't pretty. Miss Wade, my teacher was angry and I could sense her disappointment immediately and she asked, why would I do that?

Why would I disrespect Sarah's work? Why would I disrupt a class in this process, in this kind of way? And I wasn't thinking about any of that, but I was embarrassed and through a cascade of tears, and I know there were tears because my mother told me, I said "I don't know how to be smart like Sarah. My mother and my father don't like each other anymore. And I just want to have fun at school."

Miss Wade starts crying, tears running down her face. And then I'm really worried because I've made the teacher cry, and we go from bad to worse quickly. But then Miss Wade gave me a hug and she told me it was going to be okay.

She went through a process of talking to my mother. She said that we would spend time catching up on the work during recess. I wasn't happy about that because, of course, recess is even more fun than free reading. But I wanted to work hard on learning and Miss Wade wanted to ensure that she gave me the attention I needed to learn. And she was the first in a long line of teachers who cared about me as a person.

Each one believed in a mission that focused on the development of others, and I could only assume that the best educators help because it's the right thing to do, but also because they have the desire and the confidence to do it well. The best teachers, the best educators make connections that are not always apparent to us.

In this way, they create the learner in each of us. Miss Wade likely did this for thousands of students over time, and I can only wonder if her bucket of gratitude was ever fully filled. In high school, I had a Geometry and Algebra 2 teacher, Miss Robyn Hamilton. Miss Hamilton endured a bunch of us who thought it was more important to be cool and funny than commit ourselves to learning.

She was a short woman who was serious about a job and she tried so hard to help us all be great. We worked through problems on the board and of course it was embarrassing to get problems wrong and therefore many of us didn't volunteer. We didn't even think about the concept of peer learning and peer dialog, analytic reasoning and the like. We were just thinking about embarrassment.

One day after not even trying to answer a question, she asked me to stay after class and I walked up to her desk and she just looked up at me. I was tall and she said, "Dave Wilson, you have so much potential." And she was shaking her head. She said, "But you're going to have to work harder."

I thought about what she said, and I thought about how I was approaching the class and how I was blaming her for my own lack of growth. I was blaming her for the difficulty of subject. And much later I learned that Miss Hamilton was actually going through some trauma of her own. Her husband had just passed away and she had just lost her parents.

And through all of that, she would come to school every day and pour her energy and her intellect into her class and into us as students. I was never great at Algebra 2 or Geometry, but I'll never forget what she said to me about my potential and how she never gave up on me, even when I was not leading by example.

Finally, Dr. George Bloom. Dr. Bloom was a professor in the Department of Government at Western Kentucky University, where I went to as an undergraduate. He was a short, stocky man and he had a funny accent. He taught Introduction to Political Science and International Relations, and he was on the older side. I remember his nose would sweat underneath when he would talk and lecture and he'd constantly wipe it with a with a handkerchief.

He also had a limp. He kind of would stand to the side. His students would also comment on how he smelled and said he smelled moldy and that he had coffee breath. He had to endure this as a teacher. The last thing is he only had two fingers and a thumb.

And when he would make points, he meant points like this. Students would again make fun of him because of his disability. One day he asked about 12 students in this 50-student class to stay after. The 12 students that included me, no cheating this time, just poor performance. We were all African-American students. He asked us to stay behind and he talked to us and he implored us to work together and help one another build a community of learning.

He said very clearly to us, "If you do this, I will not let you fail. You must succeed." He was the only professor I've ever had to say those words to me. Somehow I said to myself, I can't let this guy down. I have to do better. A small group of us did just that. We formed a study group. We began peer learning and we went through exercises together, and later we would receive awards for academic excellence and achievement. Dr. Bloom would go on to write letters of recommendation for me for graduate school and be a great advisor during my time at Western Kentucky University.

Later, I learned more about his fingers, his lip and his sweat under his nose. It turns out that his parents were university professors in Germany prior to World War II. As a teenager, he'd been forced to join the German army as punishment for speaking out against the Nazi Party. During the war, he was captured by Russian soldiers and tortured. He had three of his toes and two of his fingers cut off. The reason his nose was wet was because of the anxiety that ran through his body when he would stand in front of students and have to teach. He was literally experiencing PTSD as he taught in front of these very critical and often rude students.

Once I graduated from Western Kentucky University, I never saw him again. But I'll never forget his commitment to making sure that I would fulfill my promises. I share these stories about my former teachers, Miss Wade, Mr. Hamilton and Dr. Bloom, because they remind me of the journey and that along the way it was education and educators who inspired me to fulfill my potential.

Education is a transformational space. It allows people to invest in one another, but it also allows us to invest in ourselves. On those college materials, you read about how education will help you get a better job, make more money, provide a pathway to upward mobility. These are all statistically significant correlations, it's true. But education builds us into something that we cannot become on our own.

Education should give us the skills to think critically and find solutions to unexpected challenges. That's what Dr. Bloom taught me. Education should teach us the value of discipline, that the greatest rewards come not from instant gratification, but from sustained effort and hard work. That's what Miss Hamilton tried to get across to me. And with the right education and the right educators like Miss Wade, you can learn how to become a better human being.

When your experiences, your challenges, when you learn authentic history, when you engage different perspectives, but also experience human models of compassion and altruism, it helps you imagine what you can become. And only then can you understand what it would look like to walk in another person's shoes. It takes skills. The economy will certainly benefit from what you've learned here at the School of Education. But the success of our community and indeed our democracy will depend on your ability to follow the Golden Rule.

Treat others as you would like to be treated. These qualities of empathy, discipline, the capacity to solve problems, to think critically, they don't just change how employers and leaders and community members see us. They change how we see ourselves. They allow us each to seek out new horizons and new opportunities with confidence, with the knowledge that we're ready, that we can actually face obstacles together. And then we can help others do it same. That's the power of education. That's the promise of what you bring to the table of ideas, and that's the possibility of a degree you're earning today.

The last thing I want to say, is something about speaking truth to power. Speaking truth to power is a catchy phrase, and it resonates with most of us because from the speaker's

perspective, the truth is always clear. We simply have to tell the powerful what it is. But know this: You already have the ability to speak truth to power. Each and every one of you has that power now. You probably had it when you came to Berkeley. But implementation is everything. How you get it done is everything. In order for truth to be empowered, you must be able to listen and be heard. There's power in listening. And that power is hard to experience when we believe our voices are more important than others. Also, when our voices are louder it is sometimes hard to be heard. And these are all testable propositions.

Empowering truth is a process. It's not an event. It's not a series of debates. And given the attack on education at all levels, content and cost, it will be important for you be more than just an advocate for your own ideas. Miss Wade, Miss Hamilton, Dr. Bloom, they all help me realize my truth and my power but I had to listen. I had to be open to the ideas of others. That's one of the secrets of power. It's always there. We simply think it looks different than it actually is.

And so School of Education, graduating class of 2023, here's your question: In spite of how much passion you have, how much education you have, how many facts you have, and these skills, how impactful will you be? Changing the world is great, but helping one person just make a connection that they don't already have is even better.

How impactful would you be? That's the real outcome that you have to invest in moving forward. That investment's not necessarily a solo project. You'll need your colleagues, your adversaries and your supporters, your leaders and those in need. You need them all for information, for ideas, and for inspiration.

For most of you, your time at Berkeley has come to an end. But stay in touch with one another. Rely on one another. Give one another thoughtful advice. Be a sounding board, be critics for one another. And most importantly, during the most troubling times we experience today, find ways to be kind. To reinvest in that kindness, to reinvest in the School of Education, to reinvest in the students that follow in your footsteps.

And lastly, be kind to yourself. Thank you very much.