

Graduation 2012 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduated Bill Gore
Orator: Professor Colin Riordan

Chancellor, the Senate of the University of Essex has resolved that the degree of doctor of the university be conferred upon Bill Gore.

Becoming a Vice-Chancellor, as I did here in 2007, is a curious experience, because you suddenly find yourself without a boss. You are the boss, and the nearest equivalent you have is your Chair of Council, which is the governing body of the university. Very soon after my arrival here Bill Gore became Chair of Council, a position he held from the beginning of 2008 until 2011. Little did he know it but Bill was taking on this critical role at a time when we were to face arguably some of the greatest upheavals since the foundation of the University. At a time of financial turmoil followed by recession, and then a radical reorganisation of university funding by the government, we were lucky to have a Chairman with Bill's background in turning round companies at times of crisis.

As a qualified chemical engineer and accountant, Bill has been a highly successful entrepreneur for many years and has undertaken senior executive roles at Chairman or Chief Executive level in companies covering a range of sectors from manufacturing to technology and property. He specializes in turnaround opportunities and has a very keen eye for where the value lies in a business. He once bought an abandoned electronics factory in Italy, and had the concrete base dug up. From the rubble was extracted all the tiny amounts of precious metals that had fallen there over the many years of manufacturing electronic components, yielding a profit of £1.5m and allowing the site to be developed for a new business. I've been racking my brains as to whether that methodology could be used for a university but think I'd better not go there.

But seriously, Bill's business expertise has been invaluable for the University of Essex. His experience of transforming businesses in ways that make them very successful has fed into the many major decisions that have to be made in an organisation like this. During his three years on Council before becoming Chair, Bill worked on the business plan for our £93m investment in the new campus at Southend. We now find that the Southend campus is financially our strongest. When we worked together for three and a half years as Vice-Chancellor and Chair of Council, we had to raise £100m following a decision by Council to approve a major capital investment programme. My background as a Professor of German didn't prepare me especially well for that sort of process, and Bill's help, advice and guidance was invaluable. We now see a £27m library building rising out of the ground at our Southend campus, product of a partnership with the borough council and South Essex College. We have bought more land at our Loughton campus and here at Colchester building work will soon start on a £21m Business School and a £26m project to extend the library and build a student centre.

Universities are not businesses in the sense that our aim is not to make a profit or satisfy shareholders. We are charitable institutions which aim to increase the sum of human knowledge and pass the benefits on to others. But to be successful we have to operate in a business-like way, and this is why Bill's success as a businessman has been so important to us.

But Bill also has a strong sense of the values that underpin universities and the charitable sector. In fact it is through his charitable work that the initial contact happened.

Bill first came to know the University in 1995, when the Children's Legal Centre moved to our campus from London. Bill helped Professor Carolyn Hamilton from the Department of Law to build up the Children's Legal Centre from a tiny charity with three part-time staff into the impressive organisation it is today with 50 members of staff and a national and international reputation. Professor Hamilton tells me that the Children's Legal Centre would not have achieved its great success without Bill's constant help, not just in terms of watching the finances as Treasurer, but in terms of strategy and in helping build relationships with other organisations and bodies.

He has been working with the centre for the last 17 years through all the changes of government funding. Being a businessman, coming to work in the voluntary sector was very new for Bill, but he took it in his stride and his skills proved more than a match for the charity sector.

If I may finish on a personal note, I quickly discovered Bill to be a very kind, generous and considerate person. He understood the importance of the relationship between Vice-Chancellor and Chair, and was aware that as a new Vice-Chancellor I would need support and advice. Not only did he instruct me in the critical importance of keeping a close eye on the cash flow, but he gave me the benefit of his keen analysis of the latest state of play in the Five Nations Rugby tournament.

But above all Bill has been a key figure in the development of this University, helping us through an extraordinarily turbulent period and asking nothing in return.

I am delighted we are able to honour his achievements in this way, and so, Chancellor, **I present to you our former Chair of Council, Bill Gore.**