

Graduation 2012

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Bill Gore

Chancellor, Pro-Chancellors, Vice Chancellor, Governors and Graduates - not Graduands - Graduates of the University of Essex. And I'm glad I am the first person to be able to call you such.

I'd first like to say how honoured and humbled I am to receive this degree from this university. I very much regard this as an award for which I act in loco parentis my fellow council members with whom I worked on your behalf for six or seven years.

But before I go on I'd like to make special mention of one of my very close colleagues who I worked with at the University for all of this time here - Tony Rich. You may all know that after a heroic battle with cancer he passed away on 17th July. He was a superbly organised man, and provided a huge momentum of both energy and wisdom in carrying out his duties. He was the main driving force in executing councillors' policies for the great changes here, not only at Colchester, but in Ipswich, Southend and Loughton. And I'd like to thank him in memoriam, so to speak, for being an outstanding colleague, and for a sports nut like me, a very good companion at Colchester United.

Do you know, my family are sitting there and I didn't get any whoops, and the Vice Chancellor said hugs are off limits, so I will carry on.

Since some of Tony's work and the work of Council is a bit of a mystery to you, I'd like to illustrate what it does by touching on some of the highlights in my term as Chair. I think you now understand, and Colin has stolen some of my thunder, that I came to the University's attention through the Children's Legal Centre and Professor Caroline Hamilton, and on which I will say no more except to thank the Vice Chancellor for his very generous comments.

After I became a council member at a very early meeting, and long before I became Chair, a seemingly preposterous notion was put to us. How do you turn an old cinema, and a one time bingo hall, into a University, in, of all places, Southend? A gamble. An absolute gamble. But of those of you who remember, this was what "two jags", sorry, John Prescott our deputy prime minister wanted to have happen, and as most of you know, he always got what he wanted. We have Southend today, and I think many of you here are from there, and I trust that you are enjoying the experience. We spent over £50 million plus in that campus, and the last pieces are now coming out of the ground as a library.

One of our early jobs on council was to find a new Vice Chancellor. A daunting task because if you choose the right guy or lady, nobody really comments about it. But if you get it wrong, the press have an absolute field day. We had a very long list of candidates, which we boiled down as quickly as we could to a short list. But your Vice Chancellor stood out, as prior to his interview he had come and spent a couple of days here, and when he saw us for interview he had a cunning plan.

Now, as you've heard, Essex is a very important university both in the UK and worldwide. And just to remind you, again, it's in the top ten universities in the UK for research, as you heard earlier on. But what you didn't hear is that it is now in the top 50 universities in the world built in the last 50 years, and there are several hundred of them. I think that's a wonderful achievement. Its foundation was based on a number of key principals, and I will reiterate them, though you may have heard them already today. At its centre is the rule of law, with a law department that is recognised throughout the world. And there is a commitment here to progressive government and improvements in the human condition. And these were the core of what Albert Sloman slated as his principles for this university back in 1964, and they are still with us today.

The role of council is to provide a governance framework for the non academic activities of the university, and lets management manage. And when I first met Colin after the news of his appointment broke, in a hotel in Tottenham Court Road, I told him I'd operate a very light touch, as he was the boss. But if I had a singular power, it was to fire him. He in turn indicated that if he couldn't get on with me, he'd look to Council to deal with me. And after that conversation we got on like a house on fire!

But, back to 'the plan'. What did it involve? It involved improving the offer; to increase the number and quality of students, and I think you up there understand that now very well; widening participation in the UK for UK students; controlling costs; completing Southend; and investing in the Acting School in Loughton. But in monetary terms, investing in the core site here at Wivenhoe. And that meant money. And as you've heard, it was about £100 million – but what you didn't hear was that we didn't have it in the bank at the time.

And this is where Council stepped in: Two lay colleagues, one an ex FTSE 100 CEO, the other a senior banker with Morgan Grenfell and Deutsche Bank, helped the University find the money in the City, in the teeth of the banking crisis, post the Lehmans' crash. I think that was pretty good work. Another lay Council member was instrumental in working with Southend District Council, with whom the university had not kicked off with the best of relationships, and helped to get the planning permission for the new halls of residence, the theatre, and the growth plans for the area, and the library you now see coming out of the ground. In fact we tried to ensure that most lay Council members could help the university directly and devote more time in using their skills. The academics on your council were extraordinary. During a time of great change and some risk, they all proved intelligent challengers in our discussions at all stages of our processes. And particularly they took up the challenge of managing the new faculty system, which was introduced by the Vice Chancellor five years ago.

Over this period I should also mention the very hard work of the professionals. Andrew Nightingale who is now retiring, who oversaw as much construction here in four or five years, as had happened in the previous forty. And Andrew Connolly as Finance Director, who had a unique gift for communicating complex financial matters not only to the council, but also to the university at large, in a very simple and understandable way.

I think though I'd like to highlight your Vice Chancellor Colin Riordan, whose last graduation this is. He, like Andrew Connolly, to use the British expression, has 'gone west', he's off to Cardiff. Andrew went to Exeter. He's been an inspiration to me, to the Council that I chaired, and I think to the university as a whole. His leadership has left, for you who remain, a university that is in all ways a better place than when he first came.

And to you, the new Graduates of the University of Essex, my thanks go to your unstinting support to all the changes that you are now seeing here, and even those which we had to plan and we've discussed, and they will emerge, the new business school for your successors, and the student centre.

I wish you all well in your future careers but be assured that Essex will always be here to welcome you back as a stronger and better place when you return.

Thanks to you all - students, staff, council colleagues, for allowing me to have one of the most rewarding and fulfilling and happiest times in my career to date. It has all been great fun.

Thank you.