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Louisiana State University Commencement Address
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Thank you, President Jenkins, for that very kind introduction. Trustees, members of the faculty, distinguished guests, moms and dads, families, friends, and members of the Class of 2004 – good morning!

As a fellow graduate of this great institution – and with a lifetime of gratitude for being able to call Louisiana State University my alma mater – I am truly honored to accept the degree that you have bestowed upon me.

You know, when someone or something you love honors you, it's very meaningful. I can't tell you how much this means to all the Longwell family. But most important, I feel privileged to share a few thoughts with the Class of 2004.

No matter where you turn these days, it is a great time to be an LSU Tiger. We all celebrate the year's athletic achievements – three national championships, and seven sports in the Top 10.

Certainly, no one was any prouder of this institution than I was in the Superdome on January the fourth. But even in celebrating such thrilling athletic achievements, we all know that LSU is much more. It also has won international recognition as one of our nation's flagship institutions of higher learning.

Louisiana State University is attracting outstanding administrators and professors to an already-world-class lineup. Research grants and programs are increasing and are competitive with our nation's top-tier state institutions. And we are seeing the highest percentage of top students in the state coming to the school. The university's reputation for educational excellence is also attracting an increasing number of high-quality, out-of-state students, particularly from Texas.

President Jenkins, these are truly outstanding days for LSU. Everyone who cares about the school's vital mission and promising future owes you, former Chancellor Emmert, and Provost Palm our sincere thanks for your superb leadership.

I'm proud to say that my own ties to LSU stretch back more than four decades and involve both my family and the company I work for.

On the business side, ExxonMobil has shared in the school's history since 1909, when Standard Oil Company built a refinery here. From the earliest days, the university, the community, and my company have grown and prospered together.

Today, ExxonMobil has more than 800 employees and some 450 retirees who graduated from LSU. They hold this university in high regard. And they remain diligent and generous in their contributions and support for the school.

Nearly every member of my family also has LSU ties. In fact, my wonderful wife, Norma, and I spent the first two years of our marriage here. And so, if I may, allow me to take a moment to share this great honor with my bride of 43 years, the mother of our four sons, Nana to our five grandchildren, and my best friend for life – Norma Longwell.

I often tell people that after Norma, my education at LSU was the best value of my life. It was my ticket to the career I have enjoyed and has been an enduring value for my entire family. Each of our four sons has been involved with the school in one way or another in obtaining their college degrees. Two are LSU petroleum engineering graduates.

One of our daughters by love also graduated from LSU, and the other two are fully indoctrinated. Our five grandchildren are already learning what it means to wear the purple and gold.

In every way, we are truly blessed. And I include Louisiana State University in the highest order of those blessings.

Being a long-term-commitment person, I especially recognize what Louisiana State University has meant in enabling me to be considered for employment by my company of 41 years – Humble Oil, Exxon, and now Exxon Mobil Corporation.

Charlie Hill was my first boss at Humble Oil, and I am honored to see that he is here today. Charlie, thank you for a great start.

My four years here – from 1959 to 1963 – helped prepare me for a productive career and responsible citizenship. I will always owe a debt to my instructors – particularly Professors Craft, Hawkins, and Holden – for introducing me to the petroleum industry and how to succeed in it. I especially want to recognize and express my thanks to Professor Murray Hawkins, who also is with us today.

When I was growing up and working in a small family business in Alexandria – now approaching six decades ago, and even during my years at LSU – nobody could have envisioned the great technological, social, and political changes that would reshape our society and our world.

Undoubtedly, the next several decades will bring changes of even greater magnitude to the Class of 2004. So now let's talk about that. As you look ahead to that future, there will be many rich opportunities for you to capture. And you've shown you have what it takes to do it.

You have already succeeded by obtaining a quality education and earning the right to be here today. Your achievements at LSU have helped prepare you for the next stage in your life.

But 24 hours from now – when we put away the caps and gowns, and when the excitement of graduation has subsided – will you be ready for success as you enter the next stage of your life?

On one level, that will depend on your ability to apply the lessons you learned at LSU to the careers that you have chosen. But on another level, success in any career – and success in life – depends on how you do it.

A few years ago, a young LSU graduate joined ExxonMobil and wrote me a letter asking for advice about how to succeed. I've always considered giving advice to be very serious business. After all, who can forget the story of the Greek philosopher Socrates? He went around giving people good advice – and they poisoned him.

But this young man had written to me, and he wanted my advice on how he might distinguish himself at ExxonMobil.

Now, I certainly don't claim to have a secret formula for success. But I did tell him about the qualities I have observed in successful people and how they approach their jobs and life.

The first is unquestionable ethical behavior. President Harry Truman used to say that people who are fundamentally honest don't need a code of ethics. Whenever you are in doubt about the right course of action, follow your conscience and always do the right thing.

The second is to take a proprietary interest in your job. It's your business. Get the job done on time and with good results. Henry Ford said that it is the biggest mistake in the world to think you're working for somebody else. I think Mr. Ford had it right.

The third quality is to take an aggressive but safe and healthy approach in all your activities.

The fourth is to remember that regardless of how smart you are, there is no substitute for hard work and attention to detail. Thomas Edison said that most people miss opportunity because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.

Fifth, make a value-added contribution while working as a team player. Remember that your team's success is your success. Sooner or later, your contribution will be recognized.

The sixth quality is really a variation on the Golden Rule. Treat everyone the same, with kindness and respect.

Number seven is to know your strengths and weaknesses, and work on the latter. Learn from others and study what makes them successful – and importantly, what not to do.

Number eight is to communicate your career goals to the appropriate people. Solicit constructive criticism of your performance – and welcome it.

The ninth quality is to have the right priorities. Always take care of yourself and your family first, and then get the job done. Regarding yourself and your family, honor your faith – no matter how you choose to define it – and live up to the potential for goodness in your values.

And number ten, enjoy what you do and have fun at it.

True success in your life's work is not about how much money you make or your job title. To my way of thinking, the only real measure of success is being good at what you do and really enjoying it.

Earlier this year, in his May commencement speech to your classmates, President Bush said, "We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give."

I agree completely. We live in a great country – a place where people enjoy more freedom and opportunity than anywhere else on earth – or, for that matter, at any time or place in human history.

Yet, it is sometimes easy to take all of this for granted. That is why we must always remind ourselves that the freedom and prosperity we enjoy did not come by accident.

It is a rich inheritance bequeathed to us by men and women who cherished freedom above all else, and for whom hard work and sacrifice were the real measure of character.

For those of us who are the beneficiaries of their labors and sacrifices – and really, that includes each of us – there will always be opportunities to honor that inheritance by service to others or by our charity to those in need. A university is really known by the quality of its graduates. When you leave here today, you will carry LSU's reputation with you. Serve it well. And serve it proudly.

Class of 2004 – the parents and families who have come to honor you today deserve your gratitude. In countless ways, they have given you a sense of purpose and direction – and you have made the best of it.

There is no more precious gift you can receive. Cherish it. Cherish them. Thank them – your mom, your dad, brother or sister, your friend from childhood – for all that they have given you.

And remember always that ours is a free society, and that we live in a nation that is the hope and the envy of the world. In America, you can achieve anything, fulfill any dream, and master your own destiny. The human mind has great power and potential, if only you will work hard and persevere without ceasing in the direction of your life's goals.

Reach for greatness. Be bold. Believe in yourself and never give up. And let me assure you, if you believe you can, you will. I wish you the best in that lifelong effort.

Again, congratulations, Class of 2004. It has been my privilege to be with you. God bless you all. And may God bless the United States of America and LSU.

Go Tigers!