

Eastern Michigan University

DigitalCommons@EMU

Commencement Programs and Materials

University Archives

1999

**Spring Commencement Address, Senator Alma Wheeler Smith
18th Michigan State Senate District, April 25, 1999**

Eastern Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.emich.edu/commencement>

Senator Alma Wheeler Smith 18th Michigan State Senate District

Alma Wheeler Smith is serving her second term in the Michigan Senate. She represents the 18th Senatorial District which encompasses most of Washtenaw County and includes the cities of Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti. Smith was born in Columbia, South Carolina, and moved with her family to Ann Arbor in 1943. She graduated from St. Thomas High School (Gabriel Richard High School) in Ann Arbor in 1959 and received her bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Michigan.

In her first term, Smith passed legislation regulating personal protection orders between juveniles and their parents and guardians. She guided into law a 50-bill technical package and one constitutional amendment which replaced the term "handicap" with the term "disability," bringing Michigan into conformity with federal terminology.

Smith has had key budget amendments on health care and the environment adopted into law. The quality of her legislative work has been recognized by the Michigan Association of Local Public Health, the Michigan Secondary Reading Interest Council, the Pro-Choice Network and several local associations in Washtenaw County. Currently Smith has several bills pending: an equal pay for equal work bill which would amend the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act to prohibit wage discrimination between the sexes and a bill that calls for property tax relief for owners of new homes.

Smith is the vice chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee and the first woman to hold a leadership position on that prestigious committee. She serves on the Higher Education, Community Health, Department of Environmental Quality, and Corrections subcommittees. Smith also serves on the Senate Fiscal Agency Governing Board.

She has held two other elected offices: trustee for the South Lyon School Board (1984-1992) and commissioner of the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners (1992-1994). During that time, she worked for then Senator Lana Pollack as her legislative coordinator.



SENATOR ALMA WHEELER SMITH
STATE OF MICHIGAN

LANSING:
(517) 373-2406
1-800-344-2562
(517) 373-5679 (FAX)
1-800-649-3777 (TDD)

510 FARNUM BUILDING
P.O. BOX 30036
LANSING, MICHIGAN 48909-7536
SENASMITH@SENATE.STATE.MI.US

Fax Transmittal

To: Ward Mullens

From: Elene Davis

Date: May 5, 1999

Faxed to: 734 - 483 - 2077

Number of Pages (including cover): 13

Comments:

Thank you

Good afternoon President Shelton, Vice President Reid, regents Purcell, Antonini, Griffen and Stephens (Stefans), deans, faculty, proud parents, honored guest, and most of all Eastern Michigan University's class of 1999 - members of this 150th year graduating class.

I am delighted to join you today as you move on from Eastern Michigan University to your new careers and new prospects.

Many of us view today as a conclusion of this period of your life. Some of your guests, parents and relatives, hope it's the end of bills - - both expected and out of the blue.

Even the graduation cards trumpet: "Congratulations! You've made it!" "Sure, to the precipice," you think. But you are not on the edge alone. Each next step will be rooted deep in the values of your family, and in the confidence of mentors and friends. To that well-tested foundation, you take from Eastern the strength of the life and tradition of this great institution.

Remember how your family marked each birthday as a true milestone. After a while, for you, your birthday was just another day.

Today is, however, more than just another birthday. This day marks... *the real coming of age* -- a welcome to the *real* world.

With each step in your education, you experienced lessening restrictions on your freedom of choice. Well... welcome, again, to kindergarten -- the real world -- where you will encounter new written rules and codes and discover even more restrictive unwritten ones. ... But a real world, too, where you will go on building your knowledge, revising your goals and renewing your dreams throughout your lives.

Some of you will change direction very suddenly and dramatically -- even to your own surprise.

II EVERYTHING CONNECTS

But for today, you have each picked your field of expertise, the challenge for you is to live and work well in a society where virtually everything connects.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt once said "In this modern world of ours we cannot afford to forget that what we do at home is important in relation to the rest of the world." Her observation is perhaps even more relevant now.

You are much more a part of our world than I was when I

graduated from college in the 1960s. While very much aware of the world and what I wanted to do to change it, "*my world*" was very narrow. My actions and contributions did not always have an immediate connection to the world outside of my own community.

Today we can share almost immediately in the successes and tragedies of other citizens everywhere. As educators, business, health and technology professionals you will work in local settings, but your action can transcend boundaries. That is the challenge that you face, and one that will keep you looking for new ways to do your best.

III CHANGE IS CONSTANT

The careers you have chosen are in some of our most dynamic fields.

A. EDUCATION

Education has changed radically in recent years. Teachers still teach the basic subjects, but they teach them in very different ways than I was taught or even my children were taught. The *most system* – more of the same thing – is unacceptable. A classroom of students has always been a challenge. But I think it's safe to say that

your students will confront you with even greater energy than you brought to your classrooms.

You will teach the first generation of students who have grown in the nursery with a computer as an appendage. Many of today's elementary students will have learned their colors by the age of 2 or 3 with the help of a special computer program. A majority of your kindergartners may be reading.

These computer age children will come to you with a different experience of learning than even you -- the computer generation -- had. They will come, too, with very different expectations: an exciting, colorful, fast-paced school day.

But exciting and fast-paced does not always mean children are learning what they need. Your challenge is to keep their interest, but teach them the basics that will enable them to succeed just as you have.

Not every child will come to you as ready to learn as the next. As new teachers you may face the challenge of finding all the resources you need for your students ...and challenge the finding established here at Eastern that all students can learn. Never, never

distrust that concept. To do so betrays tomorrow and the hope of a sound democracy.

Sadly, all of our school districts are not yet equal. Some schools have enough teachers, textbooks and computers for each child to master his or her studies. Others have far less. In some few schools teachers may be struggling just to provide enough books. These students need your enthusiasm, intelligence and commitment to help them reach their full potential. These school districts need your fresh ideas to get the whole community involved in educating their children. The more experienced among the staff and community will say “we’ve tried that and it didn’t work” or “be reasonable, it just can’t happen here.” Don’t listen completely, hear the wisdom of experience and discard the cynicism of frustration. You will learn to tell the difference.

B. BUSINESS

Those of you who leave today for jobs in business already have an understanding of your relationship to the rest of the world. The smallest, local business today can still have an international presence, thanks to the Internet. Our biggest businesses are the

result of mergers across state lines and even international borders.

The company you may go to work for could merge with another before you have completely settled into your job.

Not that long ago, the challenge in the cable television industry was to bring cable into every city and home. The latest industry challenge is how to merge cable with other technologies to not only bring you every network and cable channel you could imagine, but also phone service, high speed Internet connections all through one cable and even the opportunity to vote.

If you are in international business, that technology would let you talk to and see your partners abroad through computer conferencing. If you are a smaller local business, that same technology could give you the opportunity to grow and sell your services and products without your ever having to leave your office.

The challenge for any business no matter its size is to be open to change so that you do not miss opportunities. That demands creativity from you. The same creativity that shows our teachers new ways to educate students so they can succeed in the workplace, will show you new ways to keep those businesses and industries healthy.

And healthy businesses mean strong economies and jobs for our citizens.

Just as educators need to meet the challenge of our under-funded school districts, businesses can meet the challenges in our communities. That can mean anything from on-site daycare to programs designed to teach job skills to former welfare recipients. There are good jobs available, and there is no shortage of good technology jobs, but we don't always have the workers with the "right stuff". Business can work with human services professionals to bring a fresh perspective to help find and train workers. The result will not only be stronger businesses, but stronger communities where people can work and support themselves and their families.

C. HEALTH CARE

Those of you heading for jobs in the health and human services professions already know how quickly your chosen field is changing. Research and new discoveries lead us to ways to not only cure but prevent some diseases. But – as you all well know – that points to new issues to be faced.

Some medical advances have serious consequences for

personal privacy. New technology that lets doctors determine if someone is at risk for Huntington's disease, for example, creates the possibility that medical information can be used to discriminate against someone in the workplace. The greatest medical advances could be rendered meaningless if people are allowed to misuse the information they yield. It is up to legislators, like me and those of you interested in a political career, to make the laws to prevent this misuse. But ...it is up to you as health care professionals to educate all of us on the meaning and benefits of these discoveries.

Health does not rest only in physical and mental wellness. It depends on a healthy community as well.

D. HUMAN SERVICES

Social services and programs have also changed radically in recent years. Michigan is one of many states to experiment with new ways to move people off of the welfare rolls. No one views public assistance as a handout any longer. Your job now is to help people find opportunities for steady jobs and more education so they can support themselves and their families.

Some of those opportunities lie in education, business, health

care and technology. So the challenge for you is to connect with your former fellow students who have radiated to other careers to help people improve their lives. Like educators, human service workers directly affect the future through the children you touch. When you work with a man or woman to build skills and find good jobs, you help set an example for their children. Children learn that success takes education and hard work. You have the best opportunity in years, to truly end the cycle of poverty and show the next generation that their lives can change for the better.

E. TECHNOLOGY

One thread that connects all of us here today is, of course, technology. Those of you graduating from the School of Technology know that change and challenge is going to be as much a part of your work life as the books, computers, and medical tools your fellow graduates will rely on to do their jobs.

You have been taught how to turn risk into opportunity. And one of the challenges you will face is teaching the rest of us to not fear the technological changes that we will encounter in our jobs. With your help, we can all work better and work together to improve

life for everyone.

IV COMMUNITY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Today you leave EMU to start not only your careers, but also your life as part of a community. Although a university education exposes you to many new people and experiences, the university is still a sheltered environment. When you leave here you should accept new responsibilities beyond your family and your job.

What happens in both state and federal government will affect your life at work, home and in your community. You can't leave this to chance. You have an important role to play in our democracy. I urge you to pay as close attention to what goes on in city hall, the state capitol, and congress as you will to the new developments in your careers.

The decisions that we, your elected officials, make in your name affect the future in critical ways. Democracy is hard work. It is your work. If we are to truly represent your interests, then we need to hear from you.

V. CONCLUSION

You've worked hard to get to Eastern Michigan University's

Convocation Center today. Your families are proud of you and you should be exhilarated. May you love your chosen path as much as I do mine.

As you experience ups and downs in your future, remember your success here at Eastern. At one time, this was a new environment that posed daunting challenges. You've met them and now move on. Whatever you face in the future, you can face it with confidence in your talent, discipline and perseverance. It has brought you here today. It will take you far.

As I advise potential candidates for public office "promise nothing you can't deliver yourself". All you can honestly promise is to work hard, be open minded, provide access to all people and be true to yourself.

I believe that is sound advice for all of us regardless of the walk of life we choose, regardless of the constituency – whether Technology, Inc. or the first grade. So go forth with the sound foundation life here at EMU has provided, knowledge of how to listen and learn and your own ability to stand in your integrity.

One or two people can make a difference. In the words of my

father – I believe a truly great man – “be good to each other and have courage to right the wrongs”.

It is a privilege to share this important day with you.

Congratulations and thank you.

*** * * ***

Remarks on receiving the honorary doctorate - something to this effect:

When I told my children I was to receive this honorary doctorate today I told them I felt like a pretender to the throne. My son said, “Mom you write amendments, author bills and even get some of them adopted into law. That’s doing all the work of public affairs.

I have a friend here today, Rebecca Moore, who is about to receive her doctorate. I know the years, research and dedication Becky has put into this achievement. I still feel like a pretender ... but a very honored and privileged one. Thank you.