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**Winter Commencement Address, Paul Schollaert, December 16,
2001**

Eastern Michigan University

Commencement Remarks Paul Schollaert

Let me add my congratulations to you on your outstanding accomplishments. You have much to be proud of and I expect you to continue the superior work you have demonstrated at Eastern Michigan University as you move on to your next set of challenges, be they at work or in graduate or professional school.

If a commencement speaker is expected to offer a clear picture of the future facing you as graduates, I can assure you that I will disappoint you today. The pace and the reach of change in recent decades have been far too dramatic to allow any rational person to offer such a vision. However, I am going to take this opportunity to discuss two trends that are internally contradictory, but are developments that surely will play a major role in shaping our uncertain future. Because I value so highly the education you have been privileged to experience here at Eastern Michigan, I also will talk about ways in which your experience in college hopefully has prepared you to embrace the challenges in these trends and use them to your advantage in shaping the social space you will occupy.

We live in a world that is incredibly complex and riddled with significant contradictions, and, as we saw in September, subject to almost immediate change. **In this world, people are better connected to each other, but we are increasingly socially isolated. In this complex world, we are bombarded with all kinds of information, but we often lack the tools to make sense of it all.**

We are reminded constantly that we live in an increasingly connected and interrelated world. “Network” is a key buzzword of the past decade because of increasing connections among people. The reach of our social ties has expanded dramatically. It used to be that long-distance communication was accomplished by physically carrying the written word (or symbols) across great distances. We have instant access to people across the world through the web, or on card-sized cell phones. The fidelity and quality of these interactions continues to improve. We share substantial common culture world wide, largely because of an increasingly international media. Many of you experienced this first hand as you watched footage from Al-Jazeera, the middle eastern television network, on CNN following the September 11 tragedies. Nearly every one of us knows people from each of the inhabited continents. We live with daily reminders of the small world effect (sometimes referred to as “six degrees of separation”), the theorem that a string of acquaintances, no more than five individuals long, can link us to any other person in the country. On average, we know more people in more diverse places than at any time in human history.

In spite of the growth of human networks and the increasing reach of social contacts, Americans are more isolated socially. The political scientist, Robert Putnam, has documented the substantial decline of engagement in civic and social affairs in this country since the 1960s. We belong to far fewer groups and clubs, we work for fewer causes and we vote less. Church membership and attendance has dropped from peak rates in the sixties. There has even been a real decline in simple social participation—we don’t visit our friends and neighbors with the same frequency we did a generation ago. So paradoxically, while we are more broadly connected to other people, there has been a

decline in high-quality social connections, those that build strong communities through the development of trust, reciprocity, and cooperation.

I will return to this topic, but first I would like to explore a second issue, that of information load. We live in a society literally blinded by information. Science accumulates masses of new knowledge, such as the full sequence of the human genome, at such a fast pace that no scholar can stay truly current in a traditional discipline. Cable systems and satellite dishes deliver a hundreds of channels of programming. News is reported continuously and, often, instantaneously. The proliferation of product variety can make a simple process like grocery shopping pure agony—Do you know how many varieties of Crest toothpaste are on the shelves today? (I counted twenty-two recently).

Such a rush of information can be incapacitating. Without the skills to sort out the meaningful from the specious, thin information tidal wave leaves us passive in its wake.

However, this crush of information also provides important opportunities for people like you who can help us make better sense of all the data and apply it to daily life. In fact, I think that the focus of many of your careers will be digesting and interpreting information. The ability to recognize patterns in a mass of data and information is an exceptionally important skill. The scientific techniques developed to discover, understand, and harness the meaningful elements of the 100 million sequences in the human genome, the marketing procedures that will make sense of the thousands of purchasing decisions made by a consumer each year, the meteorological tools to create accurate models of climate forecasting from the current mass of weather data, and even the electronic device that will help you chose intelligently from the thousands of available television channels represent the kinds of technological developments of the coming century that will matter most. The ability to make sense of information will be well rewarded and I am confident that you, as graduates of Eastern Michigan, will be able to make an impact.

These two issues, a decreasing level of social community in an increasingly connected world and the need for pattern recognition in a blizzard of information actually are related in an important way. There are patterns to the millions of social interactions that happen every minute. If we view a social community as a systematic set of connections with other people--connections that build trust, cooperation, and reciprocity—deliberate patterns emerge. Community is created through the repeated use of systematic connections. The connections to others in a crowd are random and typically not repeated. No community develops. Connections among the members of a work team, on the other hand, are systematic and repetitive. Remember this as you enter the work force or graduate school: Interactions among members of a tem encourage the development of trust and cooperation. If communities of mutual support and benefit are nourished, they grow. This is principle is important to know in your first work experience on through to your last.

The basis of our connections with others has grown dramatically. Because our reach is longer, we have connections with a larger and more diverse set of people. In such an environment, the old models of community formation don't necessarily work. Our task is to find new ways of defining, building, and maintaining the social contacts that lead to community. The key to this challenge lies, at least in part, in the ability to find

meaningful patterns of community in these larger networks and to develop ways to nurture them. Reinvention of the social groups that build strong communities is a task very much like making meaning of the genomic sequence. We must identify the logical ties among people who are connected very differently than they were a half century ago and we must cultivate such communities. This is a very difficult task. However, much success can derive from participation in the process. We view you as key participants using the tools and knowledge you have acquired here at Eastern.

As a graduate of Eastern Michigan University, I believe you are especially well-prepared to face the challenges of building community in new ways. You have job-specific skills, and we know you write and reason better than you did when you came to the University. We hope that you have a greater appreciation and understanding of those different from you and that you have learned to think globally. Most importantly, you have been pushed to develop your critical thinking skills, the abilities that best help people solve complex and ambiguous problems such as I have described this afternoon.

The educator and children's advocate, John Holt, wrote "The true test of character is not how much we know how to do, but how we behave when we don't know what to do." I am confident that you can figure out what you should do even in the most difficult situations, including establishing community in our complex world.

You graduate into a challenging, but interesting, world. Good luck and have a great ride!