



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – San Francisco State Commencement Address

Remarks of Ambassador Bleich at the San Francisco State Commencement Address, California

(As prepared for delivery – May 21, 2011)

Thank you President Corrigan, or as they say in Australia: “Good on ‘ya, Mate.”

I am very honored to be here today with you and with my colleagues from the Board of Trustees, Chancellor Reed and Trustee Bob Linscheid.

Most of all it’s an honor for me to join George Marcus and all of you here today as a graduate of this, San Francisco State’s great Class of 2011.

As a former Trustee, I have walked this campus many times, met with thousands of students, and attended many graduations. I’ve had the great fortune to experience all of California’s higher education system as a student, as a graduate, as a professor, as an employer, as an alum, and as a Trustee. I’ve seen it from here, from D.C., and now from the other side of the world. This experience has been part of my life for over two decades, and it more than just professional; it has been a deeply personal one.

And so nothing satisfies me more than to be one of you, to see all of these graduates.

And nothing concerns me more than the very real chance that many other Californians will never have this same opportunity. And that is what I’d like to talk to you about today.

I came to California because of the education system. I’d grown up in Connecticut and attended college back East on partial scholarships and financial aid. Like a lot of you, I worked part time during the school year, and held down two, sometimes three, full-time jobs during the summers.

But by my first year of grad school, I’d maxed out my financial aid and was relying on loans that charged 14% interest. Going to law school, and being a lawyer had always been my dream. But in 1986, I had almost no hope of that dream. My wife and I simply could not afford the tuition for any law schools back East.

I applied to UC Berkeley Law School because it was the only top law school in the Country that we could afford. It turned out to be the greatest education I have ever



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received. And I got it because the people of California -- its leaders and its taxpayers -- were willing to invest in me.

For the past 20 years, since I graduated, I have felt a duty to pay back the people of this state. When I had to figure out where to build a practice, buy a home, raise my family and volunteer my time and energy, I chose California. I joined a small California firm -- Munger, Tolles & Olson -- and eventually became a partner there.

The firm grew, and we attracted more and more good lawyers. In fact, for the past three years, Munger has been ranked the No. 1 firm in the nation.

That success is also California's success. It has meant millions of dollars in taxes paid to California, hundreds of thousands of hours of volunteer time donated to California, houses built and investments made in California, and hundreds of talented people attracted to work in and help California.

My story is not unique. It is the story of California's rise from the 1960s to the 1990s. Millions of people stayed here and succeeded here because of their California education. Silicon Valley, Hollywood, aerospace, energy, cleantech, the farm lands that feed most of our nation came from this simple understanding. That if you invest in people, if you make a sacrifice today for their future, your own future will be rewarded.

You and I and everyone graduating here today benefited from the foresight of an earlier generation that recognized it had a duty to pay it forward. That was the bargain California made with us when it established the California Master Plan for Higher Education back in 1960.

The idea was simple: make California the state where every qualified and committed person can receive a low-cost and high-quality education, and all of us benefit. We'd attract and retain the leaders of the future and that would help the state grow bigger and stronger.

And it works.

The numbers even confirm this. Economists found that for every dollar the state invests in a CSU student, it receives \$4.41 in return.

So as someone who has lived the California dream, there is nothing more painful to me (and I hope to all of you) than to see this dream dying. This dream is being starved to death by a public that thinks any government service -- even public education -- is not worth paying for. And by too many political leaders who do not lead us, but instead give in to our worst, shortsighted instincts.



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The latest \$500 million cut in the CSU system merely reflect trends that have been hurting California public education for years. It is not a Democrat or a Republican problem. Both sides have failed us. To win votes, political leaders from both parties mandated long prison sentences that forced us to stop building schools and start building prisons; to pay prison guards more and give students less.

Back in the 1980s, California spent more than five times as much on universities as it did on prisons. Today, we spend more on prisons than we do on universities.

Let me give you an even clearer example. When Governor Brown was Governor the first time, there were 40,000 prisoners in California. Today, there are over 40,000 prison guards. This has happened in the span of just one political career.

For the last two decades we have been starving higher education. California's public universities and community colleges have half as much to spend today as they did in 1990 in real dollars. If UC Berkeley Law School had the tuition that it has today back in 1986, I would not have been able to go to law school. I would not be a Californian.

The promise of low-cost education that brought me here, and so many others here, and kept us here, has been abandoned. Our K-12 system has fallen from the top ranks 30 years ago to 47th in the nation in per-pupil spending. And higher education is now taking on water.

At every trustees meeting that I attended, we saw this in human terms. We heard the painful stories of faculty who could not afford to raise a family on their salaries; of students who are on the financial edge because they are working two jobs, taking care of a child and barely making it with our current tuitions. Today, everyone in our system is making terrible sacrifices. Employee furloughs, student fee increases and campus-based cuts in services and programs.

This is wrong. Most important, it is unfair. The cost of education should be shared by all of us because the benefit of education is shared by all of us.

Today, serving in the Asia-Pacific, I see this more clearly than I did before. America does not have the world's largest population, or the most natural resources. We are not the only democracy or the only free market. And so why are we the wealthiest nation in the world – three times greater than any other nation? Our advantage in the world is that we can make things that no one else in the world can make; we dream things no one else dares to dream. Our advantage has been knowledge and imagination: that 28% of Americans have a college degree, four times as many as the world's average. These are the minds that invented television, personal computers, the internet, that put people on the moon, that created the film industry, that are inventing carbon-free fuels and electric cars.



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This is what we are giving up if do not reclaim California's commitment to higher education.

Today, for the first time, we trail dozens of other countries in math and science. In one generation, we've gone from 1st in the world to 9th in the percentage of young people with college degrees.

What made California great 50 years ago, and what can keep California great is the belief that it does not have to be this way. It is the faith that we can solve any problem as long as we do two things: acknowledge the problem and work together. Recently, that faith has been missing. In the face of a \$500 million cut to this system, we have protests from some current students and faculty. But where are the voices of the millions of UC and CSU graduates who have benefitted their entire lives from their public education? Californians won't acknowledge it; but we have lost the commitment to invest in one another. That is why we have lost our way in decision after decision.

We've gone from investing in the future to borrowing from it.

We can change this. The president set a national goal of being first again in college graduate rates by 2020 and has increased student aid to help accomplish this.

But he cannot do this alone.

The solution is simple, but hard.

It is what I'm doing now.

Tell what is happening to every person who can hear it. Beat this drum until it can't be ignored. Shame your neighbors who think the government needs to be starved and who are happy to see Sacramento paralyzed. Remind your fellow alums who have been silent that they live today in the wealthiest state in the wealthiest nation in human history not by divine right, but because others invested in schools like San Francisco State. Raise your voice and multiply its power by enlisting other new graduates, and alums, and your parents, your mentors, your employers, all of those who invested in you. All of those millions of voices. 50 years ago, that many voices charted this state towards greatness.

That many voices can wake up this state again, and rediscover its greatness. It takes nothing more, or less, than that you give of your self. Contribute to your alumni fund. Give time to help encourage and mentor students who are coming up through the system. Give thanks and credit to your teachers. And when you run into people who dismiss public education, who demand cuts for cuts sake, I want you to give them something too:



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Give them Hell. Because if you don't, who will? Because if we don't, then we will be the generation that let the promise for a great California die.

So I congratulate us, but I challenge us. Take this great education you have, and reclaim that right for others. Because no matter what you have done up until now, and matter what you choose to do, know that you have the ability – each one of you – to make education affordable to every one, and to write the next chapter in the great California story.