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In his New York Times column on May 2, David Leonhardt wrote the following:

Education isn't just another issue. It is the most powerful force for accelerating economic growth, reducing poverty and lifting middle-class living standards. Well-educated adults earn much more, live longer and are happier than poorly educated adults.

Leonhardt is absolutely correct in making this obvious statement. Education policy—federal, state, local, and district—is the most important public policy issue we have. This might not surprise you coming from an education dean. But the education system of a modern country is perhaps its most critical social institution. Moreover, for democracies, a quality education system is an absolute necessity. Nothing can be more important.

Why is this true? The first reason is because of what Leonhardt claims. People who possess a good education—and that means every single one of our graduates here today—realizes enormous economic benefits. College graduates earn more money through their lifetimes than people who do not attain degrees.

Moreover, the economy as a whole benefits—the entire country gets richer. But the downside of this personal benefit is that those with less education fail to benefit as much as those who have that good education. Without good social policy in other areas like taxation, health, and the justice system, educational disparities result in greater stratification within the society. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

We live in such a situation. Right now, 400 families hold over half of the total wealth of the country. The top 20% of Americans control 80% of the nation's wealth. When you graduates are my age, you will most likely be in that group of the top 20%. That is one of the meanings of becoming a college graduate. With that wealth and privilege come responsibility.

In Texas right now, there are about five and a half million children in K-12 education. 59% of those children live in poverty. That is about 3,250,000 poor children. Here in Arizona, with about 1.2 million children in school, 48% live in poverty, about 550,000 kids. So, in these two southwest states, we have nearly 4 million kids living in poverty. If you think this is scary, I could march you through the entire southwest.

I am not a religious person, but I suspect many of you are. To me, allowing a society to produce such dramatic levels of economic inequality is sinful.

So, what I just said is depressing. But like most of you, I am basically an optimist. So where is the bright side? The bright side is one of the other fabulous benefits of a good education. More educated people enjoy lots of other benefits. Like Leonhardt said, they are happier. They suffer less from depression and anxiety, and they live healthier lives. They eat better, exercise more, smoke less. They live longer. For men, about 5 or 6 year more. For women, about 7 or 8 years more.

But wait, there is more. More education equates to more engagement in the life of the community. Those with more education follow the news more; they are well informed and vote at higher rates. They run for office, volunteer for civic activities, and provide leadership for their communities and their cities.

So, these non-economic benefits of good education account for much that is good in a society. These areas—civic participation, happy and healthy lives—these are the most important benefits of good education. The economic benefits derive from these social benefits. And they are essential for sustaining democratic institutions. Without a good education system, democracies fail. Without a good education system, a nation cannot afford the rest of what it means to provide a good life to all of its citizens. And a good education system can be good only if all of its students, both children and adults, have access to and success in that system. It is not a good system if only the rich and powerful benefit from it.

All of you are now graduates of a great college of education in a great university. I do not have to tell you what you need to do professionally to secure that good system for everyone in our country. You have learned that from my colleagues on the faculty and from our partners in K-12 education and other organizations.

But I am reminding you about your civic responsibilities. Become engaged. Right now. Not next year, not the year after. Now. Go out and volunteer. Protest if you think that might work. Be philanthropic. Give a buck or two, or more if you can afford it, to an important cause. Every one of you can afford a little, and once you get the habit of civic engagement and community support, you will do this constantly. It will be part of your life.

You must vote in every election. Do not skip even one. And that is a requirement for all of you family members and friends, too. You are never too busy to vote. And you are never too busy to stay informed on matters pertaining to civic life and the political process. There is an old expression in politics “You get who you voted for.” And if you don’t vote, you get who other people voted for. Shame on you. Run for office, work on campaigns. Sponsor talks from candidates. Visit the capital. Talk to your elected officials. Do not be cynical. Be activists.

And most importantly, be Wildcats for life.