

2020 Saitama University Degree Awarding Ceremony - President's Address

Congratulations to everyone celebrating their graduation and completion here at Saitama University's degree awarding ceremony today. On behalf of all our staff, I would like to express my sincere affection and gratitude to the family and friends who supported you throughout your journey.

Today we are celebrating the completion of 26 Doctoral degrees, 35 Master's degrees, and 25 Bachelor's degrees. These totals include many international students: 23 Doctoral, 29 Master's, and 1 Bachelor's.

During your years here at our school, Japan, and the rest of the world, was afflicted by a series of disasters. This year was especially tough, with new measures enforced to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, including a campus-wide entry ban. It was not easy to continue your studies and complete your degrees under these circumstances. Please allow me to express my sincere admiration for all of you who overcame doubts about the progress of your projects and your future, all of you who overcame anxiety about new restrictions on human interaction, and all of you who dedicated yourselves to endless study and kept your research in motion.

Right now, we're living through events that indicate de-globalization like Brexit and the US-China trade war. We're in the middle of a Fourth Industrial Revolution based on innovations like AI. It has already been pointed out that these events will cause permanent changes in global trade and productions systems, and in how we value society and individuals. There are 2 topics that I would like share with you today, to give you strength as you leave our school, and enter a world that is changing suddenly in unpredictable ways.

First, "maintaining a habit of inquisitiveness, learning, and thinking."

Some of favorite words of wisdom are from Confucius: "He who learns but does not think is lost! He who thinks but does not learn is in great danger." Unless we practice both learning and thinking, we will never be able to apply the things that we have learned. And even worse, we will be held back by our own stubbornness. Learn and contemplate. Learn how to contemplate. This will bring you closer to the truth of matters, and you will also gain a deeper understanding of your own thoughts. I believe that you performed many cycles of "learning and thinking" without conscious effort as you engaged in research within your departments and graduate programs. When you narrowed down your topic, you interpreted the results of your experiments, and those results lead you to a new topic to explore. Please continue to perform this cycle, but with conscious effort, throughout the diverse challenges you will encounter.

Furthermore, an inquisitive mind is required to maintain a habit of "learning and thinking." During this COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen honest reports based on facts, and we have also seen baseless and inflammatory claims. Sadly, it's no different in the world of research. If you search for COVID-19 in medical paper databases like PubMed, you will see that over 40,000 papers have been published between January and August this year. As far as I know, there have never been this many medical or life

science papers published in a single year. Of course, when you browse these papers, they are perfect examples of sloppy data collection, inadequate peer review, and a general lack of supervision. To be frank, there are a few gems, and a lot of rubbish. There have been many papers that enjoyed media attention, only to be retracted later. There are also scientific papers that appear to be clearly factual, but actually contain serious mistakes. This behavior is not limited to times of crisis. Right now, due to extreme circumstances, the underlying problems have become more obvious. But even in normal times, we need to remain vigilant against a significant amount of false papers and severely biased media reports. Any information that you come across, especially very important information, must not be taken at face value. You must scrutinize thoroughly before you accept it.

Soon, you will be building your careers at companies, other universities, and research facilities. No matter which path you choose, please consider the major that you completed here at our school, and the research you worked on, to serve as a foundation for maintaining a habit of learning and thinking. Please remain inquisitive, develop a wide perspective, and go beyond the boundaries of your own field. You will be rewarded with building new insight, building solutions to social problems, and discovering the treasure of self-actualization. If we wish to learn, we must open our hearts and find humility. If we wish to think, we must take time alone to practice introspection.

My second topic is “building communication skills.”

By now, you probably think that the importance of communication is an exhausted topic. But I want you to ask yourselves, are you truly achieving an effective mutual understanding? Obstacles to communication become more apparent in challenging situations. The current COVID-19 pandemic has provided strong affirmation of the value of risk communication... and it has also proven that achieving good communication is not always straightforward. In the US, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) established the Six Principles of CERC (Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication). These guidelines identify 6 important points to follow when communicating in emergencies: Be First, Be Right, Be Credible, Express Empathy, Promote Action, and Show Respect.

There are some world leaders who are achieving results following these principles of risk communication as a part of infection control measures. One of them is Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, and another is Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand. In her March TV appearance after the pandemic began, Chancellor Merkel was able to display true empathy for people who are infected by the virus, people who are suffering losses due to the impact of its spread, medical professionals, and other essential workers. In addition, she expressed her trust in science, and science-based policies. Her leadership has been rewarded by strong support from the public. Likewise, Prime Minister Ardern prioritized the well-being of the residents of New Zealand. She gained public trust by working alongside average people, and saw great results concerning infection control.

What can we learn from the words and actions of these wise women? I believe that we can see the value of communication with the capability of truly visualizing the circumstances of other people, of empathizing with their situation, and of basing every

word on that foundation of empathy. This is true for relationships between individuals, and between nations. Our research work is based on social and economic collaboration. Sometimes our work takes us beyond international borders. Right now, it's more important than ever that we find the capability to visualize the circumstances and interests of others, express empathy, and maintain discourse.

The Six Principles of CERC are also valuable for normal, everyday communication. Obviously, you will need to cooperate with other people to succeed in your career. Your partners may be from different countries and different backgrounds than yourself. Developments in ICT systems will eliminate geographic restrictions while expanding the communication methods available to us. But no matter how far communication tech evolves, and no matter where and when you are using it, please continue to apply the same guidelines of accuracy, respect, empathy, and engaging in discourse.

Finally, I would like to remind you that our university campus is not just rooms and tables to do homework. Saitama University is a welcoming space to enjoy the changes of the four seasons, and the company of friends. This is a place that created and shaped you as a human being, and it will always be your second home. Soon enough, whether you pursue research or work at a company, you will experience both days of brilliant joy, and days of crushing darkness. When you have lost your way, when you have lost sight of your goals, please think back on your pleasant younger days, spent with faculty and friends, here on our beautiful green campus. Reflect on your time studying and researching here, reflect on the experiences that taught you how to overcome trouble and conflict, and how to survive. I am certain that you will find the strength to take one more courageous step, and the road forward will unveil itself to you. If you have the chance, please come back and visit Saitama University. Your second home will always welcome you.

Here's a quote from our school song:

To all the dreamers,
Draw from the flow of new wisdom,
May the youth always have hope.

It is my sincere desire that you all move forward with a heart full of hope, and a blazing bright spirit.

Once again, congratulations on your graduation and completion.

September 23, 2020
Takafumi Sakai
President, Saitama University