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Make a Plan. Then Change It.

Commencement Address

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May 12, 2019

- I. *Hello, and welcome!* Greetings to Dean Marchionini and to the faculty and staff of the School of Information and Library Science. Welcome to all the friends and family of graduating students. Happy Mothers Day to all of you who have mothered these students and others. And most of all, congratulations to students who are gathered here to celebrate completing degrees at this amazing University of North Carolina! Well done!

I serve as the UNC law library director and am a professor of law teaching and writing about legal information management and the law and policy of information. I am delighted to share in this celebration as you start a new stage of life with a valuable degree from the UNC School of Information and Library Science. And, in keeping with tradition, I have a bit of advice for you that reflects my experiences in my career and in my life.

The advice is: **Make a Plan. Then Change It.**

So, to do both of these things, you need to keep two sets of awareness going at once. One is working on your plan, making it granular, perhaps with timelines...refining it, measuring your progress. The other awareness is looking up from your plan, looking around, and thinking about whether or perhaps just when you need to change the plan.

I have four reasons why you want to anticipate changing your plan.

- II. *First*, you are making plans based on assumptions about the way the world works now and your predictions about how it might evolve. But the world changes in mind-blowing ways.

I'm going to give you some examples from my past. When I graduated with a Masters in librarianship in 1986, I had plans to be a reference librarian in the Main Library at the University of Alabama. I loved this work and imagined doing it for a long time. We were Google back then. People came to the library or telephoned and asked how do you say "surf's up" Hawaiian, how tall was Lincoln, and how much do paintings by Mary Cassatt sell for at auction. One person wanted to know the top ten U.S. producers of shoelaces; another how to conduct genealogical research; and others wanted to see the actual first printings of the U.S. Census. We had so much fun looking through a whole first floor full of reference books and government documents to find answers and guide researchers. I also conducted mediated online research that transformed the year by year, volume by volume research into a miraculous discovery of one fell swoop of a search for fifty years' worth of citations to scholarship on Mary Cassatt! Wow! Frugal graduate students actually wrote us checks to conduct these Boolean searches. My biggest policy interests were expanding access to information and combatting censorship.

Suffice it to say, my experience of the world did not lead me in 1986 to have plans for teaching and writing about how research systems would become surveillance tools to monitor and monetize who is looking for what information. I did not foresee that the payment system for using the Internet would be based on trading privacy for information. Back in the 1980's I did not realize that my enthusiasm for expanding access to information might need to be balanced against huge growth in privacy invasions through changes in technology and in the information industry.

So, I have changed my plan! I now draw on both my role as a librarian and as a law professor to explore how to find practical solutions to balance information access and privacy because the world changed around me.

So I encourage you to keep that dual awareness of your plan and the changing world and be prepared to change your plan.

- III. *The second reason* you will want to make a plan and then change it is because you will meet people who have had different experiences from you, and you might want to incorporate those perspectives into your set of priorities.

Whether you read someone's book or someone's Tweet, conduct formal research, analyze data or sample opinions through human centered design,...whether you ask or just listen,...getting other people's perspectives can expand your knowledge, improve your effectiveness in your career, make you a kinder person, and improve the quality of your life.

Some examples of things I have learned from others include

- electrical outlets for library tables are more important than a good view out of a window;
- I've learned that my assumptions about what is normal and expected in a variety of settings is simply my normal, not everyone else's. I have changed my plan for how to manage up and how to manage down; I'm much less concerned about pejorative aspects of micromanagement and more comfortable exploring details of expectation that really take into account others' perspectives.

I have changed many of my plans big and small, by reflecting on other people's perspectives.

We are all part of this moment in time when polarization of opinions is accentuated by the structure of our media. We suffer from the filter bubble of getting "more like this" or "more extreme versions of this" and gravitating to see mostly just what our friends share. But reading promiscuously and with appreciation for other's experiences can be worth the extra effort. But I'm really just talking about thorough research. You are experts in information, you are steeped in values of advancing social good, and you are well positioned to always be collecting ideas. Pausing to reflect on others' experiences and getting beyond the friction and defensiveness can produce a joy of discovery, wonder, inspiration, and connection. It can lead you to change your plans.

- IV. *The third reason* you will change your plan is because opportunities come in unpredictable ways.

I'm a good example of that--learning how to embrace unexpected opportunities.

- I had little ambition to be a law library director because I loved the front-line work. But management opportunities kept crossing my path, and I finally committed to this role. But that required me to change my plan.
- As of last year at this time, I had no plan be traveling to Finland with a Fulbright award next fall to teach privacy law and research how libraries there comply with the new European law called "the right to be forgotten." But, the opportunity was highlighted for me, and it came my way, and now I'm going. Thank goodness they speak a lot of English over there.

- Frankly, I had no plan that included my standing here as your commencement speaker. But here we are!

You may discover that there are jobs that you never thought would be for you, or other roles in your life that were really not part of your plan. Your plan might include a role that disappointingly does *not* come your way. I'm not suggesting you simply say yes to whatever does come along. But who knows? You might help be the person or part of a team to balance privacy and data utility through new tools and policies. You might be the librarian or information systems manager on a spaceship vacation cruises. Who knows?

Clearly, this is our Dr. Seuss moment: *Oh the Places You Will Go!* Make your plan; then change it as opportunities come your way.

- V. *Fourth, and finally*, you make a plan and then change it because you take away from UNC the awareness that learning is lifelong. The world is changing around you; you learn from other people's perspectives; you pivot to take advantage of opportunities; and you can change your plan simply because you continue to learn more stuff. If any group of graduates knows how to keep learning, it should be this group, experts in information and in library science.
- VI. That's how I suggest you embrace your adventures as you start this next stage in your life. I celebrate you because I know you are well prepared with UNC at your back. Your SILS degrees will sustain you through many changes in plans in your careers and in your lives. You chose this very fine University and this outstanding School, and that was a great plan! Congratulations and best wishes to all of you!