It is a pleasure to join you for this celebration of academic achievement of the W.H.Thompson Scholars. This is an important moment in your academic life here at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. It also affords the university community the opportunity to recognize your talent and express our appreciation for the investment you have made in striving for excellence in your studies. Dean’s list recognition in the various colleges is one of the most significant acknowledgements of superior performance in your work, a recognition that places you in select company: your intellect, your discipline and determination to excel, your hard work, have truly set you apart and earned you the right to sit among the outstanding students assembled here this evening.

Congratulations to each and every one of you—and of course, we can only now urge you to continue on the wonderful path that you have embarked on. I say that with confidence that your past achievements were no accident. And you must share that confidence, confidence in yourselves, that this recognition is but one of many to come. I have no doubt that you will sustain the commitment you have made in the past, knowing that that will create both opportunity and reward in the years ahead.

Well, what about those years to come? Where to from here? Perhaps the best way to approach that question is to ask yourselves what you want to accomplish, what purpose the education you receive here at the university will serve. I have had some experience in that conversation with students, both on-campus and prospective students coming to the university. While I appreciate the interests they express and the reflection that has shaped their future choices, I have often come away from that discussion with some reservations. Let’s see if my experience in this regard resonates with the manner in which you have framed your response to this question: why are you here at the university? Is this a means to an end, and what is your ultimate objective? Fair enough? Think about how you would answer that question. I am sure
that you have given this some thought and that you have formulated both a goal and a strategy to reach that goal.

So, what do I hear from students? Very often I hear: “I’ve come to the university with the intention of becoming a physician, and I will matriculate as a pre-med student.” Or another student: “I will major in engineering although I am not yet entirely sure which branch of engineering I will pursue, perhaps Biosystems Engineering; but that’s still up in the air.” Or: “I will work toward a business degree because I want to run my own business, or perhaps become the CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation.”

Do any of these projections connect with your own thinking of your future endeavors? I suspect they do for many of you. I’m sure that most of you have a major in mind, a vocation that you are pursuing.

Do you recognize a common theme that runs through these statements? Is it not that the university will prepare students for a career – for a profession – to earn a living – to make money? Mind you, you should make no apology for thinking that. I have heard time and again from my students and their parents that if they are going to invest in the cost of a university education, there has to be a benefit; you want value for your investment. I think we can all appreciate that.

Now here is what I seldom hear in that conversation with students and parents: “I come to the university to become an educated person.” Does that not create an entirely different dimension of what four years or five at the university can produce. And that, my friends, is what I would like us to think about briefly this evening.

Now let me begin with a clarification that is very important: there is no conflict between these two types of responses to the question. They are not mutually exclusive. It is perfectly legitimate and even desirable to have a goal for your academic life that is going to prepare you to secure a job and embark on a career. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be an accountant, a professor of English, a journalist, or a specialist in agricultural economics.
Indeed, that is emphatically what we do at the university: prepare you to be competitive for whatever career choice you may make.

But is that enough? You will be well prepared to be an architect, and engineer, a physician – but will you be equally well prepared to be a citizen in our community? Is the obligation of the university not also to develop in its students the knowledge and the understanding that will allow them to be productive and responsible members of our society? A former teacher of mine, William McNeill, many years ago, framed the issue very succinctly: “We have to teach undergraduates something every educated person should know; something every active citizen ought to be familiar with in order to conduct his or her life well and perform their public duties effectively.” Is that not a worthy goal? Think of his emphases: active citizen, public duties. Are not our graduates obligated to be citizens and often leaders in their communities? The education he encourages is essential in a democracy where you, through your votes, will be shaping our country’s future direction.

I subscribe to that idea and urge you to consider embracing a preparation at the university that will allow you to fulfill the dual responsibility of “earning a living” on one hand and knowing our nation and our world on the other.

Well, how do we do that? It’s easy enough to know what my major requires of me. I open up the college bulletin and see that a history major must take 32 credit hours in history with distribution requirements factored in. OK, I’ll take 10 or 11 courses and become a certified historian – no problem. The same is true for a journalist, a music performance student, a future teacher.

Is that enough? I’ve also taken the required general education courses and I’ll round out my education by taking a random sampling of additional courses to reach the magic number of credits for graduation.

Is that enough? I think we can do better in order to graduate from the university prepared to be an active citizen in our society. I think we can design a course of study in which we are intentional and strategic in committing to be an educated person.
Here’s where we start: the university’s new general education program called ACE is an excellent guide. Each one of the ten student learning outcomes addresses bodies of knowledge with which we should be familiar: communication and mathematical skills and – now I quote from the ACE program, “knowledge of diverse peoples and cultures and the natural and physical world.” And the program also identifies responsibilities through the study of ethical principles and application of civic knowledge and engagement with global issues.”

Here’s my point, folks: the ACE program is a great start but not an end in itself – in other words, it is not sufficient for the purpose I propose. To take a course in each of the categories, while desirable, is not sufficient to establish a level of competence. Use ACE as a guide and formulate a strategy in each, or at least most, of these categories to develop your understanding of these areas of knowledge. In other words, go beyond the minimum expectations, even if your college has already added to the general education expectations contained in ACE. Identify the history and other social science courses, political science, sociology, that will help you better understand the pressing issues our society faces. Embrace area 9 of the ACE curriculum and “exhibit global awareness of human diversity through analysis of an issue.” Why stop there? Ours is a complex world that requires further research, additional exploration. Courses that address that issue are readily available.

And what more can we do? Is study abroad not an obvious way to engage a different culture, to see the world through the lens of another people’s experience? There are myriad programs, some short in the summer, some longer for a full semester – join our students studying in Besancon in France, join Professor Wedeman’s study trip to China this summer, go to Oxford with the College of Business Administration’s annual academic visit. Seek out the program at Hebrew University in Israel that one of our students is pursuing this year. This is how you complement your academic preparation with a global engagement.

And there are other wonderful opportunities. We celebrated just yesterday the tenth anniversary of the UCARE research program (Undergraduate Creative Activities and Research Experiences) directed by Dr Laura Damuth (who is with us tonight.) What better way to explore a research topic with a faculty mentor – what better way to personalize your education and
develop your interest in a specific area. Over 400 students are participating in the UCARE program this semester, why not join their company?

And speaking of company, please consider my invitation to explore the possibilities of the University Honors program that I direct. I encourage you to consider joining a community of students who share your academic motivation and success. Dean’s list recognition is a reliable indicator of the quality of your academic work and suggests that you would be a worthy and successful participant in our small classes, populated by students as talented and dedicated as you are.

Allow me to make a further suggestion: You will find on our campus rich opportunities to appreciate the arts whether at the Sheldon Museum of Art or the Lentz Center for Asian Culture. Have you visited these museums? If so, have you gone back a second time?

And to engage with global issues that the ACE curriculum recommends, the EN Thompson Forum on World Issues presents timely and engaging lectures every year on important current issues. These are invaluable assets to enrich your academic and intellectual experience. I hope you have made or will make a commitment to study international issues at a time when knowledge and understanding of other peoples and other cultures is critical. We cannot isolate ourselves, we cannot afford to distance ourselves from an increasingly interdependent global community. The world of China is our world; the world of the Middle East is our world; the world of Cuba and Venezuela is our world. It is our collective responsibility to know this world – and that is a first step in working to make it a better one for all.

So, is there a summary statement? Maybe this: take charge of your education, expand and pursue your commitment to becoming an educated person – embrace the opportunities to do so that are available to you at Nebraska. Just two days ago, one of the highly regarded members of our academic community, the University’s Eminent Scholar, Professor of Management Sang Lee spoke to a small group of students. Here is what he said to those undergraduates: learn; experiment and explore in your search for a career; and... work harder than anybody. Become a Renaissance person: know music and the arts and other cultures – know the world.
So, my friends, embark on your quest to be an educated person. Talk to your faculty, talk to us here about how to achieve your goal to be an outstanding professional in your chosen career field and an engaged and responsible citizen in our society – an educated person.

Congratulations once again, Thompson Scholars. Thank you.