

UIC College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs

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Remarks by Randy Blankenhorn, CMAP Executive Director

Congratulations to all of you, particularly the first class of undergraduates in urban policy and planning.

Our region is at a crossroads in the 100th anniversary of Daniel Burnham's Plan of Chicago. How will the region look 100 years from now? Will people look back with admiration at choices being made today?

It is your challenge to find bold solutions to the biggest challenges at local, regional, state, and even global levels.

1. Defining Moments

Every generation faces its defining moments. Your generation may be facing several of these moments all at once!

To some extent, the task of any commencement speaker is to act as a surrogate parent, telling you how proud we are of you and outlining our hopes for your future

I can hear you tuning me out already . . .

But what I'd like to do is inspire you while pointing out a few of the challenges that await as you embark on your careers -- all this, hopefully, without frightening you in the process. With any luck, it's the challenges themselves that you'll find inspiring.

Any short list of today's defining issues would have to include:

- The Economy
- Climate Change
- National Security

While the specifics are subject to debate, I believe that the ultimate solutions will be deeply interrelated. At the risk of over-simplifying these extremely complex issues, I think it's obvious that achieving a sustainable economy and a secure homeland will depend on our ability to achieve the energy independence that is also required to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming.

In much the same way, our regional solutions are also interwoven – not just with each other, but with the grand global challenges. Taking a comprehensive approach is essential. Residents'

prosperity depends on factors like a strong economy, good housing, transportation, water and air quality, education, health care, and much more.

When we address traffic congestion by improving public transit, we improve not only our transportation system – we also reduce our dependence on foreign oil. When we provide housing for our workers near their jobs, it also improves air quality. When we create communities where walking and biking are viable transportation options, it improves the health of our residents.

Likewise, when we create a strong regional economy, it impacts other parts of Illinois, the Midwest and the nation as a whole.

We have to stop looking at problems in silos, focusing on one issue at a time. Instead, we must start finding solutions that build on each other. Trying to solve today's and tomorrow's problems using yesterday's solutions and thinking will not get the job done.

I have been fortunate through hard work and my share of luck to lead the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning -- an agency that was created to change the way we approach our region's challenges. By taking a comprehensive approach to the issues that we face, by redefining those issues and broadening the scope of our solutions, we can improve the quality of life for our residents, boost the economy, help the environment, and bring a World Series to Wrigley Field.

Well three out of four isn't bad, right? Obviously, 100 years of waiting for a Cubs championship is something that even Daniel Burnham couldn't have planned for.

2. Burnham's Example

We don't have time today to talk about all these challenges in great detail. But I do want to talk about how pressing issues like these present significant opportunities – it just depends on how you respond.

All too often, the generations before you – including mine, sad to say – have avoided the difficult choices. Today, as a world, nation, state, and region, we have reached a point of reckoning. Putting off the tough choices is not a viable option. This does not have to be your misfortune. Instead, it can be your opportunity for greatness.

History has countless examples of people who took bold action to address their fellow man's most pressing needs. Right now, our region is celebrating the greatness of Daniel Burnham and the 1909 *Plan of Chicago*. Written with his colleague Edward Bennett, the plan was prompted in part by some pretty desperate circumstances. The livability that we all take for granted now 100 years later was a distant dream back then.

Conditions in Chicago were miserable by today's standards, with inadequate sanitation, transportation, education, and so on. In addition to the plan itself, I recommend that you read Carl Smith's book titled "The Plan of Chicago," which will give you a sense of the serious challenges that Burnham was striving to meet.

Perhaps most remarkable is that, rather than let those problems constrict his vision, Burnham instinctively realized that they required even bolder responses. He clearly wanted to inspire the region to aim high. His visionary approach covered everything from the seemingly mundane but essential street grid to the majestic accomplishments of the lakefront and parks.

He could have been daunted. But instead, he chose to be inspired by the challenges of his generation. That's exactly what I wish for you.

3. What can you contribute? (Ideas, energy, passion)

Challenges don't really define a generation or a person. It's how you respond to those challenges that define you.

Today we need a movement of young people. Dean Pagano tells me that many UIC students tend to stay in the region after graduation, even if you came from somewhere else to attend this fine university. That is a major competitive advantage for our region – to have excellent schools like UIC that attract, train, and then help retain highly skilled graduates as a resource that can build a stronger metropolitan Chicago.

That intellectual capital is vitally important. Our region needs your ideas, your energy, and your passion. We cannot succeed without you. You will be the new agents of change. You will change our communities, our institutions, and most importantly, our governments. I trust that, in choosing a career in planning, public policy or public administration, your motivation wasn't to get rich. If you did, let me be the first to tell you that there are many rewards in this line of work but yachts and vacation homes in the Hamptons are rarely among them.

I am proud of having a career in public service. You are to be commended for making the choices that brought you here today. Serving the public is an honorable aspiration. But remember: You don't have to work in the public sector to serve the public. There can and should be a public-service dimension to every career, even if you work in the private sector.

4. Think big

You've heard a lot about the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, better known as the stimulus bill. As the region's official metropolitan planning organization, CMAP stepped up to take a coordinating role in helping the region to take maximum advantage of this funding. We're proud that Illinois ranks at the very top nationally, with more road and transit stimulus funds obligated than any other state.

Yet, because the stimulus priority has been to create jobs as quickly as possible, there has been little time to consider the long-term ramifications. I won't call it a missed opportunity, because getting the economy going is so important. But the stimulus should just be the start of a national and regional movement to invest in our infrastructure.

We have not invested in the basic infrastructure of our nation, state or region. Not only highway and transportation projects, but also housing, open space, and education that are the backbone of our region's economy. All these forms of infrastructure combined are our major competitive advantage. Now it's important not just to make the necessary investments, but to make those strategic decisions through planning processes that are results driven, performance-based and transparent. Frankly, the public is right to demand accountability when their precious tax dollars are being allocated.

You have the opportunity to look at these investments from a different perspective -- one that takes the comprehensive long-term view. Now is not the time for incremental thought or action. It takes special creativity to tackle tough long-term issues. Burnham is a shining example of why you should take a bold approach – and of the difference that one person can make. In my job, I'm fortunate to employ a lot of young professionals who care passionately and want to make a difference. As a region, we need more of you.

Hopefully you'll get to witness Chicago's first Olympics. We'll find out in October whether our city has been chosen to host the games in 2016. I've been fortunate to be involved in some of the bid preparation, and I'm excited by the prospect of helping to prepare for the Olympics themselves. The opportunities will be abundant -- in terms of transportation, housing and economic development.

But hosting the Summer Olympics and Paralympics would also let the region boldly reconsider a wide range of public policies and investments. This is a unique chance to write a new chapter in the Chicago legacy of big plans and bold dreams. There are few people who enjoy sports as much as I do -- hence the earlier Cub reference -- but I have continually said that what matters with the Olympics in Chicago is not so much what happens in August of 2016, but what is left in September. You have the opportunity to not only dream the dream, but make it happen for metropolitan Chicago and the entire Midwest.

5. Seize the initiative, make your mark

These days, there is a lot of talk about how within each crisis is an opportunity. If that's true, then we have a whole *lot* of opportunities. It can lead to a very broad, powerful movement for change and innovation. Your generation may feel like those that came before you have let you down -- I can't argue, because we could have done better. But turn your frustrations into motivation.

Think seriously about where you find your inspiration, and about how your own skills can be used to make a difference. You are graduating at a time of significant challenge. I am confident that this generation can be special. It's up to you to make it that way.

UIC has prepared you and your classmates to achieve great things. It's your opportunity. It's your responsibility. The future virtually demands that you and your generation rise to this occasion. We need your ideas, your energy, and your passion. Put them to good use, and you will be the leaders for changing our region, our state and our world.

Congratulations to you all, and I wish you the very best of luck.