

The 465th Convocation

Address: "The Professional and the Amateur"

By Harry L. Davis

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I'm very pleased to be standing here today, particularly since you were kind enough to ask me to be your convocation speaker. I feel welcome—much like an invited guest in your home—and I promise to display good table manners.

Celebratory occasions call for themes stressing optimism and success. In that spirit then, let me share with you a story that begins almost 100 years ago. It involves the start-up of a new agency selling life insurance that grew over its first twenty years to become one of the largest and most profitable in the United States.

Business success rarely has a single cause and this story is no exception. Certainly one factor was timing. The first thirty years of the twentieth century witnessed the evolution of life insurance from a luxury purchased by the wealthy to a necessity sought out by broad segments of the population.

But, this company grew faster than other agencies. That's because it more aggressively recruited new agents, trained these agents thoroughly, created innovative insurance products, and provided agents with highly persuasive sales materials. In today's jargon we would say that the company *better understood and executed its business model*.

Of course, you can't overlook the talents of those in leadership positions, and similar to the stories of HP, Intel, or Apple, the two founders of this new agency had *complementary skills*. One partner was extroverted, good with numbers and operational details, and comfortable in representing the agency in front of prospective agents. The other was more introverted—even shy—but filled with new ideas and skillful in conveying those ideas in straightforward prose.

These three factors—strong leadership, the right business model and fortuitous timing—seem as relevant today as they were in 1907. The name of this company, by the way, was Ives and Myrick.

There is another plot line to this story, however—a footnote you might think. One of the two founders pursued a passion for music as a pastime concurrent with his professional role in business. He composed music in the evenings, on weekends, walking to and from work, and sometimes even stole a few moments at the office.

During the same time that he was building the company, he was also writing music with no audience in mind, with no guarantee of ever hearing his compositions performed, and certainly with no expectation of monetary reward.

A footnote to this story then turns out to be the story and his business career becomes the footnote. For as some of you know, this workaday insurance man was Charles Ives who is considered by many to be America's first great composer. His pastime, not his paid work, became his legacy.

The University of Chicago's Andrew Abbott begins his book, *The System of Professions*, by writing: "The professions dominate our world. They heal our bodies, measure our profits, save our souls."¹

I happen to agree with Abbott's thesis. The word *professional* is pervasive, and used widely to entice customers, clients, patients, and even students. (I noticed, for example, a recent ad for the GMC Envoy that begins with the phrase: "From Professional Grade People Come Professional Grade SUVs. We are Professional Grade." How could anyone resist with all that professionalism!) Even truckers are attracted to the word. A semi that I passed while driving to the University last week was emblazoned with the phrase: "Pulling for

America with [*you guessed it*] Professional Pride.”

Now, I have great respect for the professions. How could I *not* have as I stand here just moments before you’ll receive a professional degree from one of the finest professional schools in the world? According to a commonly recognized definition, a professional is someone in possession of a body of theoretical knowledge and the art of applying it.

Thus, G. K. Chesterton² reminds us that when a problem is serious, to cry out for the person who is skilled in the scientific parts of a trade. Get the one with the theoretical knowledge. While this person might be labeled *unpractical*, he or she will turn out to be indispensable.

Countless graduates of this institution have demonstrated the payoff from high levels of scientific insight and integrity—having the intellectual rigor to distinguish between noise and what is really important and enduring.

But it is worth noting that while the word *professional* has enjoyed wider and wider usage and has developed increasingly positive connotations in the English language, its opposite—the word *amateur*—has suffered over time. (Can you imagine, for example, telling your friends and employers that you’ve just graduated from the GSB and are proud to be a business amateur?)

Amateurs are often derided as dabblers, second-rate people who tackle things superficially and without professional skills. But the dictionary also provides another definition of amateur derived from the Latin term for someone who works at an art or science for its own pleasure. It is this definition that Professor Emeritus Wayne Booth uses in his delightful book on “amateurism” titled *For the Love of It*.³

Two questions come to my mind when I reflect on professional and amateur pursuits.

First, why is it that we feel the need to choose one *or* the other? That is, why do we feel compelled to choose between one way that evaluates the worth of any activity according to its future benefit relative to its cost (in expected value terms), or another way where being fully present “in the moment” overrides any serious concern about future payoffs?

After all, the differences between these two heuristics aren't really all that large when it comes to the work itself. Master chefs do not have a monopoly on well grilled steaks. Both amateurs and professionals participate in an activity; the pursuits of an amateur are not spectator sports. Both use common tools and materials, work hard, and try to do their best to improve. You need to have both the amateur's imagination to experiment with stir-frying grapefruit, and the professional's experience not to try it again.

Would it enrich our lives to pursue both approaches simultaneously rather than viewing the professional and the amateur as polar opposites?

The title of my remarks today is purposely reminiscent of Isaiah Berlin's famous essay in which he distinguishes between the single-minded hedgehog (who knows one thing) and the crafty fox (who know many things).⁴ This is a classic philosophical debate that places ideas into neat oppositions. In a business context, however, wouldn't it make sense for companies to have access to both the hedgehog and the fox's perspectives depending upon the competitive landscape?

Similarly, and at a personal level, rather than pitting the professional against the amateur, wouldn't it also make sense to have access to both. Charles Ives did not abandon his passion for music when he committed himself to business. Nor did he sacrifice performance within these two arenas. His vision was simply too large on the musical front for him to be only a church organist and choir director. He was too ambitious in business to just get a job; rather, he and his partner set in place one of

the first professionally run insurance agencies in the industry. Ives fit everything in, and played both roles to the hilt. And he was innovative in both.

There is a second question that sometimes keeps me awake at night and that is: Would our professional roles be strengthened if we brought the amateur's approach into our work?

Again, I'll invoke the name of Charles Ives. He was well trained musically, first by his father and then as a student at Yale. He performed as a professional early in his life. But in his role as a composer, Ives displayed many of the qualities of an amateur: constant tinkering, dabbling in many different musical styles, and being open to everyday music that came from marching bands, church anthems, revival meetings—even from the dance hall. At a time when serious composers believed that there was no indigenous American music worthy of the name, Charles Ives had no embarrassment to title a string quartet "From the Salvation Army" even though his teacher at Yale was appalled. He loved the energy and genuineness of amateurs making music just for the love of it.

Not surprisingly, Ives was given the derogatory label of "amateur" by the music establishment. The word "awful" was frequently used. Much of his musical output made no sense to listeners as he experimented with compositional ideas that had never before been heard. In fact, it wasn't until four or five decades after writing his most creative compositions that a wider public first heard his music and changed its assessment of the man from "crazy" to "genius."

A downside of professionalism can be a narrowness of perspective and a prejudice against points of view that have not been officially sanctioned. There is much to be said for pursuing paths from time to time without any concern for what others think. Our roles as professionals benefit, I believe, by welcoming on stage our "two-year-old selves"—that part of us which can poke at things without worrying about perfection and remain open to mystery. Wallace Stevens, another businessman who

became in his pastime a major American poet, expresses this idea with real insight. He writes: "It is necessary to any originality to have the courage to be an amateur."⁵

I have two wishes for you. The first is that you create a large enough stage for yourself to support both your professional and your amateur. Happiness surely increases from active participation in many communities, and besides, you can never be entirely certain *ex ante* the source of your legacy.

A second wish is that you welcome your amateur on stage in your role as a professional. It takes courage to work against the grain and be authentic as amateurs are wont to do. Yet, it is from authenticity that real competitive advantage may emerge, and where you have the best shot of evolving from a business professional into a truly unique artist in business.

I want to extend my best wishes for an exciting adventure over the coming years, and offer my congratulations to you, your family, and your friends.

Notes

1. Andrew Abbott. *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*. The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
2. G.K. Chesterton. *All Is Grist: A Book of Essays*. Dodd Mead, 1932.
3. Wayne Booth. *For the Love of It: Amateuring and Its Rivals*. The University of Chicago Press, 1999.
4. Isaiah Berlin. *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*. Weidenfield and Nicholson, Ltd., 1953.
5. Wallace Stevens. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. University of California Press, 1966.

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