THE NEW SCHOOL

2013 University Commencement Remarks from Miles Kohrman

To the Living Spirit

More than eighty years ago today, as Europe braced itself for a war that would define the 20th century, agents of the Nazi Party tore down a placard at the University of Heidelberg bearing the inscription "To the Living Spirit."

Just a few years later, Thomas Mann, the German novelist, social critic, and former Heidelberg professor, addressed a room of faculty members at The New School's recently founded University in Exile. Mann commended The New School for its efforts to protect endangered european scholars. In just over ten years, our university would give refuge to hundreds of exiled academics as rising political tensions boiled over, ultimately resulting in a conflict that would ravage Europe.

"There is—for the time being—no home for the living spirit in Germany's universities," Mann said. "Now I suggest that you faculty take these words and make them your motto, to indicate that the living spirit . . . has found a home in this country."

The New School adopted these words as its unofficial motto: "To the Living Spirit." It meant a university of open discussions and ideologies. It meant the fierce protection of academic freedom and a place where people could come to speak their mind without fear of persecution or oppression.

That Living Spirit defined The New School for Social Research, and in the decades since our university's unconventional beginnings, it has spread through the seven divisions that we now call The New School.

This commitment to academic freedom is what drew me to this university, and I am sure that many of my fellow graduates would say the same.

When we chose to pursue a degree here, we did so because we knew that The New School was "different." You're probably thinking: 'Another college graduation speech where you are told that your university is "different."' But I believe The New School is different, and not just because it lacks Greek life, major sports teams, or a sense of humor. What separates The New School from its counterparts is its Living Spirit: its philosophy that students and faculty can learn from one another not just by reading books and memorizing facts, but by, as President Van Zandt would say, challenging the status quo constantly—and in doing so, protecting the ideals upon which our university was founded on.

During my time at Eugene Lang College, I spent three years as a tour guide for prospective students and their parents. It was my job to show them everything you would expect in a college tour. In my second year, my supervisor, the esteemed Craig Tiede, had us tour neighboring schools in the city to get a feel of what they offered. What was their idea of a college education? How did they stack up against The New School? Craig wanted us to understand that we weren't simply selling a school—a package deal complete with tuition, housing, a meal plan, and a T-shirt to boot—but rather a philosophy.

It was an enlightening experience—one that my colleagues and I would apply to every conversation from that day forth.

I often made a remark on my tours that would momentarily tighten the brows of those standing before me. "At Lang, I don't feel like I go to college," I'd say. I'd quickly add, "but let me tell you why that's a good thing." I didn't come to college to sit in a 500-seat lecture hall, to be reduced to a number on an attendance sheet, or to struggle for a face-to-face conversation with a professor or advisor. The New School's mentality, I'd say, is different—it's much more akin to the "real world." At The New School, students are the architects of their own education, with their faculty and advisors serving as the foundation on which they build upon.

The New School sees the value in self designed learning, and understands that the traditional college experience—stifling requirements, overcrowded lectures, and overburdened advisors—doesn't necessarily prepare a student for the real world in the 21st century.

It's a different time in higher education, and just as The New School was born in rebellion against the establishment of outdated universities in the first quarter of the 20th century, it's now our goal to do the same—in everything we do—nearly one hundred years later.

Like many of you, I chose to gain my education through doing. I wanted to do more than simply think in college—I wanted to change my surroundings.

We all did this in different ways. *The New School Free Press,* the university's student run publication, was my outlet. In the Spring of 2011, I was elected Editor in Chief and, along with my staff, was faced with a challenge of an immense scale. Our paper was dated. At the same time, journalism, much like higher education, was at a crossroads. Print publication was dying; the internet was taking over, and the industry was in crisis.

Together, with the guidance of our faculty advisors, Heather Chaplin, Andrew Meier, and Rob Buchanan, our staff brainstormed innovative ways to get the most out of our college newspaper. With a shift into the digital age, and transition into long-form stories, we implemented a system enabling a break from the antiquated mold of college journalism.

The change worked: just 18 months later, the *Free Press* was awarded the two most esteemed awards in college journalism by the Associated Collegiate Press, the first in our publication's history.

Lang and The New School enabled our meager staff of college journalists to do this. We were not steeped in tradition, or forced to abide by outworn legacies. We were making the legacies with the full support of our college, but also with the knowledge and understanding that the students who come after us have—and should have—the power to adapt as they see fit.

Now that's just my story—yours is different. You might have worked with the Feminist Collective to revise the university's sexual assault policy, or Empowerhouse to build a sustainable home. Maybe it was the University Student Senate, or Parsons' PetLab, The New School Archives, or the Social Justice Committee.

My point is, at The New School, we didn't just learn from the books, we learned from experience, and we learned from the relationships that we have forged with our professors—who are accessible, intelligent, and many of whom view us as as apprentices that will one day join them, rather than students that are trying to pass a class and get a good grade.

There are challenges facing the world of higher education right now. Tutions are high, and colleges are struggling with new models to keep themselves above the red, but at The New School I say with confidence that our education has had value, and I hope that when we all go out into the world, we serve as examples that an education like the one that The New School has provided us with is fruitful—not outdated, not stale, not static—but evolving. Alive with the Living Spirit—our living spirit—to instill in future generations.

Let us all continue to embody the Living Spirit and congratulations to you all. I hope you're proud of what you've accomplished in your time here, and I look forward to seeing how you continue on your journey.

Thank you.