Thank you Dean Mackie-Mason.

Graduates, family, friends, faculty, and staff, good afternoon.

I am very honored to have this opportunity to speak to you today.

You the honored graduates, equipped with new knowledge, skills, social networks, and enhanced passion and focus, are moving to alumni status and hopefully on to jobs where you can apply what you have learned in service of a better world. I will use this occasion to tell you about the founding of the School of Information in hopes that it will illustrate some principles and lessons that may be useful to you in your future as an agent of change.

In the early 1980’s, as computing and communication converged and moved into more and more domains of use, a small interdisciplinary group of computer scientists and social scientists at Michigan began to sense an intersection between their respective disciplines. They sensed that networked computing offered a platform to explore new organizational forms for knowledge work that would potentially relax constraints of time and distance and accelerate and broaden participation in discovery and learning. Long before the World Wide Web, this group with support from the National Science Foundation (NSF), conducted a series of human-centered
research projects to better understand the social and technical dimensions of distance-independent collaboration for scientific research.

Working with space physicists, for example, they built and evaluated the Upper Atmospheric Research Collaboratory (UARC), - a global-scale laboratory without walls. One of the by-products of this work is the software that later became CTools, the UM course management system.

In the late 1980s the membership and focus of this team expanded to include prototype-driven R&D about digital libraries and electronic publishing. The team collaborated with the University Library and the School of Information and Library Studies (SILS) and doing so helped build capacity for later UM leadership in both the Mellon JSTOR project and the Google Books project.

By the early 1990’s these faculty were seeing their longterm future in a body of work around technology supported, distribute knowledge communities. They were feeling more and more constrained by their current academic homes and began looking for organizational autonomy. They also now believed that the future of socio-technical activities they were pursuing was not just about research — it was about a new field and new professions.

Now to another thread of the story. UM was a pioneer in library science, starting a department in 1926 and graduating the first class almost 80 years ago in 1928. In 1969 it became an independent School and in 1986 added “information” to its name. It was a top-ranked school of its kind. In the 1980s, Robert Warner, Dean of the School (who also served as the National Archivist under President Ford) anticipating his retirement, led the school in strategic visioning to find the way forward in an increasingly digital information world. I served as an outside member on that strategy
committee and from that Bob and I gained mutual respect both for each other and for our respective fields and I learned more about the school.

Here is where the planets started to align.

In 1992, Bob invited me to lunch and in the course of that lunch asked me to be a candidate for the SILS Deanship that he would soon vacate. I was an electrical engineer, a computer scientists, and a former dean of engineering at UM — a very unusual candidate for the dean of a library school. Bob explained that he and most of the SILS faculty wanted a non-conventional dean who could help them innovate and lead the profession in the digital age. Recovering a bit from my surprise, I said I would think about it and I consulted with family and close colleagues. One of those colleagues was James Duderstadt, then the President of the University. I had been Jim’s associate Dean of Research when he was the Dean of Engineering. He is a visionary who early on saw the profound influence that the information revolution would have on the academic enterprise. Jim saw an expanded SILS as a potential catalyst and “skunk works” to help guide the university into this future. He encouraged me to pursue the Deanship and later invested several million dollars of start up funding in the School.

Coincidently, a week later Gail McClure, a Vice President of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek visited the Provost to say that Kellogg was looking to fund a major university that would take the lead in defining the appropriate education for information professionals in the increasingly digital and connected age. They were concerned that a digital tidal wave would sink traditional library schools and that the future of open access, equity and stewardship of information - a hallmark of librarians and archivist - would unfortunately default to the pure techies. Gail had a $5 million check as a down payment for the place that wanted to take on the Foundation’s challenge.
And as you may of guessed by now, the interdisciplinary faculty team I
talked about earlier began seeing a restructured library school as a place to
gain organizational autonomy and to implement the professional programs
they were beginning to conceive.

So we saw and seized a bold opportunity:

• The SILS faculty were seeking new strategic direction and leadership.
• The Kellogg Foundation wanted to provide venture funding for a new
type of information school.
• A team of visionary interdisciplinary faculty were looking for a new
academic home.
• The UM President wanted to nurture more innovation for the university of
the future.

All this came together to form the basis for the School of Information.

The library world most certainly took note when a computer scientists and
engineer at Michigan was appointed Dean of their library school. I quickly
discovered that engineers, like librarians, are often stereotyped. There was
a lot of explaining to do, but slowly the positive started to out weigh the
negative and a few years out there was a tipping point to the positive. It
became cooler to endorse SI than criticize it. One sign of this is that the
leadership of the American Library Association made the surprising request
that they accredit all our Master’s level specialization - not just the library
and archives part, traditionally their only focus.

A great source of pride for me in these early days of UMSI is how all the
faculty - both from SILS and the newcomers — came together in an
intellectual marriage. They created a program for a new core discipline with
new types of professionals. They did NOT merely staple together all their specific disciplines and call it done. Building the initial curriculum was VERY difficult, with many iterations. I hope that this culture of inquiry, cooperation and continuos improvement stays strong at UMSI.

Another source of pride is the strong culture of societal engagement that has carried forward from the culture of the library school and the influence of the Kellogg Foundation — a foundation devoted to “helping people, help themselves.”

And a third part of the culture that I hope will persist is a high degree of mutual respect between people in all roles within the school, be they faculty, staff, or students at any rank. If done well, we should all respect each other for what we contribute.

As the scope of the school expanded the question arose - what to call it? We generated long lists - mostly by adding more and more words to School of Information and Library Studies - already a mouth full. But one day in a conversation with John Seely Brown, then Director of the XEROX Palo Alto Research Center, it hit me — the common denominator in all we were aspiring to do was information. Let’s just call it the School of Information. This name was constructively ambiguous — less could be more.

As a condition for Regental approval I had to visit with every other UM Dean to float the change. Most were neutral, some very supportive, and several joked that if we were the School of Information, what was left for them? I responded that they should be thankful we are not becoming the School of Knowledge and Wisdom.

When you said “School of Information” people waited for more words like “studies” or “science”. But now the Information School — the I-School
movement — is well established here and other places and sounding less and less strange. It is now the place to be.

Since I left the Deanship of SI in 1998, the story gets even better. The School of Information, 20 years old next year, has grown in numbers and excellence with many spectacular faculty additions, new forward-looking programs, more and better students, and more and better research. It is an exciting place with students from all over the world and with many undergraduate specializations finding intellectual kinship.

Today also represents another landmark in the emergence of UMSI - the graduation of the first 25 pioneers in our undergraduate BSI program. Joining you are 9 PhD graduates, 158 MSI graduates, and 16 MHI graduates.

So, what can we learn from the SI success story. Here are a half dozen of the many things I learned. I hope you will find more.

1. Plan and think strategically, but act opportunistically. Keep in mind, however, that you need to try things and take risks in order to recognize opportunity when it comes along that fits within your strategy.

2. Luck does play a role in success, but the harder you work the luckier you get.

3. Unintended consequences may end up being the most important consequences.

4. Leadership should be service-oriented and focus on maximizing the the common good of the people you lead. Create a culture where everyone can take credit for success.
5. Your professional social networks are indeed very important. Nurture them and try not to burn bridges.

and

6. When you build a team to do something difficult and risky, think about picking people that you would do wilderness camping with, who you would trust in an emergency, and who would not complain about washing the pots.

All of us have been the beneficiaries of the passion, the dedication, and the hard work of the many who have created and are still moving the UM School of Information forward with positive impact in the world. You are now part of that community and I challenge you to proudly go forth and do your best “to create and share knowledge so that people will *indeed* use information -- with technology -- to build a better world.”

Thank you.