

Think Big (Red)

Dennis L. Molfese, Ph.D.
Mildred Francis Thompson Professor
Director, Center for Brain, Biology and Behavior
Editor-in-Chief, Developmental Neuropsychology
Director, Big Ten/CIC Traumatic Brain Injury Research Collaboration
Director, Developmental Neuroscience Laboratory

Congratulations, graduates! You mastered your studies, received your diplomas and now face life's new adventures. Now is the time to "Think Big Ideas." As Horace wrote in the 1st Century, "Carpe Diem quam minimum credula postero." Seize the day and put little trust in tomorrow. Another way of saying that is, "Today is the tomorrow that you were looking for yesterday." Do it now! The future is yours. Build your own future. Now. Do not just dream of greatness – be great. Always have faith in yourself. By believing that you personally can make a difference, your dreams can become reality.

Several years ago four students and I were invited to visit a small country. Over the course of 11 days, the students conducted a series of workshops on education, psychological and medical issues. We also interviewed medical teams, visited schools, refuge camps, and psychiatric hospitals. At the end of our visit, we met with the Director of one of the country's ministries to discuss possible changes in their policies on HIV/AIDS. The minister took some of our recommendations to heart. In only 11 days, four students impacted the policies of an entire nation. Their advice saved lives. Changed destinies. They listened, they learned, and they shared their knowledge. You have the skills to do the same. Here or abroad. The only thing that can hold you back from changing the world is you.

About 20 months ago, UNL hired me to work with students, faculty and administrators as part of the University's THINK BIG initiative. With Dr. Prem Paul, our Vice Chancellor for Research, faculty draw up plans for a human brain imaging center. At that time there was no budget, no building, and less than a handful of faculty with a background in human brain imaging. Some said the project was "too big". "Destined to fail." But we were thinking big. We created the world's first truly interdisciplinary brain research center, the Center for Brain, Biology and Behavior. We are creating it from the ground up with one prime directive: "Think Big." Students and faculty from every department at UNL have access to cutting-edge brain imaging equipment to conduct groundbreaking studies. 210 students and faculty already have trained to use this equipment. Forty student-faculty teams are conducting their own unique studies using tools that were not on campus two years ago.

By "Thinking Big," we encouraged others to "Think Big". When we talked to our Athletics Department about the neuroimaging center, they jumped at the opportunity to partner with us to better understand and hopefully prevent concussions in our student athletes. The Athletic and Academic sides of UNL now are working in close collaboration, continuing to "Think Big."

I grew up in Oklahoma. As a football fan and resident of the "Sooner State," I learned to both fear and respect Tom Osborne at an early age! Working with him at UNL, the fear is gone but the respect continues. Like UNL's President and Chancellor, Tom "Thinks Big." Athletics donated 25,000 square feet of space to house this new Center. But they didn't stop there. Athletic trainers are learning brainimaging techniques and coaches are working with academic faculty to understand and prevent concussions from affecting our student athletes. Indeed, what began as a unique collaboration between Athletics and Academics has become a model for the rest of the

nation. And we are leading the pack. UNL heads the BIG 10 concussion research initiative. The Ivy League, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, asked to join us! Some said that it could not be done. We proved them wrong! And we did it by “Thinking Big.”

No matter what you do in life, there are always people saying that you will fail. They will say it’s too hard. Too Impossible. They are wrong! “Think Big.” On average, women graduating today will be paid 15% to 20% less than men for the same jobs. Do your research to find out what fair wages are and push for them. Do you want someone you care about to receive lower wages because of their gender? Race? Economics 101 – you want as much money for your household as possible. The loss of earnings because of discrimination means tighter budgets for families and fewer opportunities. Get informed. Push the envelope. “Think Big.”

Throughout your life are you going to say, “I did not get to do what I dreamed about because someone else made decisions for me”? The education you received at UNL has prepared you to “Think Big.” Make your own choices. Consider this. What happens when you don’t vote in local, state or national elections? You let someone else make decisions that WILL control your life for years and years to come. These strangers are the ones telling you “It can’t be done.” Maybe they don’t share common values with you or maybe they’re just not “Thinking Big” enough. What happens if they decide not to create new reservoirs for drinking water and irrigation, or not maintain power lines supplying homes and farms with electricity? What if they stop fixing roads, close schools, raise taxes, create new “user fees”, restrict access to medical care, or change retirement laws in ways that impact you or your parents. The list goes on. If you see a problem, you have the education and the training to find a solution. You just have to “Think Big.” And by “Thinking Big,” you take control of your life. You change the world.

America’s Founding Fathers were Big Thinkers. They saw injustices in English Colonial Law and they rebelled. They were told a Revolution could never succeed. Never. How could a rag-tag crowd of poorly armed and undisciplined patriots defeat England, the world’s greatest power? But Americans “Thought Big.” Today, we have more protected freedoms than anywhere in the world. Freedoms that we take for granted. This lesson was brought home to me recently by a scientist visiting my laboratory. His country does not tolerate such freedoms. He was in awe that we can travel anywhere in the country at any time, we can work at the jobs we choose, we can speak and write freely to each other, read any book, surf the net and even disagree openly with our government. Those are not options for him. He can only dream of a different future. We are living his dreams.

As graduates of UNL, you have all the tools you need to “Think Big.” As Americans, you have the right to share your big ideas with others and make choices. Don’t let others decide the future of your country. Be active in politics. Be active in educating your friends and family. Inspire and hug your children. Teach them to “Think Big.”

Unfortunately, polls show that there are sharp divisions over the direction of our own country’s future. Arguments are increasingly strident and heated. True discourse to deal with our nation’s challenges is stalled in Congress and in our communities. Americans at times appear more angry at each other than at the terrorists that threaten us. These are dangerous times. Abraham Lincoln warned a younger nation that, “America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.” Do not let this happen. You graduates will always be a part of the UNL community. You come from different faiths, different backgrounds, different states and countries, yet you lived and worked together during your undergraduate years. You shared a part of each other’s lives, each other’s triumphs and disappointments, each other’s hopes and dreams. Remember that camaraderie. Treasure it. Keep

those lessons with you as live your lives. Your futures and the future of our country are closely linked. As you achieve your great dreams, you achieve great things for all of us! Now go out and Think BIG! Change The World! Make us proud!

CONGRATULATIONS !!!