

**Stephen D. Fantone Acceptance
of University or Rochester Distinguished Scholar Award**

May 16, 2015

Good Morning,

Thank you, President Seligman and Provost Lennie, for your kind words.

Having spent my career largely outside of the academic world, this award was completely unexpected. A letter arrived from the University and I put it aside figuring it was a standard announcement. So imagine my surprise when I opened it after sorting through the mail and learned that I was chosen to receive this award.

I was stunned and flattered by the news, but it caused me to ask, what exactly is a distinguished scholar and how did this happen to me? I thought about my education and realized that my first exposure to the notion of scholarship did not occur in an optics, engineering, or even a college class. But in 9th grade Latin.

It was in this class that I was exposed to a teacher and role model who expected excellence from his students and respect for learning. It was in this class that I first tried on and later embraced the idea of what it means to be a scholar.

The class was presided over by a rather distant and diminutive man, Mr. McEvoy, a former army intelligence officer, who managed to enforce a unique sense of classroom order. Although not the general practice in public schools, in Mr. McEvoy's class you were addressed by your given name. There was no Robbie, Betsy, or Jimmy; it was Robert, Elizabeth, and James.

When he called on us, we were required to stand up next to our desks and address him as "Mr. McEvoy, Sir."

This oasis of civility occurred in a public school in the Northeast during the turbulent sixties, a decade of civil rights marches, Vietnam War protests, an emerging drug culture, and a period of time when challenging traditional authority was routine.

On day one, Mr. McEvoy posed the question, "Are you a Latin scholar?"

Some of us giggled, for about all the Latin we knew on the first day of class was the opening line of Caesar's Commentaries, "All Gaul is divided into three parts." Because scrawled on the blackboard was "Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres."

Every day, Mr. McEvoy presented the question to one or more of us and through the year, the giggling ceased, and we met his question with an equally serious response: "Yes, sir. I am a Latin Scholar."

We learned to think deeply about language, history and mastery of a subject matter. We stood, we sat, we responded respectfully. We submitted to this scholarly boot camp where we grew to love a subject in a way we never imagined we could.

That was nearly fifty years ago; yet his lessons are life-long: strive for excellence; seek a depth of understanding of your subject; respect yourself and others. His class was both a transformational experience and a philosophical framework for future scholarly pursuits.

Each of you has just completed a similar transformative process. Successful completion of a Ph.D. program proves to the world and yourself that you have the ability to recognize and frame a problem or issue, assemble the means to solve, analyze or resolve it, and then communicate your work to your peers.

You go through a Ph.D. program only once – and you are transformed into an academic scholar and a role model to others.

The scholarly mantle I first tried on in Latin class and later fully embraced as a doctoral student gave me the skills to participate in activities I never imagined. I was not a political science major, yet I chair a public policy think tank; I was not a CFO, yet I served as the Treasurer for an international professional society; and I've chaired or served on several public company boards without an MBA degree.

The scholarly approach provided me with the skills to learn on my own and to invent, create, and synthesize products, technologies and businesses and to communicate ideas effectively.

The truth is, when I sat where you sit today, I did not envision making those contributions, or see a path to this podium. You, sitting here now, have a pretty good idea as to who you are, but I challenge you to continue to stretch and imagine what you might become—and pursue that vision. Whether it takes you to a new field or geographic setting; do it with purpose, passion, and intensity.

Graduates, I congratulate you and suggest you take a moment today to thank those who helped you—a relative, partner, spouse, friend, teacher or mentor—or, perhaps someone from long ago. They will love to hear from you and will appreciate the acknowledgement more than you can imagine.

I thank my professors, the faculty and the University for this great honor. I thank my Optikos family of employees that have helped nurture a scholarly work environment at our company. I thank my family, and my wonderful wife, Betsy, who has helped me embrace my scholarly side and achieve things I never thought possible.

And were my teacher here today, I would say, “Thank you, Mr. McEvoy,” and “Yes, sir, I am a Latin Scholar.”

I wish you all great success!