HONORS CONVOCATION
SPEAKER SERIES

Mark Simmons

“The College Graduate in the Year 2000: Industry Needs and Expectations”

Remarks upon the occasion of the third Honors Convocation 1997
The University of Arkansas follows a nondiscriminatory policy in programs and employment.
The College Graduate
in the Year 2000:
Industry Needs
and Expectations

by Mark Simmons
Simmons Foods

Remarks upon the occasion
of the third
Honors Convocation

Thursday, April 17, 1997
Arkansas Union Theater

Dale Bumpers College
of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences
MARK SIMMONS

Mark Simmons is a second-generation owner of Simmons Food, Inc., which was founded in 1949 by Mark’s father, M.H. “Bill” Simmons. Under his direction, Simmons Foods has grown to become one of the nation’s largest privately held broiler processing companies. A vertically integrated poultry company, Simmons processes over 2.5 million broilers a week, employs 4,300 people in three states and has annual sales of approximately $420,000,000. Simmons products can be found in all 50 states and in more than 40 countries.

In addition to serving as Chairman of Simmons Foods, Simmons is the Immediate Past Chairman of the National Broiler Council. He is also on the Board of Directors of Siloam Springs Memorial Hospital, John Brown University and Arkansas State Bank. He has served as President of the Arkansas Poultry Federation, director of the Arkansas State Council on Economic Education and the Poultry and Egg Institute of America. He was honored for his work with the Arkansas Poultry Federation by being named their Man of the Year in 1990.

Simmons and his wife, Diane, who met while both earned business degrees at the University of Arkansas, have been married for more than 30 years. They have two children.
It is a great pleasure and an honor for me to be chatting with you folks today. I don’t give speeches, I typically give talks, and I am here primarily to congratulate you students and faculty members who are receiving these honors today. I think it’s a great thing and an accomplishment of which you should be proud.

Last night I told my sister, who was a 1964 graduate at the University of Arkansas in business administration, that I was giving a talk to the Honors Convocation, and she was somewhat impressed. Then she laughed. I said, “What’s the deal?” And she said, “Well, I remember the first year you went to the University of Arkansas.” She was a recent graduate, honor student and did well...set the curve for me. She reminded me that I didn’t do a very good job of following her example. After my freshman year, my parents got a letter from the University, and it was a reminder not of how well I had done, but of how poorly I had done. I was like a lot of college freshmen who didn’t get their act together until later in school.

Fortunately, I met my wife, Diane, when we were freshmen. We started dating seriously after the University so graciously allowed me to come back for a second year. My grades started improving because she was a positive influence on me. We got married between our junior and senior years here at the University and lived in apartments out north of the campus. Our senior year, we were both honor students on the Dean’s list. Unfortunately, I couldn’t overcome the early years and be an honor graduate like
those we are honoring here today, but I did end up on a strong note.

When I first accepted this honor to come speak to you, I thought, “Gosh, what am I going to say to these folks?” I talked to a few people about what this convocation was and what it meant. One of the fellows I talked to was Wes Jamison on the staff of the Center of Excellence for Poultry Science. He, among others, suggested I speak to the students primarily about what it takes to be successful in private industry. As honor graduates, you obviously have been very successful in your college careers. You, better than most people, know what it takes to achieve what you have achieved. And many of those skills, probably most of them that you have used here in college, are going to serve you quite well in private industry, if that’s the profession that you choose. There probably are skills that you didn’t get to use much here in college that may be necessary in private industry. Let me list a few of the things that I noted when I was thinking about giving this talk. I’ll just list them briefly and then come back and talk about them individually.

Obviously, technical skills that you’ve learned in your classes here at the University are going to be very important in your future professional life. Also important, however, are communication skills, listening skills, patience, honesty, ethics, willingness to change, willingness to address problems, willingness to work hard, the ability to work in groups and teams, the ability to disagree without being disagreeable, desire, motivation and initiative. We could probably raise up our hands and say, “Oh, you forgot this, or you forgot that.” I’m sure there are many other skills that we all need, but I think these are the high points, the significant ones that we need as professional people.

The technical skills are things that you recognized and have learned, but I think that you have also learned at this institution that the technical skills and the knowledge we have is changing daily. We gain knowledge in tremendous amounts through good work in
institutions such as the University, where we know so much more today than we did just a year ago or five years ago about the things we are trying to do and how we can feed the American public and the world. So we recognize from those technical skills that we have to stay abreast, and we use the University and its extension outreach extensively to have that happen in our company, as is the case in other companies of which I am aware.

You’ve used your skills in *communications* to impart the knowledge that you have gained here at the University back to your instructors so that they can tell you how well you’re doing. So communications is something you have obviously gained the ability to do. Communication skills probably will have to be honed in the area of interpersonal relationships, and those interpersonal discussions are probably going to take on more meaning in your professional life.

Right beside communications is *listening*. If you can’t know where somebody is coming from, if you don’t understand their point of view, it will be extremely difficult for you to be effective in communicating to them.

It's amazing how much *patience* it takes to deal in the American business world. You probably find that to be true in the University setting as well. But when people have problems you are trying to help them deal with, you have to have an infinite amount of patience to be able to listen, to be able to wait until they are satisfied that they have been able to communicate with you, so that you can understand quickly what they are saying to you. You will need patience with people who may not get their job done exactly right the first time and need some coaching on how to do it better the next time. And you will need patience with yourself for not being able to achieve all that you would like to in the first attempt.

*Honesty* is something that is an absolute requirement, because if you are dishonest, you will be found out sooner or later. It may take a week, a day, a year, but people will come to recognize whether you have the character to be honest.
Ethics is different than honesty. Ethics has to do with understanding what is right and what is wrong in the situation in which you are working. And what is probably much more difficult is to define what ethics are in each particular situation that you’ll have to deal with in your life ahead.

Usually you can wrap honesty and ethics up in something that is called integrity. Achieving integrity is a very difficult thing because you have to constantly question yourself about the decisions that you make and whether it is the right thing for the situation and the right thing to be doing—the honest thing for you and the honest thing for the other people involved.

Willingness to change is incredibly important because our business and our world are changing every day, and if we resist change, people sense it. If we don’t embrace change and say, “How can I do things differently and do them better,” then we will be left far behind in our professional life and our industry. If we did in our business only what we were doing five years ago, as far as our efficiencies, we would be out of business today because we would not be competitive. Things change that fast. And I think things change that fast throughout the world, not just the industry we see here or the university classroom that we’ve been in. So our willingness to change and embrace change is critical.

Willingness to address problems is another requirement. If we just sit back and say, “Oh well, that’s a problem, but I’m going to avoid it; I’m going to go around it, and I’m going to try not to fix that,” then we will not be effective, and people will recognize that.

Willingness to work hard is also required. As honor graduates and as honor recipients here today, you didn’t get here by doing what I did in my freshman year—not going to class, not doing papers and not reading the books. You worked hard. You spent many hours achieving what you’ve achieved, and that’s going to be required for the rest of your life. Tasks have varying degrees of difficulty, and you have to recognize what’s important at the time and do what it takes at the time to achieve what’s in front of you.
The ability to work in groups and teams is extremely important in today’s business world. You have probably been exposed to group and team activities in a university setting. When I was going to school, group activities were not used nearly as much as they are today. My son worked on multiple teams while he was in school. The one thing I noticed about those teams was that they were mostly short-term relationships, for a semester, a few months. If team members did not perform on that team, then they were going to be off the team automatically at the end of that class; if other team members had to make a grade for the class, they had to carry the team. In the professional world, those are not going to be short-term relationships. They are going to last for years. So you have to be able to learn to interact with and rely on people for the long term, and you have to learn how to work in a setting in which you may not have the authority, but your team has the responsibility to achieve something. So you have to be able to motivate each other and respond to each other for the long term, not just the short term. That may be a skill that you haven’t had much experience with yet, and it is something you need to think about and work on.

Part of that is learning how to disagree without being disagreeable. We all have different opinions at times, and sometimes it’s hard not to express those opinions in a way that gets to be offensive to other people, so you have to learn how to be diplomatic in expressing your disagreements but still address the disagreement. That’s a critical issue, and it goes back to willingness to address problems.

Desire, motivation and initiative are all kind of wrapped up in themselves. Desire is saying, “Here’s something I want.” Many of us have said, “Oh, I’d like to have that” or “I wish I had that.” And that’s easy to do. Desire is easy to come by. Motivation is the second step. It’s saying, “Hey, that’s something I want to do.” I’ve got the willingness to go grab that, whatever that desire is, and I’ve got the willingness to put the work in, to achieve the honors of distinc-
tion that you have achieved. Initiative is something that is a little different in that it takes a self-push, hitting the start button yourself, and that is something that most managers find very attractive in people who work for them. Managers like somebody who will walk in and say, “Hey, Boss, I’ve seen this problem, and here’s what I think we might be able to do about it, and I’d like to go do it.” Take the initiative. Look for things to do. Don’t back away from problems.

As I said, these are some of the important points, and I probably left out half-a-dozen things, but we only have so much time. One of the further things that I’d like to suggest to you is that your professional life needs to be balanced with your personal life. I think those of us in my generation, folks that graduated in the ‘60s and the ‘70s and, to some degree, the early ‘80s, didn’t have as good a balance as we probably should have. I think in that era it was more important, or too important, to achieve success, to achieve the material things of this world. I think that what we choose to do in our personal lives is just as important as what we choose to do in our business lives. We need and you need to consider that strongly as you go forward. In business we do extensive planning toward our future. We decide on mission statements, we set out core values, we set goals, and we develop strategic plans and tactics to achieve those goals. In our personal lives, it’s becoming more accepted and more recognized that we need to do some of those kind of things. We need to decide, “here’s what I want to be as a person.”

When I went back to work after college, I had never discussed with my dad whether I was going to come back to the business or not. I’d never really thought about it because I had just always assumed that I would. That’s what I was going to do. And that was something that Diane and I were going to do after we got married. Fortunately, she didn’t disagree with that. She did have trouble adjusting from being a Houstonian gal to living in a town of 4,000 when we moved to Siloam Springs. But my point to you is
that you probably ought to think about what you’re going to do, if you haven’t already, and I’m sure you have. But when you sit down and decide whether you’re going to be married or not, you need to sit down and work out some of the plans with your spouse, what kind of life that you want to have. You need to identify what is important to you. Make sure that you have discussed those things with your spouse, so that you know them together.

The other thing that I see about your personal life is commitment. It’s too easy today to make marriage vows without commitment. I think that’s a problem we’ve had in our society. Having been married 30 years, I know that it takes a tremendous amount of commitment to achieve that record, so I would suggest to you that commitment in your personal life and your business life is extremely important to add to those items.

Again, I want to close with congratulations to each of you for the accomplishments that you’ve made. I want to wish you the best for a successful future in your business and your personal life. And I want to suggest to you that you need to define what that success is for yourself and work hard to achieve it because luck has nothing to do with it.