

Undergraduate Commencement 2017

- June 11, 2017
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Welcome to your commencement here in the KeyArena. We are thrilled that we have room for this large and happy crowd of graduating students, professors, families, and friends. This has been a day long looked forward to across your years at Seattle University. At last you have made it. Enjoy it. Listen to some great speakers, applaud award winners, celebrate the accomplishments of one another, enjoy your own success and recognition.

As president I thank you for choosing Seattle U. and for contributing so much to the life of your university. Take a moment today to thank your professors and mentors. Above all thank your parents and families. They have looked forward to this day as much as you—professors, mentors, parents, and families—and they have helped get you to this happy day. It is their day too.

Your commencement is a special day for another reason. Today we conclude our year-long celebration of the 125th anniversary of Seattle College and University. It is a very long journey from 1891 to 2017; a long journey of Jesuit education. The year this university began that journey, 1891, marked the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the Jesuits in the Northwest. We were invited here by the Native American people to come and minister among them. Four times, they trekked all the way back to Jesuit headquarters in St. Louis to invite “The Blackrobes” as they called us, to come out to the great Northwest to their land and to their peoples. Six Jesuits finally came out in 1841 and felt welcomed by the indigenous people from that time to this day. We have always seen ourselves as invited and welcomed here and we have tried over those 175 years to be committed to, to walk with, to stand with and stand up for our special friends, the Native American peoples. It has not been a history with our failure to understand and to respect, even a history of our repression of the spirituality of those who were here long before us. We apologize to our best friends for these failures. We are proud that our university is the only Jesuit university in the United States named for a Native American: Chief Seattle. Most of the others—Gonzaga, Loyola, Xavier, Canisius, etc.—are named for Jesuit saints. We are glad ours is named for Chief Seattle who had such a profound sense of the Great Spirit and the sacred land on which we all walk.

We are particularly proud that in this 125th anniversary of our university and the 175th anniversary of the first invited arrival of the Jesuits, we have been able to establish at Seattle University, with the help of friends, an Indigenous Peoples Institute. It is already making a difference and we want it to make an even bigger difference in the education of every Seattle U. student of the future.

In light of this history and celebrative anniversary we wanted an appropriate and special speaker at your commencement. We knew who to ask and we are glad he accepted. He already deservedly has an honorary doctorate from Seattle U., the highest recognition we can give. It is my pleasure now to introduce Sherman Alexie, your commencement speaker, and to yield this podium to him after my introduction.