Dean’s Graduation Remarks, 2011:

Congratulations to all the GSLIS students who are graduating today, and to the parents, partners, and friends who have sustained you through this program and to this end. The world will be a better place for your efforts, because you will bring better information to bear on the problems around you, and you will help others to find and use the information that they need in order to accomplish their goals, as well. It is a real pleasure, each year at this time, to send you out into the world to do good: I am deeply impressed with the passion and the commitment that you bring to this profession, and I prize the intellectual commitment and the life experience that you contribute to our program. I am honored to be associated with you.

After a graduation ceremony, no one has ever wished for longer remarks from the Dean, so with that in mind, I’ll be brief; at the same time, those of you who are graduating today have been in this School at a critical time in its development, and I know that you want to see us move in the right direction in the future—because, although you are to a significant extent responsible for the value of your education, we are responsible, over time, for the value of your degree.

To properly appreciate where we are, and to understand where we’re going, we also need to remember where we’ve been. The University of Illinois has had a library school since 1897—114 years, this spring. Our School was the first of its kind in the Midwest, and the second professional school established at the University of Illinois, a year after the Law School. It is also one of only four units on campus that survive intact from the 19th century. The others are Engineering, Agriculture, and Law. Ours was the country’s first undergraduate degree in library science, established in 1902 and discontinued in the late 1950s. We began granting graduate degrees in 1926. Ours is the oldest Ph.D. program of its kind in the country, established in 1948. We taught the first course on information retrieval on this campus, starting in 1962, before Computer Science was a department. We had some of the first NSF funding for digital library research in the 1990s, at about the same time that we
established Prairienet, an early community networking project; also, around this time, in 1996, we began delivering the masters program online—a year before commercial learning management systems like Blackboard came into existence. Today we account for about a quarter of all online graduate students at this university.

Online and on campus, and in venues around the world, GSLIS students have made us proud this year: for example, many of you participated in Alternative Spring Break during your time at GSLIS. This program—supported by donations from the Library School Alumni Association as well as individual alumni and friends—places motivated graduate students in professional work environments during the week of Spring Break. Each year, more than 60 GSLIS students participate in these placements, which give them new perspectives, hands-on experience, and an opportunity to expand their professional networks. Recent placements have included Abbott Labs, Adler Planetarium, the American Library Association, the American Bar Association, the Art Institute, Caterpillar, the Federal Reserve, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Library of Congress, the National Archives and Records Administration, the National Institutes of Health, the National Library of Medicine, the Shedd Aquarium, the Smithsonian, the Holocaust Memorial Museum, and many others. Earlier this spring, we heard a presentation by recent graduate Moustafa Ayad, whose spring break placement a couple of years ago, at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School of Communication, helped him find his way into teaching the effective use of social media to journalists and civic leaders in Iraq, Egypt, and Jordan.

This year you have also won scholarships, fellowships, and other awards (from Rare Book School, from Beta Phi Mu, from bibliographic societies, from library organizations), you’ve published and edited (in blogs, journals, and even the Chronicle of Higher Education), you’ve participated in national discussions of information and communications policy, you’ve been recognized as emerging leaders in the profession, you’ve succeeding in getting papers and posters into peer-
reviewed international conferences, and you’ve won prizes at some of those conferences, too. Today we will recognize more of your accomplishments with our own set of awards, for work across a broad spectrum of library and information science activities, and for professional promise in many different domains. And even if you have not been singled out in this way, your presence (physical or virtual) here today demonstrates that you have met and overcome many challenges, acquired new experience and expertise, and brought this phase of your education to a successful conclusion. For that, each of you deserves recognition and felicitiation.

Your accomplishments, both here and hereafter, are a key ingredient in the reputation of this program, and in its rankings: the GSLIS masters program has been ranked #1 by US News since that magazine began ranking library and information science programs in March, 1996. Re-rankings were done in 1998, 2006, and 2009, and we remained in the #1 slot for each of those. In recent years, we have been tied for #1 with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Recently, sub-specialties have also been ranked, and GSLIS is #1 in Services for Children and Youth, and highly ranked in a number of others. That’s good for you, as you take this degree out to the job market, but it’s also an ongoing responsibility for the faculty and administrators up here on the stage. The needs and expectations of both students and employers are constantly evolving: our program needs to evolve as well, in order to meet those needs and rise to those expectations. In the eight years that I’ve been Dean at GSLIS, we’ve added a specialization in data curation, a certificate in community informatics, a certificate in special collections, a CAS concentration in digital libraries and enhanced offerings in K-12 and public library youth services. We’ve also significantly expanded continuing professional development offerings, including a certified public library administrator program offered in cooperation with the American Library Association. All of these programs connect the interests of students to the needs of employers, and that’s important to the continued success of GSLIS graduates. However, in order for GSLIS to survive in the changing landscape of public higher education, and in order for us to produce the information
professionals who will be required by an increasingly diverse and global society, we know that GSLIS must continue to grow and change.

We also know, from teaching you, that you have a great deal to teach us, and we need to open our curriculum to the experience and the insights that our students have to offer, and make students our partners in the structures and the processes of the School. As we do this, we will also need to broaden the conversation to include the whole variety of experiences that are represented among us. Doing that will help us to increase our diversity in the future, thereby producing a stronger, more open, and more intellectually challenging GSLIS community. That’s the job that awaits us, after this graduation: I hope we will be as successful in it as I know you will be in the work that you do after graduating from here. If we each do our work well, then the GSLIS community, the education it provides, and the degrees that it has granted, will steadily increase in value over time.

Thank you, and I look forward to hearing great things about you in the months and years to come.