



News Releases

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[About Thomas P. Sakmar](#)

News Room

Information for Journalists

News Releases

News & Notes

About the Rockefeller University

Publications

"I Love This Place"

Editor's note: Wednesday, Feb. 12, Acting President Thomas P. Sakmar met with the university's graduate students. The following comments, written by Sakmar, were the basis of his remarks to the students.

"I want to tell you all a story. It's my story. The story of how I got here today as acting president and professor and head of lab at The Rockefeller University.

"Twenty-five years ago last week, I was on an airplane traveling from Chicago to Washington, D.C. I was traveling to look for a summer job -- a job that would be my first real laboratory research job. On the plane, I noticed that the gentleman sitting next to me might be a scientist. He was in a tweed jacket and was reading biochemistry papers -- he was quite distinguished, actually. I was too shy, as a 20-year-old undergraduate, to say anything. But I remembered him.

"The job search was tough. After four months of searching, I had only one job offer, which I accepted, at the FDA's Bureau of Biologics in Bethesda, Maryland. On my first day of work in June 1977, I went to the central office and was eventually escorted to the laboratory to which I had been randomly assigned. I was introduced to the lab chief -- and it was the man I had been sitting next to on the plane four months earlier. The same person -- Dr. Darrell Liu.

"When I left the lab at the end of the summer, Dr. Liu gave me an inscribed copy of the book: *The Professor, the Institute and DNA: The Story of Oswald Avery*. Dr. Liu, who was a postdoctoral fellow at The Rockefeller University with Nobel laureates Stein and Moore in the 1960s, told me, 'If you ever decide to go into science, make sure you try to work at Rockefeller. Rockefeller is the place to be.' Later, he set me up in the lab of Professor Bob Heinrikson at the University of Chicago -- another Stein and Moore postdoc.

"Twelve years later, after medical school, clinical training at Massachusetts General Hospital and research training at MIT, I had a chance to come to Rockefeller. I never really hesitated.

"Twenty-five years after that fateful plane flight, I stand with you, my colleagues, on hallowed scientific ground. I ask you to devote yourselves to your work, in the name of the university.

"I love this place, and I want us all to succeed. I want all of you to focus on your work -- and thereby to advance our shared mission -- scientific research for the benefit of humankind."
-- Tom Sakmar

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Acting President Thomas P. Sakmar (standing left) and Richard B. Fisher (seated), chairman of The Rockefeller University's Board of Trustees, talk with graduate fellow Deborah Gurner (right).

