PwC chairman tells students to embrace change

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PwC U.S. Chairman Tim Ryan, right, delivered the 2019 R.W. Freeman Distinguished Lecture at the A. B. Freeman School of Business on April 30. Ryan's talk was moderated by Freeman School Dean Ira Solomon.

As college graduates prepare to enter an increasingly automated workplace, one of their greatest fears is job security.

In a talk at Tulane University's A. B. Freeman School of Business on April 30, the head of the nation's second-largest professional services firm told prospective graduates not to worry.

"One of the biggest opportunities we have as a society is around automating and upscaling jobs," said Tim Ryan, U.S. chairman and senior partner at PwC. "I don't believe we're going to see jobs go away."

Ryan said he foresees a decades-long transition in which organizations deploy technology to accomplish the most tedious tasks, leaving humans more time for critical thinking and high-value projects. In the interim, he said graduates can make themselves more valuable to their organizations by embracing change, being team oriented and — perhaps most importantly — becoming lifelong learners in technology.

“Don’t run from it,” he said. “In your free time, make sure you’re learning the latest elements of technology. I’m not asking you to be a PhD in AI. I’m asking you to invest enough of your time to know the critical tools out there. In my generation it was Excel or Lotus Notes. For you, it’s Alteryx.”

Ryan has served as PwC’s U.S. chairman and senior partner since 2016. In that role he has responsibility for leading the organization by setting the tone and strategy as it relates to quality for the firm and its approximately 52,000 employees. Prior to becoming chairman, he served as vice chairman and markets, strategy and stakeholders leader, with responsibility for the firm’s strategy function and stakeholder relationships including investor relations, regulatory affairs, public policy, corporate responsibility and human capital.

Ryan also helped to launch the CEO Action for Diversity & Inclusion, the largest CEO-driven pledge to advance diversity and inclusion within the workplace. The coalition of more than 600 CEOs is dedicated to taking action to cultivate environments where diverse experiences and perspectives are welcomed and where employees feel comfortable and encouraged to discuss diversity and commitment.

In addition to delivering the R. W. Freeman Distinguished Lecture, Ryan spent the afternoon at the Freeman School, meeting separately with Dean Ira Solomon, accounting faculty, and groups of undergraduate and graduate students.

“Hosting the chairman of the nation’s second-largest professional services firm was a very special privilege,” said Ira Solomon, dean of the Freeman School. “I can’t thank Tim enough for so generously sharing his time and insights with our students and faculty.”