In the spring of 2013 IU awarded the honorary doctorate of humane letters to Sombat Thamrongthanyawong, president of the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), in a ceremony at Hine Hall on the Indianapolis campus.

NIDA, a graduate-level-only institution, is responsible for producing many of Thailand’s government and business leaders. Sombat was the first graduate of NIDA’s School of Public Administration and joined its faculty in 1989. A productive scholar and prominent public figure, Sombat moved quickly through the academic and administrative ranks. He became NIDA president in 2007.

Sombat has led NIDA through an important period of growth, including several new additions to the campus and the establishment in the past three years of four new schools: the Schools of Law, of Tourism, and of Communications Art; and the International College, which hosts international students from all over the world.

Today, NIDA is a major presence in higher education in Thailand. Its graduates include governors of Thailand’s 72 provinces, top executives in the Thai government,
including a prime minister, and more than a thousand civil servants and diplomats.

Indiana University’s ties to NIDA go back to the 1950s when over a period of nine years a total of 45 IU faculty and senior administrators helped establish an advanced training ground for public service officials at Thammasat, Thailand’s second oldest university. The resulting Institute of Public Administration became the core of NIDA, founded in 1966 with an expanded mission to prepare all varieties of public leaders.

As president, Sombat has been a strong supporter of the historic relationship between his university and IU. He was in familiar territory because in the 1980s, he spent some “very good years” as an exchange student in Bloomington, living first in Eigenmann Hall and later with his family in graduate apartments, attending opera at the Musical Arts Center, and studying with some of the university’s preeminent international scholars. He returned in 1994 as a visiting scholar in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs on the IUPUI campus.

Sombat was the fourth child in a family of eleven. From the age of eight, he worked on the family’s vegetable plots in rural Phetchabun province, carrying many buckets of water each day before he went to school at 7 a.m. He initially studied science in high school, but his real interests were in political science and law. His university career carried him more deeply into those fields than he ever would have imagined.

In his fourth year of studies, Sombat was elected secretary general of the National Student Center of Thailand (NSCT). Since World War II, Thailand had been ruled primarily by military dictators. The NSCT was formed in 1972 to advocate for democratic reforms, but the government was very strong. The students decided that their protests would not succeed unless they had popular support.

“Student leaders from 11 universities had a meeting every month,” Sombat explains. “We discussed how to change the political system from dictatorship to democracy. All the leaders agreed that because the military was so strong, we would begin with academic and other issues to open up discussion. We decided to focus on the problem of Thailand’s trade deficit with Japan. The government didn’t know how to solve it, so we proposed a boycott of Japanese goods. We asked the Thai people not to buy...
Japanese products, to use Thai products instead. All of the newspapers supported the student movement. That brought a lot more students out, so we became stronger and stronger.”

The student group escalated its activities to protest moves to constrain the justice system and in the fall of 1973 to push for early acceptance of a new constitution. The arrest of 11 students for passing out pamphlets in support of the new constitution led to a series of protests that climaxed with as many as 400,000 students marching and ultimately toppling a military dictatorship. A “government of professors” was installed, and Thailand saw the first possibility of democracy in a quarter century. For his leadership role, Sombat was declared a “national hero in Thailand” by *Time* magazine in July 1974 and was included as the youngest in *Time*’s list of 150 rising world leaders.

Sombat attributes the success of the student group to the character of the students who were involved in its leadership. “Before that time, student radicals did not have a good academic record and put their effort into protest activities. But my friends and I, most of us were good students. Many have become leaders in government, banking, and academic life.” After the successful overthrow of the dictatorship, the NSCT put its efforts into education “back to the countryside” to teach the principles of democratic society and to learn the problems of the rural poor. Student mediators were also instrumental in settling a hundred labor strikes that threatened the new government. “We are watchdogs of democracy,” Sombat told reporters at the time.

After graduation, Sombat formed a political party, the Thai Party, which got four members elected to a new parliament. Sombat was invited to join the cabinet, but at 23, he did not meet the age requirement in the new constitution.

Asked what his parents thought of his student political activity, Sombat said, “My parents were in the provinces. They didn’t know a lot about what we were doing.” Indeed, his reputation as a student activist followed him for many years. Thai politics remained contentious and while Sombat was studying at IU in the late 1980s, a change in leadership put him on a blacklist. “I couldn’t go back home. Fortunately, after about a year, the government announced an amnesty; otherwise, I might have had to stay in Indiana.”

Sombat was a thorn in the side of university administrators during his student days. Asked how, as university president, he would deal with such protests today, he has not forgotten his roots. “I would not expel dissident students. We have freedom of expression. Thailand is a democracy. Students can use their freedom like that.”

*William Siffin (left) with Reverdy T. Gliddon in Thailand in 1958. Sombat particularly remembers Siffin, IU professor of political science, who had been one of the chief architects of the Thammasat program in the 1950s. “Every time Professor Siffin saw me when I was at IU in the 1980s, he mentioned Thailand,” Sombat said. “He loved that place a lot.”*
Sombat in conversation with David Zaret, vice president for international affairs, before the hooding ceremony.

On the platform for the awarding of the IU degree were: MaryEllen K. Bishop, IU trustee; Gil Latz, associate vice president for international affairs; Sombat; Rebecca E. Porter, associate vice chancellor for student services, IUPUI; IU President Michael McRobbie (speaking); Charles R. Bantz, IUPUI chancellor; Songphol Sukchan, consul general of Thailand; David Zaret, vice president for international affairs; Patrick O’Meara, vice president emeritus for international affairs; William M. Plater, executive vice chancellor emeritus, IUPUI.