

Remarks of President Kwang-Wu Kim
Commencement exercises
Columbia College Chicago
May 2015

Graduates, parents, families, friends, guests, distinguished members of the faculty and staff, and all others who are with us today: I welcome you to this happy occasion, and I thank you for being here to bear witness to this important moment in the lives of our students.

With your permission, I would like to address my remarks directly to our graduates.

Congratulations, graduates! We know that the fact of your graduating is no accident, and we honor the accomplishments, the choices, and the sacrifices that helped you get here today.

We call graduation a commencement, which means a beginning. Actually, in my day it was common at these ceremonies to hear something like “Today is the first day of the rest of your life!”. How embarrassing is that?

No, your beginnings were some time ago, and you have been on your paths for a while now.

First and foremost, today is a celebration of your tenacity and determination to succeed. Your degrees announce to the world that you are capable of making a complex, multi-year commitment, sticking to it in the face of many challenges, and finishing what you start. That says a lot about the quality of your character. Your degrees also say something about what you know and what you can do. Your degrees are a key; now you have to figure out which doors they open.

There is hard work ahead of you, but I am confident that none of you will be discouraged by that task, because if you were lazy good-for-nothings, we would not be celebrating your accomplishments today. And by the way, there will always be a place for smart, responsible people with a great work ethic who know how to work well with others and who have something to say.

Today, you are also making a transition from one environment to another.

Columbia College Chicago, like all other colleges and universities, is a world unto itself, with its own rules and realities. In our world, the pace of change is moderate, and change itself is occasional and usually incremental. In the world you are entering, change is constant, rapid, and often massive.

In Columbia-world, almost everyone you meet thinks that you are interesting and that your work is inherently valuable. And all of us are here to support your search for identity. Out there, sorry to say, many who meet you, far from finding you interesting,

will not have a clue what you are talking about or why they should care. And as for your exploration of identity, many are likely to respond with a mystified “You are what?”.

The good news is that your degrees also testify to the belief of our faculty that [*snapping fingers*] “you’ve got this” – that you are indeed ready and prepared for whatever comes next.

As you make your way in the world, you are likely to encounter three myths:

1. The myth of the self-made person who achieved success all on her own through sheer brilliance, force of will, and determination.

Graduates, you can search the world high and low, and I assure you that you will never find anyone who truly succeeded all by himself. Yes, of course, successful people work incredibly hard, learn from their failures, and are relentless in their pursuit of excellence and authenticity. All that and more.

But you can be sure that for each success story, there was someone else who recognized the ability and the talent and who opened a door. Your success will come from others who see you and who choose to help you. So think about how you treat other people.

2. The myth of the most interesting person in the world.

This is the idea that in any field, someone out there is the best – the most interesting, the smartest, the wittiest. The list is endless. The problem with this way of thinking is that it will prevent you from seeing how interesting every person you meet really is. And if you can’t see that, you will lose many precious opportunities to learn.

(By the way, if anyone in this auditorium believes that he or she is the most interesting person in the world, all I can say is you need to get out and meet more people.)

3. The myth that the world owes you.

This one is easy: no, actually, it doesn’t, so get over it.

As soon-to-be Columbia alumni, you have all experienced Mark Kelly’s “Hell, Yeah” Liturgy. I’d like to add a new call-and-response to the Columbia lexicon, one that I call the “Yes, I Will” Affirmation.

Graduates, will you show up on time?

[Graduates: YES, I WILL!]

Good, because you know that Dr. Kim’s number one rule for success is ‘Be. On. Time.’

Graduates, will you do what you say you are going to do?

[Graduates: YES, I WILL!]

Excellent, because once you get tagged as being unreliable, you might as well stay home.

Graduates, will you take time to listen to other people's stories?

[Graduates: YES, I WILL!]

Outstanding, because being a good listener will take you far.

Graduates, will you be compassionate towards others?

[Graduates: YES, I WILL!]

Thank you, because until you have walked in another's shoes, you don't have the right to judge.

Graduates, will you take full responsibility for your choices and their consequences?

[Graduates: YES, I WILL!]

Fantastic, because you know that the three verbs which characterize losers are 'to blame', 'to complain', and 'to whine'.

Graduates, will you live with gratitude for what you have and who you are?

[Graduates: YES, I WILL!]

Yes, each of us is blessed many times over. Recognizing that is a constant source of hope.

Graduates, will you always aim high?

[Graduates: YES, I WILL!]

Terrific, because as far as we know, this is it, so you had better go for it.

So take your next steps believing in yourselves. Follow your path and honor your voice. There is no joy in pursuing someone else's dream, and spending your life being what you think others want you to be is a formula for despair.

I know that you may get hurt. I know that you may experience disappointment. But I also know that you will rise above those challenges, because you are Columbia College Chicago students and all of us believe in you.

So to each one of you, I say:

- Let your light shine;
- Let your voice be heard;
- Have faith in the goodness and bounty of the universe; and
- Let your courage surface.

Congratulations!