

Graduates, parents, families, friends, guests, distinguished members of the faculty, staff, and all others who are with us today: I am delighted to 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! Today we celebrate your achievement. We know that the fact of your graduation is not an accident, and we honor the accomplishments, the choices, and the sacrifices that helped you get here today.

Having presided over 20 graduation exercises in the past thirteen years, I have observed that the ceremonies tend to follow certain set patterns. That extends to what gets said at them. Often, because of our wish to send you on your way in a

spirit of excitement and enthusiasm, we tell you things that don't make any sense.

One of the most common graduation exhortations goes like this: "You are in charge now, so go out and change the world!" This statement usually triggers wild applause. But let's examine those words.

- *"You are in charge now."* That statement always bothers me because, frankly, it isn't true. You are not in charge now, and thinking that you are puts you in a false relationship to the world and to the opportunities ahead of you.
- *"Go out there and change the world!"* Doesn't that feel like an awful lot of pressure? In truth, I think that each of you will eventually change the world, but you will need time to really get to know yourselves, clarify your values, and figure out what you are good at and what you truly care about. The key to changing the world

is to do it responsibly, and that requires deep self-knowledge.

Another graduation trope has to do with success, specifically the notion that success is the result of your talent, skill, knowledge, hard work, and perseverance. That is true as far as it goes. But it leaves out a crucial point: your success will always come from others. Opportunities will come your way because someone recognizes your ability, understands who you are, and chooses to open a door for you.

It follows, therefore, that this moment in your life is a good time to refine your people skills. Since graduation is an occasion when we reflect on next steps, I would like to offer you my 'seven simple rules for success' in this area. These are behaviors that I truly believe will help you get ahead:

1. *Be on time.* This is the critical one for me. In the professional world, if you show up late, you can be certain that someone else will have snapped up the opportunity ahead of you. They might not be better than you, but they got there first. More importantly, showing up late says to the world that you think your time is more valuable than other people's time. I have never seen success built on that attitude of disrespect for others.
2. *Do what you say you are going to do.* Don't overpromise. If you can't do something, just say so. The minute you get tagged as unreliable, you are done.
3. *Reach out to others.* I mean that literally and figuratively. When you meet someone new, step towards that person. Talk to someone you don't know, or someone you don't need to talk to, every day. And actively seek out others who

are wiser, better, and more experienced than you, and make them your teachers and mentors. You will reap great benefits from them.

4. *Listen at least as much as you talk.* I understand that at this point in your lives, you are under tremendous pressure to promote yourselves and your work. That is important. But be careful not to talk about yourselves too much. Always let others figure out how great you are.
5. *Have compassion for others, and don't be too quick to judge.* A helpful daily practice is to spend some time imaging what it would be like to walk in another person's shoes.
6. *Live every day with a sense of gratitude.* In my book, complaining, whining, and self-pity are inexcusable. Take a moment every day to reflect on how blessed you are.

7. *Take full responsibility for your actions, your choices, and your behaviors.* People who make excuses are lame. People who blame others are losers. So just step up.

I want you to know that I think each and every one of you is remarkable. Some of you may be thinking, “Whatever, he doesn’t even know me.” But in a way, I do. I’ve walked many of the same paths that you have. I know about the struggles, the doubts, the fears, and the needs that drive you to follow those paths. I have experienced the swings between the extreme highs and the extreme lows. I understand what the isolation feels like, what it means to question whether the things that you care about so deeply matter to anyone else, or to wonder whether anyone will ever notice what you can do. I know how hard it is to keep going.

But you kept going and refused to give up. Starting

is easy; it's finishing that is difficult, particularly finishing well. And finishing well is what got you here today.

So let me move on to five pieces of advice:

1. *Never abandon your pursuit of excellence.* Do not accept or build on anything less. If you are searching for a definition of excellence, let me offer one that I picked up from an extraordinarily thoughtful student when I was a dean. Excellence, he said, is “unimpeachable craft wedded to the relentless pursuit of one’s unique voice.” Those are words well worth pondering.
2. *Be anything you want, but don’t be casual about it.* The world does not need more casual, uninvolved people.

3. *Try to avoid three traps that are waiting to ensnare you:*

- Cynicism – the attitude of “Why should I care, it doesn’t make any difference anyway”, which I call cowardice.
- Coolness – the attitude of “Why should I care, it’s good enough, which I call laziness.
- Arrogance – the attitude of “I’m better than everyone else and deserve special treatment”, which I call stupidity.

4. *Aim high.* I believe that we get what we ask for, often just not in the form in which we imagine or envision it. In the asking and the dreaming, we define our world. So you had better go for it.

5. *Believe in yourselves.* 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 I believe in you.

In closing, I give each and every one of you three charges:

1. Let your light shine!
2. Let your voice be heard!
3. Have faith in the goodness and bounty of the universe, and let your courage surface!

Good luck, and congratulations!