

Commencement Address
Saturday, May 12, 2018
UMSL College of Arts and Sciences II

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Curator Brncic, Chancellor George; Honorable Mayor Schoemehl; Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Assistant Vice President Mary Suiter; Provost; Vice-Provost; Vice-Chancellors; Deans; eminent faculty colleagues; graduates and celebrants:

It's hard for me to believe that 45 years ago I embarked on a life-altering journey. I was filled with both excitement and trepidation. I was leaving my family to go to college, and I was excited to be FREE! No one to tell me when to get up, what to eat, whom to hang with, or give me lots of unsolicited advice. Unfortunately, my parents couldn't give me the advice I did need at that time in my life. You see, I was the first in my immediate family to go to college; I was a first generation college student – just like 42% of UMSL's current students. My parents grew up during the Depression and went to work after high school to support their families. And, only a few years later, my Dad was drafted into World War II and sent to fight the Nazis in Europe.

So, my parents couldn't tell me what high school classes to take to increase my chances of going to the college I liked best; how to prepare for the ACT and SAT; how to fill out financial aid and college applications, and write a winning essay; or how to choose between my college options. Once I was in college, they couldn't give me advice about how much time to commit to an outside job during the semester; how many credit hours to take and the best mix of courses; how to cultivate mentors and deal with ornery faculty; and what different majors meant when it came to post-graduate opportunities. Hence, the source of my unease.

Through observation, persistence, a willingness to ask questions, and trial by error, I succeeded, becoming the first college and Ph.D. graduate in my immediate family. And I want to say to all of you, today, that I AM PROUD to be a first generation college graduate.

I would now like to ask those of you receiving your undergraduate or graduate degrees today – whose parents did not attend college - to please stand and remain standing to receive a special tribute to your accomplishments. I know that among my faculty colleagues and guests on the podium, there are also 1st generation college graduates and I invite you to stand as well to join our proud group. And finally, I would ask my dear husband, Dr. Jay Pepose, to stand as well to be recognized as a 1st generation college graduate.

TRIBUTE: You have all survived unique stresses, uncertainties and setbacks to achieve your degrees today. In this way you have changed not only your own destiny, but also that of your siblings, nieces, nephews, and your family's future generations. You will now be a resource for your younger sisters and brothers, nieces and nephews, to navigate the college experience – as I did for my kid sister, Pam, who is with us today, and my niece Karen. You will be a wellspring of advice for your children, as I have been for my own 4 kids, including Morissa and Sam, who are here in the audience. By your perseverance, you have truly opened the door to the American dream for generations to come.

Before you sit down, I would now like to ask the parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles of these 1st generation graduates to please stand as well for your own tribute.

TRIBUTE: You, like my parents, may not have had much advice to give your child about college. But I know, from personal experience, the investment you made to get them to this day. Whether it was working two jobs or overtime; forgoing vacations; making time for parent-teacher meetings; and demanding excellence of your child in and out of school – often in the face of grumbling, eye-rolling and resistance - you provided the environment and values that gave your child the opportunity to grow and succeed as a 1st generation college student. You gave them the foundation to change their destiny. For this, you deserve tremendous recognition.

YOU MAY ALL BE SEATED.

Given my limited time, I will share only a few closing remarks with the entire graduating class.

Exactly what has your college degree bought you? We know that college graduates are, **on average**, less likely to be unemployed and have a shorter duration of unemployment when they are unemployed. We know that, **on average**, college graduates have higher lifetime earnings and, on average, have healthier and longer lives. The operative words here are “on average.” You should all know by now what an average is and that not everyone will be at, or above, average. But it is not a random event whether you will be an above or below average college graduate during your lifetime. IF you graduated college by the skin of your teeth – doing the bare minimum to get a degree in hand – you are much more likely to be the below average college graduate when it comes to the “goodies” associated with a degree. You know who you are! Now, if you truly want to catch up to the average or above average college graduate, you must pledge to replace your devotion to mediocrity with a commitment to excellence once you are in the workplace. It is not too late if you are willing to ratchet up this investment in yourself.

In contrast, if you showed up to class on time; worked with integrity and personal responsibility on assignments; developed strong written and oral communication skills;

and treated your peers and professors with respect, you are well along the path to reaping the above average benefits of a college degree throughout your life. Keep your focus, determination and resilience in the face of setbacks and you won't be disappointed with your future opportunities.

For all of today's graduates, know that your degree is a signal to employers of your willingness and ability to make deadlines; to respect a workplace hierarchy; to come to work on time and stay off your cellphone (!), to start at the bottom and work your way up, to take criticism and grow from it, and to always be excited to learn, learn, learn!

Speaking for my esteemed faculty colleagues, I want you to know that we are very proud of you and wish you much success as you move on to the next chapter in your lives.