

# University of Missouri – St. Louis Commencement Address

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First and foremost, I would like to thank Dean Yasbin for the invitation to speak at commencement today. It is quite an honor to speak to my fellow UMSL graduates today and it is something I have been excited about over the last few months.

I have been asked to tell you about why I chose to attend the University of Missouri – St. Louis. But, before I give you all the details about my journey here, I suppose I should tell you a little bit about myself. I have been a doctoral student here at UMSL in the Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice for the last five years. I am proud to say I have spent this time growing as a researcher under the direction of the department's esteemed faculty, I have created lifelong friendships with my fellow doctoral students, and perhaps my most cherished experience here at UMSL – I am very proud to say I have taught some of today's graduates in various criminology courses over the last three years.

So, you are about to hear how and why I arrived at UMSL - and since we are all friends in here, I am going to be honest – this is a story that even some of my colleagues and our department's faculty members are not even aware of (which makes the fact that I am telling this story today, on a stage, in front of hundreds of people, even better).

My journey here began in good old Reno, Nevada. Reno is where I grew up and the only place I had lived before I came here. Throughout my years in college, I have met many students who have struggled to figure out what they want to do with their future. It is tough – how do you choose what you want to do for the rest of your life? It is not an easy decision and I am sure some of you can attest to this. Sometimes we decide what we want to do and select a major, but then later change our minds and switch our major. Sometimes we enter college knowing we need that degree, but we are not quite sure what we want that degree to be in, so we are just crossing our fingers that we take a class that sparks our interest and points us in the right direction.

I consider myself one of the lucky ones. I decided to earn a Ph.D. when I was in middle school. At first it was because I wanted the fancy title. I wanted to be Dr. Pickering and I wanted to spend most of my life not letting people forget it! But then as I moved into high school, I quickly realized that when it comes down to it, I am just a nerd. I love learning. I love going to school. I love studying. I love reading. And let's face it – earning a Ph.D. would allow me to do all of these things for an extra couple of years. I was sold!

I attended college in my hometown, where I earned a Bachelor's and a Master's degree, but if I wanted to achieve that doctoral degree dream – and I did - I would need to leave the safe confines of home.

Now, when applying to Ph.D. programs – or any college in general – some of the important things people typically consider are things like quality of education, prestige, maybe they even have a specific scholar in mind that they would like to work with. But here is where my journey

deviates from those of my colleagues. You want to know how I went about applying to Ph.D. programs? LOCATION! Since this would be my first time leaving home, I just wanted to live somewhere cool. So, I decided to apply to Ph.D. programs in places like Philadelphia, New York City, and Phoenix.

At this point, my advisor at the University of Nevada suggested that I apply to the doctoral program at UMSL. The first thing I had to do was Google “UMSL” to find out what it stood for. . .and luckily its location is in its name. The second thing I did was think, “St. Louis? Why would I want to live there? Not sure it meets my definition of ‘cool new place to live.’” Truth be told, my grandparents were from St. Louis and because of them I knew three things about the city: 1) tornados, 2) great beer, and 3) they have one of the best baseball teams of all time. But hey, I trusted my advisor and said, “What the heck? I’ll throw my hat into the UMSL ring!”

This is where my story becomes funny. If you know anything about the criminology & criminal justice department here at UMSL, you know that it is consistently ranked as one of the top criminology & criminal justice programs in the country. The department’s faculty members are essentially criminology superstars. They have created criminological theories, published some of the seminal works in their areas of study within criminology, and are regularly recognized as the top scholars in the field by their peers.

Now, many of my fellow doctoral students will tell you that this why they wanted to come to UMSL. They wanted to learn from the best of the best. Many of them had a specific faculty member they wanted to work with and applied to the program in the hopes of achieving this dream. Me? Not so much. Remember, I just wanted to live somewhere cool. I didn’t do my homework and look at program rankings or research the faculty at UMSL to see how their interests matched up with mine. I simply applied because my Master’s advisor told me to.

Months went by and I received word that I had been accepted to six of the seven doctoral programs I applied to. Sure, I was excited, but I was also panicked about how I was going to choose where to spend the next four to five years of my life. Luckily, when doctoral programs accept you, they typically invite you out for a visit. This gives you a chance to see what the program is like: the faculty who would shape you as a scholar and the graduate students who would become your surrogate family and much-needed lifelines throughout the grueling process that is earning a Ph.D. I ventured out to visit some of the programs who had accepted me and let me tell you – my experiences were not the best.

One of these programs brought in 25 of us for a visit and we spent most of the time wandering the halls of the department while their faculty members continued to work in their offices, blatantly ignoring us for the day. During my visit to another program, the faculty apparently couldn’t be bothered to talk to me and answer questions I had about their program, so they sent me to speak to one of their current doctoral students. This student was diligently typing away on his computer when I walked into his office and never once looked away from his computer to acknowledge me when I was trying to talk to him. Sadly, I thought these experiences were normal and typical of doctoral programs, which made question whether this was something I wanted to sign up for for the next few years of my life.

My last visit was to UMSL. Now, these people did it right. A few of the current doctoral students picked me up from the airport, took me out to dinner, and gave me a great tour of the city that I would call my home should I choose UMSL. They spent our time at dinner really getting to know me. . . asking me about my current research, what I might be interested in studying in the future, and how – based on their experiences in the program – my goals and interest would line up with those of some of the faculty.

My visit to UMSL only got better the next day when I met with the faculty. They had clearly done their homework on me. I met with each faculty member and they knew my name, where I had studied and was coming from, and my research interests. Honestly, I felt like a celebrity. They knew who I was before I walked in and took the time during our meetings to get to know me. It became very clear very quickly that they were invested in their students – they genuinely wanted to see me succeed and they wanted to make sure they provided me with the education and tools necessary to help me achieve that success.

Last but not least, I met with the current doctoral students in the program. This is important because again, these people were going to be my friends for the next few years. I wanted to make sure I could fit in with them. At first, it was pretty awkward. We were all sitting a room and they were clearly waiting for me to ask them questions about the program, but since everyone was awkwardly staring at me, I forgot my questions. Finally I just said, “Do you all mind going around the room and telling me your name and fun fact about yourself?” And I will never forget – the first student to answer replied with, “My name is Mikh, I am an Aquarius, and I like long walks on the beach.” The room was immediately filled with laughter and I thought, “Ok, I can hang with these folks!”

That afternoon I flew back to Reno and the next morning I signed my acceptance letter – I had officially selected UMSL and I was so excited about joining such a truly wonderful program. After only spending a day with them, the faculty and graduate students felt like family – and for a girl who was leaving home for the first time, that was important to me. I am happy to say that over my last five years here, I have never lost that feeling. The faculty and graduate students in the criminology & criminal justice department *have* become my family. They have challenged me to push myself as an individual and a scholar, they have always been there when I have needed help or advice, and perhaps most importantly – they have always wanted the best for me. I have thrived as a student here at UMSL, I have had an amazing time during my tenure as a doctoral student, and I will be forever thankful for the love and support that my UMSL family has given me.

Which brings me to why I am here at this podium today. The chair of our department nominated me to be today’s student speaker after hearing what I am about to tell you. As many of you know, once you earn that degree, you’re encouraged to go out there and get what people call “a job”? Last fall, I was interviewing for an assistant professor position at a university when I was asked, “What is the best professional decision you have made thus far in your career?” And I thought, “Is this a trick question? Am I supposed to say, ‘Why, applying for this job, of course!’” Instead, I went with the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth: the best decision I have made in my professional career thus far is choosing to attend UMSL.

Now, I know our reasons may be different and our experiences may be different, but you and I have something very important in common: we chose UMSL. And it is my hope that you all are leaving here today with the same positive experience that I am. I hope you feel prepared to take on the world, to contribute to this world, and to make this world a better place. And I hope that your time at UMSL has provided you with the knowledge, skills, strength, and confidence necessary to achieve those many dreams of yours.

Today we honor your achievement – be proud that you chose to seek an education. Be proud that you leave here today with that education. And be proud that you earned that education at the University of Missouri – St. Louis. Congratulations to the Class of 2016. I wish you nothing but the very best!