University of Missouri–St. Louis

Commencement Address
May 14, 2016
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Welcome class of 2016! Thank you for having me and I'm honored to be given this opportunity to speak with you. A little background of why I'm here: The UMSL Daily published a short article about my startup business, [Beanstalk Web Solutions](), a local website design, web application development, and internet marketing company. I currently employ and have employed, 6 of my classmates from the computer science department, all while still attending school here at UMSL. After reading the article, Dean Yasbin thought you may be as interested as he was to hear this story. For my sake and yours, I hope he was right!

Although I may not have as many years of age and wisdom as your average commencement speaker, I hope you can still find ideas of use to take away from my story. Maybe I can inspire you that the "American Dream" is still alive and can achieved through hard-work, collaboration, and pursing what you love.

My story starts in 2011 with temporarily following a path that wasn't right for me. I was attending a university in Florida, studying to become an ocean engineer. I had hopes of designing artificial islands, offshore platforms, underwater tunnels, and other structures that seemed very grand and interesting to me at the time. But after taking a programming class for the ocean engineering degree, I realized yet again how much I enjoyed programming. Many years prior I had taken an intro to HTML class through a program called 'college for kids' when I was 12 years old or so, and in high school I used to program games on my graphing calculator to share with classmates. Taking that programming class re-ignited my curiosity of writing code, and I began to dabble in it again, in my free time. After another year or so went by, I was having trouble avoiding the distractions of Florida- mostly the beaches and the sun- and was spending time that I should have been studying for engineering, coding instead. Finally, my friends and family were able to get through to me and make me realize that I wasn't pursuing my passion. That I wasn't going to be happy on a path toward a career that I didn't love. My whole life I had been told to pursue what interests you most- so you can end up doing what you love, so I decided to move back to Missouri and switch my degree to computer science. I looked at my various options for school in and around St. Louis and decided to go to the University of Missouri-St. Louis. UMSL had a great balance between an excellent education and affordable tuition. Not to mention the computer science department had a lot of focus in artificial

intelligence at the graduate level, which happened to be one of my favorite topics. So I enrolled at UMSL and began my journey here, which I finish with all of you today.

After I had been at UMSL for about a year, I was working part-time at a local company, helping with drafting irrigation design plans and doing some marketing for them as well. Shortly after I had started, I learned how much they had paid for their new website which they had acquired recently. My jaw *dropped* when I heard the price. Immediately, I knew I could do better. After doing more research, I quickly learned a large portion of the web design companies in St. Louis were essentially preying on middle-aged business owners that knew very-little or nothing about websites, programming, and internet marketing. They were taking advantage of the layman and confusing them into thinking they needed to pay outrageous prices for a product they were pushing. The realization spurred me into action and I decided I would start offering website services on the side for anyone that wanted a fairer, more transparent process, at a **reasonable** price. I immediately made it my mission to not take advantage of those that knew less than I do about technology - to explain everything to my clients in helpful ways, so they could understand exactly what they were buying, what is was worth, and how it could help them.

At first, I started making a few websites for family members and friends. They were all so pleased with my work, that they began referring me to their friends and associates, and my client list started to grow. Things moved faster than I had thought, so I decided it was time to make my own website, incorporate the business, and give it a name.

People always ask me how I came up with the name for my business, and the funny thing is- I didn't. I created a list of name ideas, most of them consisting of what I thought were trendy, one-word names similar to the ones you would hear of in Silicon Valley. I gave the list of name ideas to family and friends to have them vote on it – after all, it's not always about what I like, but more what other people will like. After the votes were in, the winner emerged: Beanstalk Web Solutions. To my surprise, *not a single one of my ideas were chosen*. Instead, the name my mother had **suggested, Beanstalk Web Solutions, overwhelmingly won**. **It goes to show you that *sometimes*, mothers really do know best.**

Beanstalk as we call it for short, kept growing as more and more clients spread the word about my services. I started to realize that I could not keep up with the pace of work by myself. Luckily, a solution presented itself. In one of my classes, I somehow struck up a conversation with a classmate sitting next to me named Dan. We became fast friends, and I eventually asked Dan if he would like to do some work on the side to help with some of the jobs for my new company. Dan accepted, has been with Beanstalk since that day, and is now my lead developer. It really goes to show you how sometimes a 30 second conversation with a stranger can result in great things. I've gotten a few of our biggest, highest-paying projects that way. One of them even resulted from having a short chat with a <u>stranger at the gym</u>. **You never know who**

someone might be in their professional life, so *it's always worth trying to meet people and make connections.*

Last year, I took some advice from a mentor, and decided to invest in a brick-and-mortar location. He told me that it would take my business to new levels that I couldn't imagine at that time. I always try to humble myself when it comes to taking advice so as to take it as seriously as possible, so I went for it and sure enough he was right. Within months of establishing an office in downtown Webster Groves, business exploded. Within 8 months, we reached 10 employees, and have subsequently completed hundreds of projects for over 200 clients.

Recently at Beanstalk, we've established a number of partnerships and business alliances with other marketing companies, video companies, PR companies, and more. We've even made alliances with other businesses that work in the web development and internet marketing industries- that would generally be considered **competitors** of ours. Nothing good can come from making enemies with your competitors, but at a minimum, there is always an opportunity that good things can come from a relationship if you make friends............ A couple months ago, Beanstalk won the 'Most Outstanding Business of 2015' Award from the Webster Groves Chamber of Commerce. We also just finalized our first acquisition of another, smaller firm.

Although many of the great things that have recently happened to our company can be attributed to our hard work and perseverance, more importantly, we owe the success to our mentors, the local business community, and many who gave help and advice. Most of all, my employees and I would like to thank UMSL for the excellent education we've been provided- it has helped us in so many ways in our day-to-day work.... and aside from the actual degree-related content, the work ethic that UMSL and the faculty at UMSL imparted to us was the most valuable of all.

As you walk away from here today with your hard-earned college degree, take it as a stepping stone to forge your own path in life. Whether you choose to work for a small business, work for a corporation, travel the world, be a stay-at-home parent, or start your own company is up to you. *But if you do choose to start a company*, please choose **anything** except a St. Louis-based web design company - I have enough competitors as is.

Lessons learned from my story: pursue what you love, put in a lot of hard work, listen to your mentors, and collaborate with your peers. Our generation can keep the American dream alive, if we **choose** to do so.