

## UMSL COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS – Aug. 9, 2014

**Steven R. Sullivan, president  
Provident, Inc**

Thank you Dean Hoffman.

Good afternoon.....It is an honor to be with you today as we celebrate your years of hard work that have brought you to this point in your life. Congratulations to each of you and the legions of family and friends that accompany us this day to share in this moment with you...please take a minute to remember them today...these degrees belong to them as well for the love and support that have provided to you during your labor.

In a few minutes, you will become University of Missouri St. Louis graduates. Let's take a moment to reflect...what I am about to say about this University was not always true, but today it most assuredly is. Here in St. Louis, as you begin your careers...that really smart person sitting next to you on day 1 is more likely an UMSL graduate than from any other University. That person a couple of years your senior..the one that teaches and mentors you..same thing most likely an UMSL grad. All of the way through the chain of command...even at the top of your organization, whether it be Sandra Van Trease, Group President at BJC, or my dear friend Warner Baxter recently named the CEO at Ameren or even right on this campus, George Paz, Chairman & CEO of ExpressScripts or **countless others**...the CEO of your company here in St. Louis is more likely to be an UMSL graduate than any other University.

And I know why that is....having earned two degrees from this University and having taught more than 8 years in the evening college....I know that many of you worked one or more jobs while you attended school here...many of you came to school here after you had tried a different occupation and then returned to school...our St. Louis community knows that the typical UMSL graduate is more mature, more focused and has more life experience than other graduates and that is why we are simply a better hire. Perhaps the fact that I remain most proud about at our University is that 35-40% of the degrees conferred today are the first college degree within your immediate family...a fact that has been true about our graduates since the time that I graduated more than 30 years ago. It was true about my degree and it was true about the degrees conferred upon those three CEOs I just mentioned as well. We know that over 85% of the graduates from that "W" University come from outside St. Louis and then leave St. Louis in like numbers. The "S" University is about 50-50. University of Missouri St. Louis graduates remain in the St. Louis area at the rate of more than 80%. With our St. Louis retention factor and all of those first-time degrees, just think about how our University has impacted this community. My own, somewhat anecdotal research...still subject to peer review mind you, indicates that UMSL graduates tend to be better looking, more caring, more kind to animals, children and the elderly and much more likely to make this world a better place to live. And yes, we tend to have a smaller carbon footprint as well.

Now I know that some of our degrees today, are being jointly conferred by Washington University and UMSL and, in all honesty, St. Louis is a better place with that W University and S University as well. Really, some of my best friends are W and S graduates...but only about 15%. So congratulations...you

made the right choice when you chose this University. Your investment in yourself and in this University will provide payback for years to come.

When Dean Hoffman asked me to speak to you today, he asked that I speak to something that would be full of insight and impact, but most important of all...the most important thing he wanted me to do, was to keep this talk to less than ten minutes. Since I just spent three minutes bragging about our University, it is now time to turn to insight and impact.

As Dean Hoffman stated, after nearly 25 years in the utility business, I decided it was time to do something different and so my career path has taken a hard right turn...I am now the Executive Director of Provident, a not-for-profit that has been in St. Louis for more than 150 years. We specialize in mental health counseling and suicide prevention. After six short months, it has proven to be the right decision. As an old guy, I am still far from having it all figured out, but let me leave you with three points today that I do believe I have figured out.

Point 1. It all has to come from your **purpose**. Throughout history, philosophers have asked and pondered the eternal question...why am I here? What I have to tell you today is the answer to that question has to come from each of you...your own sense...your own path...your own course. To find your purpose, I encourage you to look not to motivation, those things that are held out as carrots along the way such as increased responsibility, increased notoriety or even increased pay. No, to find your purpose, I encourage you to look to inspiration...those things that stroke your heart, that fall within a deep sense of what is right. Yes, those things that evoke emotion deep in your soul. Think big when defining your purpose. Make it bigger than your education, bigger than your job and, yes, even bigger than your family. Although these things may be served by your purpose, your purpose must truly transcend.

Point 2. Middle age is long and, without purpose, it can be scary. For most of you, the events along your life's path have had clear lines of demarcation. You knew precisely when you achieved your goal, be it high school graduation, now college graduation, your first job, perhaps marriage and even a child. As you walk out of here today those clear lines will become blurred. At times it will be difficult to even know what the next goal is, let alone how or when it will be achieved. Today I ask that you do something that will likely prove difficult....leave that check the box method of accomplishment behind. Stay grounded, daily, in your purpose. This is where your happiness truly is, where it truly thrives. Believe me, if Bobby McFerrin sold twenty million records by basically repeating the phrase, "don't worry, be happy", there just has to be something to it.

I read and listen to a fellow named Shawn Achor. Shawn studied happiness for 8 years at Harvard. Now that is pertinent for 2 reasons. First, if it took them 8 years to figure out happiness at Harvard, I am pretty certain we could have completed the job in 2-3 years here at UMSL. More important, his research indicates that so many of us, as goal-driven people, tend to set these hurdles of our own choosing into our lives. Ask yourself, have you ever thought I can't afford to let myself be happy until I first achieve this goal or that goal? Maybe this college degree was one of those goals. Once achieved, we then move on to the next goal, denying ourselves happiness until we achieve that next milestone.

...and then the next, until we find ourselves chasing the elusive happiness our entire lives because of our own self-determined and self-perpetuated hurdles. We tell ourselves that we are not yet worthy of happiness today.

Let me assure you today....you were worthy of happiness yesterday, you are worthy of happiness today and you will be worthy of happiness tomorrow. Shawn's research proves that for those who focus on happiness, each and every day, these other so-called accomplishments and goals will come to you more naturally and with much, much less effort. With gratitude as your base and purpose as your northern star you will have set a course to achieve more than, today, you can possibly imagine.

And finally, Point 3. The task at hand is never more important than the people at hand. This one came particularly hard and late to me. If you find yourself on a team and saying to yourself, "I'll just do it all, it will be easier that way", there is a problem. The product of the group is always better than the product of the individual. While working "on the team" has its own special challenges, those challenges are worth spending time on and solving. Do not circumvent them, solve them. You will never feel more satisfied than when you achieve a goal as part of a team, particularly when that goal is larger than anything you could have ever done on your own.

When it became my job to manage people, I continuously found myself saying, "why don't they approach this problem like I do" and "why don't they do it like me"? The goal of managing people is not to create an organization of mini-mes. The idea is to encourage disparate thought and different approaches and allow all of the ideas to come to the surface. When deadlines loom, however, it is easy for patience to run thin. Sometimes difficult to allow ideas to ferment and grow into a final plan. What I have to tell you today, it is worth the time. If you show appreciation, even when appreciation seems difficult, a strong sense of accomplishment will form and the next time that same team will be able to tackle even larger issues with efficiency and ease. It is that sense of teamwork that I see lacking in so many corporate cultures. When it exists, no task is too big, no challenge insurmountable. We lost a great St. Louisan earlier this year and so, as to this final point, I will borrow Maya Angelou's words when she said that when it is all said and done...."people will forget what you said, they will even forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel." Keep that in mind over the course of your career.

And so, as you sit here today, rightfully excited in your sense of accomplishment and what the future may hold, I ask you to make it your job to be happy and grateful each and every day. Remember it is all about the journey and not the destination...because we all know how this story ends. When you look back on your life 30 or 40 years from now, please know that it will be the people that you will remember and not the work or the tasks. If remember this, every day, you will be more successful than your mind today will even allow you to imagine. That is my sincere wish for each and every one of you. Have a terrific day and a wonderful life.

Thank you.