

UMSL Commencement Address – **June McAllister Fowler**

May 16, 2015 (Ceremony I)

Thank you for those kind words of introduction, and for inviting me to be a part of today's ceremony.

And to the 2015 University of Missouri–St. Louis graduating classes, I offer my congratulations. Very soon, each of the 228 of you, will receive a degree from the College of Nursing, the School of Social Work, Program in Public Policy Administration or the College of Fine Arts & Communication. These degrees represent the culmination of many years of hard work, many hours of study, probably too much coffee and Red Bull and a whole lot of learning from one of the finest institutions in our state. Not just because they describe themselves that way, but because the facts bear out the description. Whether the fact that within six months, 96% of you will be working in your career field or UMSL's advocacy for those not born into economic security as evidenced by the cover of the Spring 2015 magazine that features one of your fellow nursing students on the cover who took it upon herself to volunteer to help meet the health needs of peaceful protestors during the Ferguson unrest.

For just a moment, I want you to pause and not think about what this accomplishment means for you. Instead, right now, I want you to look around and focus on someone who is here today to celebrate with you - your husband, wife or significant other; children, mom, dad, sister, brother, grandparent, aunt, uncle, friend, classmate, advisor or professor. These are the people who are perhaps more excited today than you are. They are invested in your success – some of them maybe even wrote the checks that got you to this point – which makes them feel even MORE invested.

And yes, today is your day, but think about how much more special today is because of those with whom you get to share it. And, while I know we all take care to be formal and appropriate at ceremonies like this, I want you to take just a moment to say Thank You to the people who

are here to celebrate with you in the most stand-on-your-feet, raucous, handclapping, foot-stomping, hooting manner possible.

Now that we are a bit more relaxed, I want to share with you just a few words today because as a person who spent the first 16 years of my career as an urban planner listening to concerns expressed by community members and who has spent the last 19 years in the communications field, I have learned two things. First, effective talks take into consideration the needs and wants of the Listeners, not the SPEAKER and second, the listeners generally need, want, crave and pray that the SPEAKER'S remarks are SHORT! I promise to answer your prayers.

To start, I want to quote someone who spoke at another commencement not too long ago – that wise and revered sage, comedian Stephen Colbert. He told a graduating class and I quote: “You will truly serve only what you love, because as the prophet says, service is love made visible. If you love friends, you will serve your friends. If you love community, you will serve your community. If you love money, you will serve your money. And, if you love only yourself, you will serve only yourself, and you will have only yourself. Try to love others, and serve others, and hopefully, find those who love and serve you in return.”

Against that thought, which is really very sweet from Mr. Colbert – who I have to tell you ended his speech to that graduating class with this piece of advice: “The best career option possible is to get a TV talk show where people will pay you a whole lot of money for doing jack squat.”

Now that sounds more like the Steven Colbert we all know.

Like me, you have probably been told all of your life to dream big, to imagine what you want to be when you grow up, to pursue those things that will bring you great happiness and joy. But, what would happen if the messages we all received from a very young age shifted just a bit? What if instead of having ourselves at the center of our big dreams, we placed helping to meet the needs of others at the center of our dreams? What would happen if we began to see ourselves as servants, taking on the issues that really matter for those not able to easily take

advantage of the opportunities many take for granted such as access to a quality education, a safe environment in which to raise a family, a job that allows you to provide for that family, a future filled with hope? What if we were willing to take risks that bring added value and beneficial change to others? Just imagine..... I have studied and observed that all great moments and movements begin when one person is willing to think and act differently.

This morning, I want to encourage you to let this ceremony and today, be the last moment in your life that is all about you. Each of you is about to receive a degree that at its very foundation is all about service to others. It means you have a head start on being willing to dream big for others. It means you will be among those willing to develop solutions to the issues that plague our community rather than being among the problem pointer outers. You have been educated to make a difference for others. Whether to one person at a time as 78 of you enter the nursing profession; one audience at a time as 102 of you put your communications skills to use; one community at a time as 38 of you enter the field of social work; or one city, state or nation at a time as ten of you focus on developing and executing impactful public policy. Being willing to dream big for others is a powerful tool that can literally change a life and change our world.

As I take my seat, I know that you will all accomplish great things. My request of you this morning is that you give serious consideration to making others the center of those great things.

Thank you so much for inviting me and now let's get closer to the reason we are all here.