

Commencement Address
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College of Business Administration

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Thank you, Dean Hoffman.

Congratulations to all of you here today, certainly to those graduating, but also to family, friends, and faculty that supported this journey. I'm honored to be here to help celebrate your achievement today. Special congratulations also to Chancellor George, who as you know will be retiring in September, and who is attending his final Commencement as Chancellor here this evening.

One of my favorite leaders used a phrase at the start of every team meeting: "Be Bright, Be Brief, Be Gone", and that is exactly what I will endeavor to be this evening.

I'll admit find myself somewhat astonished to be on this side of the podium. I assure you that the vision I had of myself when I sat in your chairs did not include any form of public speaking, much less to be in a position to share what I've learned over the years. I've had to learn a lot of lessons throughout my life, most of them the hard way. As I reflect back, there are four things that stood out, each of which had a major impact on my career progression: humility, skills, mentoring and vision. I'm sure none of these are new concepts but I'll try to approach each from a slightly different angle, and hope that you find something useful in at least one as you embark on your future careers.

One of the early and most important lessons I learned – thankfully – was what it meant to serve humbly. Servant-leadership is a phrase you've likely heard, and it's one I try to adhere to. There is no job too small to not do well, and no one is above any task, no matter how menial it may appear. When you rise to leaders in your organizations, demonstrating that you are not above any task becomes even more important if you want your employees to respect and follow you.

With the help of UMMSL's career services, I got my first job at IBM, which led to a 32 year career. I was eager to do well and make a good impression. I worked earnestly at my position, and was particularly careful to get things right. Except for one little area. It was horribly tedious and I frankly didn't understand why that task was important. I also looked around and noticed my teammates were a little sloppy on that particular work item, so I felt I was in good company. Sure enough, when we had our annual audit, we failed that segment. When I subsequently got dinged in my performance review, I was quick to defend myself with all the other things I had done splendidly. My manager's comment stopped me in my tracks and has stayed with my entire career. What he said was (and I quote) "You got to do the whole job, you can't just pick the pieces you like".

That phrase has been useful to me so many times throughout my life as I faced tedious tasks or had to provide feedback to my own teams who maybe were not doing the "whole" job. In life or at work, do the complete job. There are going to be parts you like better than others, but you've got to do the *whole* job.

Which leads me to the next lesson. Learning is never "over".

When I attended my graduation ceremony several years ago, of course I was happy, but my overwhelming emotions were relief and exhaustion. Like I'm sure many of you, I worked full-time, had a young child, and tried to juggle classes and homework around everything going on in my life. I also distinctly recall thinking "I will *never* go back to school again – this is *it!*". No more studying, researching, paper-writing, I was finally free.

But the truth is, you're never finished. Our world moves at a much faster pace than it did when I graduated. The reason you are employed is because you have the skills your company needs to get the job done. It's the only reason any of us get to keep our jobs.

I was fortunate to be offered training programs at my company, and each time I thought "Ok, this is it, now I'll be the master of my domain". But that ball kept moving. Every time I thought I had it all figured out, something changed – new leadership, new software, new processes.

Things keep moving. Take advantage of any opportunity to grow your skills, whether inside or outside of your organization. Keep them sharp, keep them updated, keep them fresh. To stay relevant, you need to commit yourself to being a life-long learner.

Get a mentor/be a mentor

As I progressed my career and began taking on leadership roles, I found myself being asked more frequently to be a mentor. I had the good fortune to have several wonderful mentors on my journey and found it an honor to give someone else a hand-up.

What I want to say to you are two things: First, find your mentors. They come from all parts of your life: family, friends, colleagues, pastors, professors – anyone who has wisdom they can share and who knows you well enough to provide honest coaching and feedback. For your part, accept their feedback not as criticism, but as opportunities to understand areas that need further development. Get several, one is never enough – we all have blind spots and need trusted advisors to help us grow.

But I'd also encourage you to be a mentor. Now. Not after you've reached some level in your career that you deem is worthy enough. You may be younger or less experienced, but every one of you has unique value. Understand what that is for you and offer it up!

I want to tell you about a young man I hired a few years back – one of a group of new college hires. He had a lot to learn, and like his other new hire peers, he attacked his training with energy and enthusiasm. But he also did something impressive that helped him stand out. He looked around and identified something he was good at that he could offer to our team.

At the time, LinkedIn and Twitter were just starting to surge in popularity and few of we "experienced" folks knew how to leverage these tools. This young man put together a short education session over a lunch hour, and trained us how to Tweet, and how to improve our profiles on LinkedIn. Such a simple thing but it was brilliant! I will also tell you that this young man's career trajectory moved at a much more rapid pace than his peers because of the simple way he differentiated himself. YOU have knowledge, YOU have value, don't be shy about finding ways to mentor "up".

And finally, I want to touch on Vision. And probably not in the way you are used to hearing about it. I'm sure all of you have been urged to "have a vision for your life". I wasn't one of those lucky people who

was born knowing what I wanted to be when I grew up. I had to do a process of elimination, getting rid of whole categories like Medicine because I knew I didn't like blood, or Engineering because my Calculus grades were far from perfect. What I did learn that ended up being hugely helpful, was that I needed to recognize the invisible barriers I myself had erected. I needed to dismantle assumptions about my life and potential before I could reach for more.

I grew up in humble circumstances. I'm a first-generation college graduate, and there were few others in my circle that could show me a different path. When you come from that kind of environment, it's hard to envision a large future for yourself. Or, perhaps you grew up overshadowed by achievement and have a hard time envisioning ever attaining an equal measure of success. Many of us are guilty of keeping our visions for ourselves small. The trick is to recognize when and where you are doing that.

How many of you are thinking right now, "I could never speak in public" or "please just don't let me trip on the way up". We put these images in our minds and they become true. It's hard to even recognize these invisible fences we set up around ourselves. And these thoughts-that-become-truths, can cause people to limit their vision for their future.

Family, friends, and community play an enormous role in our lives, but they can also erect and enforce invisible barriers. Everyone is just a bit more comfortable when we stay in our zones. When you reach higher or step outside that zone, it's uncomfortable and easy to get pulled back to the norm. But we are all on our own individual journeys, and we all have enormous potential. Resist being held back by boundaries that are of your own making.

What I've learned is that in order to create and achieve a vision, we have to first unshackle ourselves from the invisible barriers that keep our visions small.

As you leave here this evening to celebrate your achievement, be sure to thank those who helped you. Go out into the world to serve humbly, live a life of learning, reach high and understand what unique value you bring in order to help others.

A final thought as I leave you, don't forget your Alma Mater! UMSL has a unique and special place in this community. Be part of the thriving alumni group, mentor a student, be a guest speaker – there are so many ways to continue your relationship. And who knows, it may lead to your next job or promotion!

Congratulations again, best wishes to each of you for a bright and successful future. Thank you.