

Commencement Address
Saturday, December 17, 2022
Ceremony II:
College of Arts and Sciences
Douglas Harrison, Vice President and Dean, School of Cybersecurity and Information Technology
at University of Maryland Global Campus

Thank you, Dean Grady.

Chancellor Sobolik and members of UMSL leadership team, distinguished faculty, and especially to winter class of 2022 and your family and friends, thank you for the opportunity to come back to my first collegiate home and celebrate the tremendous accomplishments of this amazing class of graduates.

Like so many graduates before, you have made innumerable sacrifices to get here. But unlike most of those other graduates, you also persevered to this success through a devastating public health crisis with a global force so mighty that it could have easily knocked you off course. But here we are, and here YOU are. Graduates, congratulations to the class of 2022!

You also contain the multitudes of those who supported you – the family and friends who encouraged you, the faculty who taught and mentored you, the fellow students you studied with and formed friendships with, the irreplaceable staff who kept the campus running and provided the support services that helped keep you on track. Think for a moment about the specific people and communities and networks within and beyond UMSL that were part of your path to this moment, many of whom may well be here today, and then join me in thanking them for helping make this day possible.

You are an inspiration to us all.

The higher education you formally receive today is among the most powerful renewable resources of a free and open society, and you can take particular pride in graduating today from a public state university. For generations, public higher education has been an engine for social

and economic uplift, especially for populations of students who are too often left behind or excluded from higher education. So, you're not just earning a degree today. You are righting the scales of injustice by taking the knowledge and skills you've attained, joined to your courage and determination to do right and do good, and going back out into a world that so badly needs you, now more than ever.

I know this, because it was and has been my own experience.

I arrived at UMSL a first-gen student from a low-income family in the rural Ozarks. In that world, there was none of the cultural capital of assumed knowledge about all the unspoken rules for being a college student that my wealthier, more sophisticated peers brought with them as on-board attachments in life. So, the summer before classes started my freshman year, I sat on a grimy couch in Woods Hall cluelessly trying to figure out what classes I should register for. I managed to sign up for what was required and a few things that were of interest to me. But then I missed the first day of PSYCH 101, because I thought "TR" in the column of my course schedule listing the day of the week on which the course met meant "Thursday," when it actually meant Tuesday (T) *and* Thursday (R). In my life as a university dean, we would call these things risk factors that imperil retention and persistence. But what I experienced at the time was an emotional high-pressure system of insecurity, anxiety, and chronic bafflement.

Many of you have had your own versions of what came next for me. Once classes started, I began to encounter a fascinating array of faculty and friends, especially in the Honors College, where I lived and learned. My narrow and cloistered worldview came under the constructive, transformative pressure of the intentionally broad education UMSL provides. I found the physical and intellectual safety that would allow me to come out and live openly and honestly in the world. And I had the opportunity to engage in immersive, real-world learning, applying my English-degree coursework at the campus newspaper.

Among other things, the campus newspaper work taught me the value of humility. I once wrote a front-page caption for a picture of a Vice Chancellor receiving an award, and instead of writing that he received a *plaque* as part of the honor, I wrote that he received *a plague*. So, like you, I had to learn how to fail and even humiliate myself ... to sit with that and reflect on what it had to teach me (and, in the case of the plague, to go apologize to the Vice Chancellor), and then push through to the other side, a bit wiser, a bit less sure of my own infallibility. This is what I think Elizabeth Bishop meant when she encouraged us to “lose something every day.”

After college, I started my career as a journalist and then became an English professor. That would have seemed foreseeable to me when I sat where you are 25 years ago. But cybersecurity? Dean? That would have been a hard no for 22-year-old me. For one thing, cybersecurity didn't exist in 1998. But it also turned out, that I was a pretty good professor, but I was vastly better at helping working adults advance in their career or make career changes in a modern workforce ever more driven by technology.

I only figured that out because I embraced unexpected opportunities. But – and this is key – at the right time. I love what I do now, and I wish I had known I could have done it with an English degree when I was where you are. But even if I had known that then, the truth is, I had to put my time in doing the important foundational work of rising through the ranks and filling the gaps in my knowledge and experience before I was ready to embrace the chance to contribute in the ways I do now. Which is to say, if you want something, you should also worry, at least a little, if now is a good – or the *right* – time. So, I exhort you to go boldly toward the light of change and serendipity, and to be equally purposeful in the opportunities you say yes to, and when.

Our culture valorizes stories of self-creation and self-making, and you should always be proud of your hard-won achievements. But commencement ceremonies are a powerful reminder that no achievement or success is a self-contained accomplishment. Just look around us.

And so let me conclude by taking this, for me, rarest of opportunities at my alma mater to recognize two people from my UMSL days who were then and have continued to be agents of transformation in my life: one is Judith Linville, an emeritus instructor in English and an advisor to the student newspaper back in my day who has come to count among my dearest chosen family, and Professor Jeanne Morgan Zarucchi, who both taught me about French art history and has been a steadfast friend and an even shrewder mentor in the internecine intrigues of university politics ever since my undergraduate days. Thank you. You both have been immeasurably consequential in making me the person I am on the job, at home, and in the world today.

I know these names do not mean anything to most of you, but I say them here in this place to honor them and because doing so is part of what I've come to think of as a personal discipline of gratitude that I encourage you to make part of your existential routine: recognizing to yourself and, when you have the chance, to others, the shaping force that generous teachers, mentors, colleagues, friends, and family have on your life.

None of us can predict the future, but you can leave here confident that the education you take with you means you are well prepared to shape and change the wider world in life and work ... for better and for good.

Thank you. And again, congratulations.