

Commencement Speech

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Good morning. President Noland, faculty and staff, guests, and, most importantly, the Class of 2017: it is an honor to be here today. I would like to start by congratulating all the graduates on their accomplishment. Since no one gets here alone, I would also like to congratulate the families, friends, and instructors who helped to get you to where you are today.

A couple of years ago, I had a student come to me after class to tell me that I taught her something that I hadn't intended to. As it turns out, I had used the snipping tool in Windows to steal an image off the internet and paste it into my class notes which were on the Smartboard. She was working on a presentation for one of her other classes at that time, so that little trick was immensely and immediately valuable to what she was currently doing. I don't know if she remembers the specific lesson that I was doing that day. I certainly don't remember specifically what I was doing that day. However, at least I taught her something that day, even if it wasn't the lesson that I had intended.

This led me to think about the other lessons that we learn in college that the professor did not intend to teach us. Because these lessons are not specific to any particular college or major, often these are the lessons from college that have the greatest impact on future success. I promise to keep my remarks brief. As such, I have selected only three lessons to highlight.

The Greek philosopher Socrates is often quoted as saying "The only thing that I know, is that I know nothing." With this quote in mind, one of the most important things to learn is how much more we have to learn. For example, while preparing for this talk, I recently learned that on average we speak about one hundred twenty-five words a minute and that the fear of public speaking is called glossophobia. As instructors, we rarely have the time to tell you all that we would like to about a topic. This being the case, often what we do in class is just the tip of the iceberg. In such cases, we hope that you've not been afraid to ask questions and more importantly, that you have developed the ability to ask good questions.

Albert Einstein once said “I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious.” By asking intelligent questions, we feed our curiosity and continue our education. In a way, continuing your education is necessary to keep up with the advances in technology. Today, many of you have a smartphone in your pocket that allows you to access information from all over the world. It is thousands of times more powerful than the room-sized computers that helped us get to the moon nearly fifty years ago. I refuse to hazard a guess as to what technological marvels the next fifty years will bring. However, by continuing your studies, you will be able to keep up with the advances in your field.

The second lesson that I hope that you’ve learned to get here is the ability to solve problems. To paraphrase poet Rainer Maria Rilke “Be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the problems themselves”. In any job, there will be problems that need to be solved and the solution often requires patience. Sometimes the solution will take longer than you think that it will and it won’t be as smooth as you think that it will either. But that’s okay, as C. S. Lewis says “Failures are the finger posts to achievements.” While analyzing literature or solving complex physics equations, you were also learning to break the problem into smaller bite-sized chunks, look at what came before, and to take the next logical step. When solving problems as a group, perhaps you learned to listen to people with different opinions and backgrounds than yourself. You may have learned that often the best solution comes from leaving your ego at the door and that it doesn’t matter if it’s your idea that wins out, but that it is the best idea that wins out. One of the great triumphs of Allied intelligence in World War Two was the ability to decrypt the Enigma code used by the German military. This required a great deal of patience, a number of set-backs, solving dozens of smaller problems, and a group of people with diverse skills working together for a common goal. These same qualities will help you to solve any number of problems that come up in your professional career.

The final lesson that I hope that you take with you going forward is the importance of proper preparation. One of my professors had a line on his syllabus that said that “anything you turn in to me should reflect the professional pride that you take in it.” Since the time I was given students of my own, I have shamelessly stolen this line for use on my own syllabi. Often, the students that are the most successful in mathematics are those that are the most careful and meticulous about

their work. I can't help but think that the same could be said about most majors. Talent and ability can only take you so far, the rest of the way is often an act of sheer stubborn determination. Upon his retirement, future NFL Hall of Fame quarterback Peyton Manning remarked on the value of preparation by saying "There were other players who were more talented, but there was no one [who] could out-prepare me." There are many times when you only get one chance to get things right. Putting in the grind work ahead of time can help to make sure that the one chance goes as smoothly as it can. When preparing your term papers and capstone projects, you learned the importance of careful research and proper format. No doubt you learned the value of putting in the extra hours of proofreading and polish that turns an acceptable paper into an exceptional one. This attention to detail will cause your employers to appreciate the extra time and attention that you place in your work.

In closing, I would like to reiterate my congratulations today. I hope that you take the opportunity in the coming days to reflect on the things that you learned in order to be successful at ETSU – especially those lessons that may have not been explicitly part of the professor's plan. This ceremony to celebrate the successful completion of your degree program is called a "commencement". However, the word "commencement" also refers to a beginning. For this reason, I hope that this ceremony represents the beginning of your success. Best of luck in all of your future endeavors. Thank you.