

Mr. Rector, Madame President, visitors, guests, faculty, staff, and graduates of the Class of 2016:

I'm deeply grateful to President Sullivan and the graduation committee for the honor of speaking to you. I do not hold a degree from the University of Virginia and I must confess I envy you. There is not a finer educational experience available anywhere than the one you complete today. Please don't ever forget or lose your appreciation and gratitude for that fact.

I am more fortunate than you today in one respect. I'm facing the Rotunda and can see the results of four years of intensive renovation work. My own college graduation took place in MIT's Killian Court, modeled on the Rotunda and the Lawn, so today brings back a happy memory. We all owe a great debt of gratitude to every donor and every taxpayer who made it possible to preserve this jewel for the University's third century.

As an academic, I listen to graduation speeches for a living. Based on the 50 or so I've heard, I'm now supposed to tell you to follow your passion. And I don't disagree with that aspiration, but it is an aspiration and not a plan. And it is also somewhat misleading because it implies that your passion is the north star of your life, always there and always in the same place. That may be because graduation speakers are drawn disproportionately from the ranks of performing artists and entrepreneurs, who are often among the small minority of the population whose passion is fixed and all-consuming.

But I think there is another reason for the general reluctance to offer more operational advice on these occasions, for which I blame Shakespeare. After all, when Polonius gives his famous parting words to Laertes, "neither a borrower nor a lender be" etc., we are supposed to see him as a pompous old windbag, and who wants to be that? Well, it's a risk I'm willing to run. My hope is to provide some thoughts that are concrete enough to help you develop a plan of action right now.

For many of you, today marks the end of your formal education. Some will receive terminal degrees—Ph.Ds, MDs, JDs, MBAs and so on. Many of you who receive bachelors or master's degrees in engineering, education, architecture, nursing, commerce, leadership and public policy, and data science will launch your careers immediately. For many graduates of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies, today is the culmination of years of sacrifice leading to career advancement or career change.

So sometime in the near future, most of you will head off to work in an organization—a hospital, financial institution, law firm, corporation, university, government agency, or NGO. And in most cases, you will embark not just on a job but on a profession. What does that mean? Dictionaries tell us that a profession is distinguished from other work by the requirement of special skill or education; thus the term “learned profession” beloved of lawyers. Each of you has acquired special skill and education that give you entrée into a professional career. But your success in that career will be determined in significant part by something else that often goes under the heading of professionalism, or certain distinct habits of behavior and judgment. I will focus on a few of those that I hope you will display from the very outset, grouped around three basic precepts: take ownership, learn continuously, and think long-term.

One key feature of professionalism is taking ownership. As a junior person in any organization, it is easy and tempting to conclude that your job is to do what you’re told. Write the memo; create the spreadsheet; attend the meeting. You’ll probably be able to do those things without thinking about the needs of your organization’s ultimate client, customer, or patient. But don’t fall into that trap. Make sure you appreciate the larger context. Understand what your organization, or your organization’s client, is trying to achieve and make it your business to achieve it.

In a highly functioning organization, the senior leaders do not “make” you a partner, a managing director, or a member of the leadership team—they simply recognize that you’ve made yourself one. Start that process on the day you walk in the door. Ask questions; understand the organization’s strategy and values; learn about the client, customer, or patient and why that person or organization sought out your advice or services. And above all, if you think something else could or should be done to improve the product or service you are working on, speak up, identify what you think needs to be done and offer to do it.

Ownership also applies to your mistakes. You will make some; everyone does. When you make a mistake, don’t hide from it, blame it on someone else, or make excuses. Own it and own the clean-up. And when someone you supervise makes a mistake, take responsibility for the performance of your team in your interactions with co-workers, your boss, and your client. Let the people you supervise know you have their backs.

You must keep learning throughout your career to be effective at it. You don’t know everything you need to know to do your job at the highest level—far from it. And neither does

anyone else. But the people around you will have skills and knowledge that complement your own. Start building constructive relationships with them immediately. Those relationships will help you learn. More than that, they will be building blocks for your and your colleagues' career success.

For roughly the past two decades, you've been in a structured learning environment. You went to classrooms and labs and worked on assignments. Now you are going into an unstructured learning environment. How will you continue to learn in that setting? Start by asking questions. No one likes to feel stupid, so we often keep quiet when we don't know something. It takes conscious and deliberate effort to combat that tendency. When you are unclear why your organization or its client is doing something, or how to perform a particular task, or what a new term or concept means, ask. Asking questions should supplement, not substitute for, going into meetings and assignments well prepared. By both preparing and asking questions, you will perform tasks more quickly, efficiently, and accurately.

Another central part of learning is getting feedback. Finding out what you did well and what you need to improve on is essential to your progress. Remind yourself that a supervisor or co-worker who gives you critical feedback is doing you an enormous favor. Request feedback and express thanks for it after it's delivered.

The late Randy Pausch was a member of our engineering faculty for many years. His book *The Last Lecture* is based on a talk he gave shortly before he died of cancer. He made the point in that lecture that when people stop telling you that you've messed up, they've given up on you. As he put it, "Your critics are the ones telling you they still love you and care." Interestingly, he identified a football coach as the source of that insight. Which makes sense—the elite-level athletes in the audience are already used to handling criticism effectively; for everyone else, it is something to be practiced and learned.

You will give and not just receive constructive criticism. In most professional careers, you will supervise others; you will be a boss. Your job will involve leadership and not just technical skill and expertise. Part of leadership is giving thoughtful and actionable feedback.

And this brings me to my third theme, thinking long-term. Giving good feedback takes time, and time is your most precious resource. In the short run, you free up time by not bothering to give careful instructions before a project or useful feedback afterward. But the time saved today will always be paid back with exorbitant interest tomorrow. And there are many

other situations that present the same basic tradeoff. They often involve resolving conflict or disagreement or otherwise tackling a problem today rather than letting it smolder until it bursts into a larger conflagration down the road.

Professionals make decisions. The higher they rise in their organizations, the more and larger decisions they make. And oddly enough, some of the most challenging ones have a clear right answer. They are the ones where saying “yes” will make everyone happy in the short run but will cause predictable problems in the long run. As Professor Rob Cross from the McIntire School has noted, highly effective workers are often bombarded with requests to collaborate on projects. You may be asked to work on a project when you are already stretched so thin that you won’t be able to deliver on time. Someone who reports to you may ask to work on a project that is not the best use of his or her skills and time. Someone may ask you to make an exception to a rule or policy that applies with good reason to the situation. Our natural impulse is to avoid conflict, which means we will too often say “yes” when we should say “no.”

Sometimes, although you can’t or shouldn’t say “yes” to a request, you can propose something else that will meet some or all of the objectives motivating it. Always try to think outside the parameters of the specific request to come up with a compromise that suits the other party. But it isn’t always possible. Sometimes you will have to just say no. You can’t make that process easy, but you can make it easier. Listen carefully to the request and to the arguments behind it, consider those arguments before making a decision, communicate the decision clearly and unequivocally, explain why you think it is the best decision, and then move on.

As perhaps these examples make clear, a professional career includes some unavoidable amount of stress. You will be responsible for other people’s livelihoods, wealth, safety, well-being, and in some cases their lives. That will necessarily put pressure on you. Please recognize that feeling stress is not a sign of weakness or pathology—it is a sign that you have been entrusted with something important. But you have to find strategies that work for you to keep stress from adversely affecting your own health and well-being. This, too, means investing time today in order to gain it back with interest tomorrow. Consider blocking out a brief period of the work day to do something that relaxes you—taking a walk, reading a few pages of a novel, listening to music. Getting your mind off work for just a few minutes can be extremely refreshing. And you will also be able to deal with stress more effectively if your career is part of a full and satisfying life that includes close ties to family, friends, and neighbors.

Professionalism also means conducting yourself, in every interaction, with honesty, integrity, and good will. I won't insult your intelligence by saying that this is the only road to career success. You've no doubt observed people succeeding through dishonesty and treachery. But despite the short-term temptations to do otherwise, there are enormous long-term advantages to pursuing success ethically and graciously. Doing so ties your professional and personal selves into a coherent and attractive whole. It assures that others will not merely note your success, but will admire and celebrate it. And as your life progresses, it will help you answer affirmatively one of life's central questions: am I a good person?

And that leads me to my final and most important point. Your career is a means to an end. The end is to live a good life—a life full of what the ancient Greeks called *Eudaimonia*, variously translated as happiness or flourishing. The service you provide to others, both in your workplace and outside it, will contribute to it. So will your relationships with family and friends and involvement in your community. So will your enjoyment of physical activity and the beauty of the natural world. So will your inner life—your enjoyment of ideas, art, literature, music, and other achievements of the human mind. So will your religious faith or ethical beliefs. And so will the kindness, courtesy, and fairness with which you treat others in and out of the workplace. Keep your eye on those sources of happiness every single day. You will never regret having done so and both you and we will look on your endeavors with pride and satisfaction.

Congratulations and best wishes as you open an exciting new chapter of your lives.