

President Austin, fellow honorary degree recipients, distinguished faculty and trustees, staff, alumni, and families: I am deeply honored to be with you today, and to receive the degree that has just been conferred upon me.

To today's graduates, I offer heartfelt congratulations. You deserve to feel tremendously proud of your achievement.

You have come so far. When you first arrived on this campus, you struggled with the profound questions of human existence: nature or nurture? Free will or determinism? Individualism or community?

Eventually, you boiled those questions down to just one: Ted's or Husky's? I commend you.

For many years, I have dreamed of appearing before a large audience such as this here at Gampel Pavilion. But in my dreams I'm wearing basketball shorts rather than a cap and gown. At five feet nine inches, though, I doubt that dream will come true any time soon.

Still, it is a privilege to share this day of reflection and celebration with you here in this building that has been the site of so many wonderful memories for the members and supporters of this university.

I remember the first time I was asked to speak at a commencement. I was a young congressman from New London, and I was nervous. A friend of mine, an Irish priest, shared a piece of advice that I have never forgotten. He said, "Now, Christopher, a commencement speaker is much like the guest of honor at an Irish wake. They need you in order to have the party, but nobody expects you to say very much."

I will try to take his words to heart today.

Some of you may ask: "Why do commencements require commencement speakers?" A fair question. In an attempt to answer it, I did a bit of research into the history of commencement addresses.

I make no claims to complete accuracy. But I found a few interesting pieces of information:

Apparently, the first commencement address was delivered early in the 12th century, in the Italian City of Bologna. That may explain why a derivative of the word bologna has been the single most common reaction of commencement audiences to so many commencement speeches over the centuries.

I also found that the longest commencement speech was delivered at Harvard University in the early 19th century. It lasted 6 hours. The first three hours were in Latin;

the other three were in Greek - and at the conclusion of the remarks, the students were given a test.

At the other extreme, the shortest commencement address in history was reportedly delivered by the film maker Woody Allen. He stepped to the podium, recognized administrators, faculty, alumni and alumnae, then turned to the students and uttered two sentences. "We have given you a perfect world. Please do not screw it up. "

An equally succinct graduation speech was evidently delivered by the comedian Bob Hope a number of years ago. He, too, began by recognizing the distinguished members of the audience.

Then he said to the students: "As you prepare to leave these hallowed halls of learning, these bastions of knowledge, these citadels of scholarship, I have just two words of advice: Don't go. "

Those two words may reflect how many of you feel today, at least in part. There's a lot of enthusiasm about graduating, but I suspect that there's a certain reluctance, as well. You've had the time of your lives here.

And you know that you have not just gotten a degree from this place. You have received an education - in the fullest sense of that word.

You have been fortunate enough to spend these past few years at an outstanding school - the flagship university of the small and remarkable corner of the world we call Connecticut.

This has always been a state of men and women who conceive of a world that can be, rather than curse the world that is. More than any other, ours is a state of firsts:

The first written constitution in the world - the fundamental orders - were written here in 1638;

The first public library in America was established in New Haven, in 1656;

The first law school, the first trade school, the first women's school, and the first school for people with disabilities in America - all were founded here.

The first automobile factory, the first computer, the first helicopter, and the first television station in the world - all brought to life in Connecticut.

This university is in keeping with our state's tradition of leadership. It rose from truly humble beginnings.

Only 119 years ago, in 1881, it was launched with 70 acres of land, a few wooden buildings, and five thousand dollars to support a faculty of three and a student body of twelve.

And only 63 years ago, in 1937, the elected representatives of this state committed two and a-half million dollars to improve and expand the university - a sum that was then the largest single commitment of resources for any purpose in the state's history.

That was a stunning act of faith in the future by the people of our state - carried out not in a moment of abundance and prosperity, but during the darkest days of the Great Depression.

They performed that act because they shared a collective vision of a great public university that would prepare generations of Connecticut students for life as educated men and women.

You are the beneficiaries of their noble vision. Today, in so many respects, the words "University of Connecticut" are synonymous with excellence - in areas like health care, business, education, agriculture, the arts, literature, science, and yes, athletics.

If this university, and the state it calls home, are to continue to lead the country in the 21st century - as we have led in centuries past - then we must act as our predecessors have acted - with vision and with hope. That means, I believe, taking action on three fronts:

First, we need to find a way for each and every one of us here to continue to support this university in its mission of excellence.

Please understand: I am not here to make a pitch on behalf of the alumni association, as important as its efforts are. The members of the association can do that very well on their own!

I am here, rather, to ask you to find a way to give back to this place which has given so much to all of us.

A century and a half ago, Americans supported something called the Morrill Act. That act used our abundance of land to establish the great land-grant colleges and universities that exist throughout America today - of which UConn is one.

I believe that it is time for us to enact a new Morrill Act - a Morrill Act of the 21st century - one that will harvest the abundance of the airwaves to underwrite technology-based learning at this and other public universities.

But we must do more than enact new laws for these new times. As you know, I am not a graduate of this university - although I am, today, proud to call myself an honorary Husky.

Nevertheless, I feel a deep debt of gratitude to this institution. It has done so much for our state. It has embraced my father and my family.

I will always be grateful for the contributions that UConn and its graduates have made.

And that is why I am committed - during whatever time I have remaining in public life, and in whatever way I can - to upholding and building upon the reputation of this wonderful university. I ask all of you to pledge to do the same.

The second thing we must do for our state to be a leader in the 21st century is to strengthen the backbone that has made Connecticut a leader in centuries past: our public elementary and secondary schools.

Our world is rapidly changing. Things are happening that we could scarcely imagine just a few years ago. The Internet now brings the world to us on a laptop computer, and in devices that can fit in the palm of our hands. Automobiles are equipped with satellite technology that gives us directions to anywhere we want to drive.

Where did the people who invented and developed these new technologies come from? Mostly from our public schools - where nine of every ten children go every school day. Our public schools, then, have by and large spawned this remarkable period of change and progress.

But the great irony of this moment - which we must urgently address - is that the change and innovation spawned by our public schools have in many respects bypassed the public schools themselves.

Our communities struggle - daily and mightily - to produce students who will thrive in the global economy - and they do so with a system of education funding rooted in the 19th century.

Despite these shortcomings, most of our schoolchildren, thank goodness, receive a superb education. But far too many do not. Far too many attend schools where the roof leaks, where computers are scarce, and where classes are held in broom closets.

In the 19th and even the 20th centuries, we as a state could get away with an education system that allowed the children of one town to get the best education - while children in a neighboring town got something less.

We can't do that anymore. We can't ask individual towns to foot almost the entire bill for their children's schooling. We can't allow the federal government to dedicate just one-half of one percent of its budget to educate our children - and then pat itself on the back for doing enough.

We can't continue on this path - not if we want our state and nation to thrive in the global economy. And not if we believe that every child deserves a chance to obtain the best possible education.

There are some who say that change in our elementary and secondary schools is not possible. They say it can't be done, that we should abandon our public schools and try something else.

In my view, these naysayers don't know their history. And they don't know Connecticut.

As I said earlier, ours has always been a state of firsts. And so today, I ask you, I implore you - the first class of the 21st century - to add another first to the long list of firsts for which we are known:

Make Connecticut the first state in the 21st century that provides to each and every child an equal opportunity to achieve a world-class public education - from kindergarten to this, our flagship public university.

Tutor. Mentor. Coach. Teach. Join the P. T. A. Do something -anything - to support the children who attend our public schools.

The third and final task that I believe you must - and will - accomplish in order for our university, our state, and our nation to succeed is to find success in your own personal lives. That may sound esoteric, but it's really very simple. We can't be successful as a people if we don't consider ourselves to be successful as individuals.

That said, what constitutes personal success defies easy definition. It is elusive.

Yet, the successful people I have known have shared several qualities in common _ qualities that I would like to share with you today.

Many of you may believe that your graduation today is proof of your success. I humbly submit that it is not.

The southern writer Walker Percy once wrote "You can get all A's and flunk life. "Success is, firstly, a journey, not a destination. The diploma you will receive shortly does not make you a success, or even guarantee it in the future.

It is not simply what you do, but how you do it, that will determine whether or not you succeed. The honesty of your effort, the decency with which you treat others, your determination to solve problems

rather than surrender to them, and the other qualities of heart and mind that you bring to bear in your daily activities - these are the important mileposts of life.

So as you go forward from here, I urge you to resist the notion that your job, your salary, your address, or the car you drive will determine whether or not you are a success. They will not.

Success is, secondly, the capacity to dream, and the determination to live in obedience to those dreams. An important but little known American poet, Delmore Schwartz, once wrote, "In dreams begin responsibilities. "

Many of you here today understand very well the meaning of these words. You set a goal for yourself: to earn a college diploma. Then you set about to do what was necessary to achieve it _ despite your

own moments of doubt, and at some sacrifice to you and your loved ones. Imagine where you might be today if you didn't have that dream and if your friends and family didn't support you in achieving it?

Indeed, where would any of us be if we didn't dream - if we allowed ourselves to be defined by limits instead of possibilities?

I have often marveled at how history's deft hand can make the dreamers of today the realists of tomorrow - and expose today's realists as terribly short-sighted.

Consider these statements:

In 1899, the Commissioner of the U. S. Patent Office said: "Everything that can be invented has been invented. "

In 1943, the president of IBM was asked about the prospects for something called the computer. He said: "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers. "

In 1977, the president of a leading computer company said: "There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home. "Needless to say, that company is now out of business.

These statements remind us never to confuse what is, with what can be. The only sure thing is uncertainty. As one of the great philosophers - and baseball players - of our time, Yogi Berra, once said, "It's tough to make predictions. Especially about the future. "

Think about all that has happened just in your brief lifetimes, and you will surely know that you are inheriting a world with virtually limitless possibilities for progress. Things that were unimaginable

just a few years ago have now come to pass. Changes that no one could have dreamed of.

Such changes remind us that America truly is a "land of becoming" - a place where the only constant is change, where the future belongs to those willing to imagine it and work for it.

So I urge you: do not accept the limitations of the here and now. Dare to dream.

A third quality of success is endurance. Someone once said that half of doing well in life is showing up - keeping appointments, honoring commitments, and answering when called.

Pace yourself. Life is not a sprint; it's a marathon. You will need a cool head and a pair of fresh legs for those inevitable moments of trial and tribulation.

The legendary entertainer Sophie Tucker was once asked: "what's the secret of life?" She answered: "Keep breathing. "

Sometimes all you can do is do what you can. Do your job as best you know how _ at home and at work. Eventually, things will break your way, the road will straighten out, and the future will again burn brightly before you.

A fourth quality of success is failure. Yes, failure. Bob Dylan, the finest poet certainly of my generation, once wrote that "There's no success like failure, and . . . failure's no success at all. "

The most successful people are not those who make the fewest mistakes. They are the ones who learn the most from the mistakes they make.

So when failure comes _ and surely it will _ accept it _ not as a comfort, a crutch, or an excuse, but as a moment of instruction. And then go on.

The fifth _ and final _ characteristic of success that I want to discuss with you today is this: success must be shared to be enjoyed.

Gore Vidal, the talented and sometimes sarcastic author, once said: "It is not enough that I succeed. Others must fail. "During the course of your life, you will invariably stumble upon people who believe they can only raise themselves up to the degree that they put others down.

Resist the temptation to retaliate. Revenge may be sweet, but it leaves a bitter after-taste.

Instead, treat people the way you would like to be treated. When all is said and done, the Golden Rule is still a good one to live by. Treat others as you would like to be treated - including, as I mentioned earlier, those who will come after you. They look to you to look out for them.

Encourage others. Applaud their achievements. Overlook their fumbles. Above all, find time for family and friends. In the end, it is the quality of your relationships with them that, more than anything else you do, will give your lives depth and meaning.

In closing, I wish you all a successful journey, full of dreams, responsibilities, endurance, and high purpose. And if all else fails, remember: keep breathing.