

UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA
GRADUATION SPEECH – Fiona Godfrey

Deputy Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Members of the University Council and Board,
Graduates, Parents, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for the invitation to speak here today. It is indeed an honour and one that I was delighted to accept, when approached a number of months ago.

To the graduates, I am aware that I stand between you and the well-deserved celebrations that are to follow this ceremony. Please know that I don't intend to do that for any longer than is necessary – I have never been one to stand between a celebration or three.

Today is a special day and I'm sure many of you are soaking up the sense of achievement that it brings. As I look out at this sea of gowns, it takes me back to my own graduation day, when I received my Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Melbourne. It really was an amazing day and oh dear, I really wish I knew then what I know today!

Carl Sagan, the well-known American astronomer and astrophysicist, once said:
'Science is a way of thinking much more than it is a body of knowledge'.

And I have to say this really sums up my attitude to science. It is a subject of immense interest to me and I was lucky enough to have good school teachers and university lecturers who inspired me to think in a way that was analytical, logical, critical and evidence based. In their teaching of science in such an engaging way, they didn't just spark my interest in the subject of science, they inspired me to want to be a teacher – to be able to make my mark on young, impressionable people, who may one day thank me (figuratively at least) for what I had been able to give them.

So you would be forgiven for assuming that the obvious step after my undergraduate degree was to gain a Diploma of Education and become a teacher. But it wasn't that obvious and this is one of my key messages to you today. While education will open doors for you, it cannot prepare you for what's on the other side.

You have to prepare yourself to be focused, to be resilient and to continue to ask yourself the tough questions.

When I was thinking about becoming a teacher, I had to be robust with that aspiration. I knew I could gain the qualification, but did I have the right demeanour, the right values, the necessary capacity and, most importantly, the resilience and desire for the job?

Once I'd answered yes to all of those questions, further study in order to become a teacher seemed the right path to take.

It won't surprise you to hear that while my teaching course gave me a solid foundation in pedagogy, it didn't have a unit on what to do when employed as the only female science teacher at one of Melbourne's largest boys' schools. Nor did it prepare me for being appointed that school's first female Head of Science.

For example, nowhere in my Dip Ed course did we learn what to wear when wanting to teach a very complex and difficult concept in Year 12 maths. I can now tell you, if you are wanting to teach the Chain Rule or the Product Rule as part of a calculus unit to a group of boys doing Maths Methods, don't wear a low-cut dress or top because their eyes and thoughts will not be where you expect them to be.

Likewise, if you want to climb open stairs in an all boys' school, head to the right-hand side closest to the wall. Why? Because if you don't, you will look innocently down on the floor from which you have just ascended and see a line of overstretched faces hanging from the floor below, hoping, just hoping, to catch a glimpse of something other than just ankles and calves!

There are so many other similar stories to tell, but in essence they all revolve around the same point: don't think you know it all now – you don't and nor do I profess to know it all. We all just keep learning. This is one of the wonderful things in life; to be lifelong learners.

I went on to complete further study during my career and it has assisted in opening doors into school leadership positions. But I can tell you there still isn't a day that goes by when I'm not confronted by a situation I'm fairly certain is not covered in a text book or learning resource anywhere!

So today, be grateful for your education and the doors it will open. You stand as both the beneficiaries and custodians of two of the finest traditions – learning and teaching. And whether you feel you have attained a body of knowledge or developed a way of thinking, or established a network you can leverage in the future, be ready for what comes next.

Make no mistake, there will be days when you will fail and you will be criticised and none of it matters. What matters is how you respond. An incorrect decision made with the correct intent and based upon sound reasoning is better than no decision at all.

I recently watched a six-minute Ted Talk by Angela Lee Duckworth. While teaching mathematics to seventh graders in a New York public school, Ms Duckworth realised that IQ wasn't the only thing separating the successful students from those who struggled. This sparked her interest in a theory of 'grit' as a predictor of success – grit being defined as perseverance and a passion for long-term goals.

Ms Duckworth says: '... I left the classroom, and I went to graduate school to become a psychologist. I started studying kids and adults in all kinds of super challenging settings, and in every study my question was, who is successful here and why? My research team and I went to West Point Military Academy. We tried to predict which cadets would stay in military training and which would drop out. We went to the National Spelling Bee and tried to predict which children would advance farthest in competition. We studied rookie teachers working in really tough neighborhoods, asking which teachers are still going to be here in teaching by the end of the school year, and of those, who will be the most effective at improving learning outcomes for their students? We partnered with private companies, asking, which of these salespeople is going to keep their jobs? And who's going to earn the most money? In all those very different contexts, one characteristic emerged as a significant predictor of success. And it wasn't social intelligence. It wasn't good looks, physical health, and it wasn't IQ. It was grit.'

As I look around this room, I sense a lot of grit amongst you, the graduates. That's not to say you aren't all good looking, healthy, intelligent people, but I suspect it will be your unwavering perseverance and passion for long-term goals that will set you apart from those who don't have these.

So, please enjoy your celebrations today. My very best wishes for the next stage of the journey.

Where others see challenges, may you only see opportunities and good luck to you all.
Thank you.