

Occasional Address to the Graduation Ceremony for the Faculty of Business, Governance & Law and the Faculty of Science & Technology

Tuesday 25 September 2018.

I also would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land where we meet today, the Ngunnawal People, and pay my respects to Elders past and present.

Thank you to the Vice-Chancellor for inviting me to speak to you today. Thank you to the academic and administrative staff at UC who work so hard to get students, you, through your degrees and out the other end well educated, more socially aware hopefully better people. Thank you to all your family and friends who have no doubt supported you in your academic pursuits.

It is a great honour to deliver this address. I have completed three courses at UC. A degree in commerce, a Grad Dip in Info Systems and a Master of Business Informatics. I will come back to my study – but introduce it as context so you understand I am like you and have spent a lot of time at UC. I even have the great honour of being an adjunct professor at the UC. I think my mum is more pleased with that honour than me but it is awesome.

So I thank you graduating students of the UC – and welcome you to being a graduate of this fine institution.

Who am I? I am the Australian Government's Chief Digital Officer. I work at an agency called the Digital Transformation Agency. I am married with two teenage boys. I think I am a pretty regular person. In my life I have been clever, perseverant and lucky. Today I will talk to you about my experiences in study and my career.

First to study.

In my under-graduate degree I wasn't the best student. Much of my first year at UC was marked by failing, at my courses anyway, I had a great time. I think it took me four and a bit years to do what should have been a three year degree. It wasn't that I was incapable, I just wasn't motivated or incentivised to get through it. Partly I might have been doing the wrong degree but mostly I had no direction because I didn't really know what I wanted to do (although despite my degree, I knew I didn't want to be an accountant). Plus the adage that Ps make degrees seemed appealing at the time.

Following my efforts in this degree, I could never have thought I would be a person who would end up in the position I am in here talking to you today.

But we all grow.

A few years later I came back to study and undertook a grad dip in information systems. I was working in ICT and really enjoying it. After having more life and work experience and with a better understanding of myself I found the course easier and did really well. But I will say, I saw my study as a means to an end, helping to advance my career. The paper was more valuable than the learning.

A number of years after that I had the opportunity to do a Master of Business Informatics. I was older and wiser – and not only did I do well in this course – but far more importantly I really enjoyed it. I engaged deeply and found myself with a voracious appetite to learn more on topics directly related to my work. I found learning was a pursuit in itself and I felt I really grew during this course.

So what is the lesson or advice I would impart to you from my study experience? It is absolutely that with age (and experience) comes wisdom – but also having a direction and the right incentive makes study and growing wiser a pleasure. Also I look back at my undergraduate degree and think I really didn't fail maybe I didn't learn as much as I should have. However, that experience made me the person I am today. The determination I showed to get through it is a trait, I value in myself, and so should you all.

On work.

Many of you today will have your next move sorted out. Have a job or one lined up. For those that don't – as I said before I graduated and didn't know what I wanted to do – I definitely hadn't thought about a career.

But despite this – having a degree from UC was a valuable artefact and I got a job in the Department of Industrial Relations. I won't bore you all the details – but I worked on Industrial Relations policy (despite not initial skills in it) and after few years moved to a career in technology and service delivery. I have worked for the past twenty odd years in this field – I have been a Chief Information Officer and delivered major technology programs. I am now the Australian Government Chief Digital Officer. I run major government services like myGov and GovPass which is our soon to be released digital identity platform. I had amazing opportunities to do cool work.

I will declare that despite my reservations about accounting, I did work for a few years as an accountant – doing system and management accounting. It turned out to be pretty good. I even completed my CPA course during this time – and have since been awarded a fellowship with CPA Australia because of my contribution to ICT in government.

I have been very lucky in my career to date and had great opportunities. But how did I get these? Luck is not magic. In your career you make your own luck. You work hard, you are a team player, you are reliable, you are honest and you are resilient. I would say my number one lesson for you is to be resilient. How you react to disappointment or failure is a much better mark of a professional than how you react to success. Being good at what you do is a thing that makes you lucky. Continuing to learn and grow makes you lucky. Helping others succeed is a thing that makes you lucky.

What would be the best advice I can give your career? I will give you three things I think matter.

One. You need balance. Work and family or sport or whatever it is that balances you. Work hard but be balanced. Balance makes you a better employee and leader. Sometimes deadlines are more flexible than people say and going home and thinking about them gets you better results. But note sometimes deadlines are hard and you have to work long hours to meet them.

Two. Be a good team player. Build networks. Be competitive but not at the expense of others. Build bridges don't knock them down. Take a hit for team.

Three. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Especially why? If someone asks you to do something you have every right to ask why. But realise how you ask matters. Ask it respectfully. Having context of the why helps you perform tasks way better in my experience.

The best leaders are those that apply the mirror and window leadership model. What is that? When things are going well good leaders look out the window and credit success to their team. When things aren't going so well they look in the mirror and say what can I do better? Poor leaders do the opposite. Look to their team as responsible for poor outcomes and credit themselves for success.

I am now going to give you some gratuitous life advice. I wonder who am I to give you life advice as each of us tread different and diverse paths? And you can take it or leave it. But I have seen a lot of graduates and post-graduates come into the workforce. Some of the traits I see in people that serve them best are ...

Hope. Be optimistic and positive. I can't tell you how many times I have seen positive approaches succeed over pessimism (although I note at times a healthy dose of scepticism is a good thing too).

Determination. Give things a go and do your best. Despite circumstances sticking to something and getting it done can be the most rewarding things you will do.

Do good. Like google who say “don’t be evil” but with a more positive spin. What it means is if you have a choice to make, make one that is good. What good is you need to determine yourself? It is usually obvious but not always easy.

I hope my experience and insights are of some use to you.

I wish you every success in your life and career. Again I congratulate you on your graduation.