



Berks County Community Foundation 2019 Scholarship Luncheon Remarks

June 3, 2019 | DoubleTree Reading | Keynote Address

Today's luncheon is a special event set aside to celebrate successful students who, during their high school years, have worked hard and balanced (or maybe juggled) academics with athletics, artistic or other activities, service projects, and sometimes — employment.

Congratulations to our student scholarship honorees and, on your behalf, thank you to family members and friends, high school principals, superintendents and generous donors for supporting these students during this important stage of your academic journey.

Students, I promise you will forget much of what transpires during this lunch, including—I regret to say—even my own remarks during the next several minutes. But let me still persist and share a few thoughts that each of you, in your own way, might find helpful to hear and perhaps even remember. Think of them as a “Top Five” list for post-high school success.

Number one . . . be grateful and gracious because no one achieves and enjoys success alone.

Enjoy today. And take satisfaction that you are in this room. But never forget that others helped you get here and achieve whatever you have achieved in your life so far. I promise you that as you get older one of your best gifts is a deepening awareness of your debt to others and a deeply-felt desire to pay back this debt.

Transitions in our lives, like your's now, are peak times for reflection and gratitude. No one knows that better than I, as I enter my final month at Alvernia University after fourteen years of being privileged to serve as president of such a special university.

Each of you has your own distinct high school experience to appreciate, but all of you are here today because others have supported you academically and personally on your life's journey. No doubt you are more grateful today than usual for what your parents and other loved ones have meant to you during your high school years. Don't forget they would like to hear that. So, too, would some other special people. I hope you do take time, in the weeks ahead, to drop a note or stop by the office of those special teachers, coaches, principals, and other staff members who played an essential role in your high school journey.



By this time in your life, you hopefully have been blessed to have one or two people in your life who have been role models for you, even if you weren't conscious of it. At your age, mine were my mother--an award winning elementary school teacher-- and my freshman and sophomore high school English teacher. I hope you are fortunate to have mentors come into your life during the next several years and throughout the years ahead. But remember to benefit from a mentor you must want these people to advise and guide you. At times, you will need to seek mentors out and ask them to share their insights. You will certainly value and appreciate these people, but the best mentors view your own growth and development as their best reward.

As you also hopefully already know, being grateful is its own reward. It brings out our best self. Expressing your gratitude will remind you to be humble. And being humble will become more and more important as you become very successful.

All of you have been around sore losers. There are few things worse than dealing with people who make excuses or blame others when they fail or mess up. But sore winners may be even worse. Heaven save us from those who brag or become self-important or forget those who have helped them along the way or fail to be grateful for their talents or the advantages they may have.

So always be gracious as well as grateful when you succeed.

Number two, also be generous and begin to pay it forward.

Our debt to others for their advice, guidance, and assistance is the best kind of debt. Unlike the loans you may take to help pay for college or to buy a car and eventually a house, you don't have to pay it back, at least not in the usual way. Actually you are expected to pay it forward.

The superintendents and principals and your teachers will certainly appreciate a word of thanks but what they want most is to see each and every one of you flourish in your own special way. So too, the generous donors to the Community Foundation's Scholarship programs who are here with you at lunch today.

My greatest delight as a president for almost twenty years is to hear the stories of our students. But a close second is hearing from donors about what has motivated them to fund scholarships. Their stories are, of course, unique, but they always include a passionate belief in the transforming power of education and great confidence that young women and men of character are our best hope for the future. I hope you have time this afternoon to ask your



scholarship donors why they have chosen to support you and many others. Trust me, it will inspire you, now, but hopefully even more in the future when you can do the same for others.

But the good news is that you can begin to pay it forward right now and in the next few years, long before you are professionally successful. You already know how this is done. Think of those classmates you admire—the ones who are quick to step forward and lend a helping hand without looking for praise. Think of those friends who genuinely care about you and others, who make you feel good to be around them. You can be the kind of person who brings out the best in others, who makes all those around them better.

Some of you may have parents or older relatives who have said at some point to you a version of what my grandmother often said to me as a child: “To whom much is given, much is expected.” So going forward be the kind of person who uses your talents to benefit others.

Number three, talent isn’t everything and is no guarantee of success!

Speaking of talent, whatever your background and interests, each of you are here today in part because of your gifts and your talents. No question. But all of you, I promise, will discover in the years ahead *hidden* talents as well as ability well beyond your imagining and potentially achieve more than today you think is even possible.

Yet I also promise you that this will never happen unless you **will** it to happen. When you look back to you high school years, never forget that your motivation, work ethic, and self-discipline were the keys to how you performed, whether in class, on stage, or on a court or field.

Speaking of athletics, we all know the stories of high school, college, or pro athletes who have superior talent and yet never reach their full potential and, in many cases, aren’t even able to make the team. Not due to a lack of ability but due to a lack of dedication. Don’t be this story!

If you want to be truly successful, you must set excellence as your standard and never be satisfied with just getting by or being just good enough. You will need passionate **inner** motivation and **personal** responsibility for your efforts. And that drive and devotion will help you accomplish things that you could not do by sheer talent alone.

Number four, don’t be afraid to get out of your comfort zone and explore the unfamiliar!

All of us, at all ages, naturally gravitate toward what we are best at, where our talents lie. And all of us, if we are honest, like being in our comfort zone—whether it is tasks we must complete



or people we need to deal with. You already know what it is like to be forced out of your comfort zone, because during high school everyone is required to take some courses that we either disliked or struggled in or both, and we had to interact with some people completely different from us in their background or their attitudes or both.

Hearing that I was a literature and history major in college, you can probably guess the courses I loved to take back in high school, college, and graduate school. And yes, the kinds of courses I avoided as much as possible.

For those of you heading off to college, trust me, I am not suggesting you major in biochemistry if, like me, you have no desire to spend even a minute in a science lab. And don't be foolish and pick your major because someone tells you to study X so you can get a job. Like almost all Americans today, you will change jobs at least several times, perhaps even careers too, and many of you will hold jobs that don't even exist yet. After many years working at colleges, there is nothing sadder than hearing a student admit they have chosen their major because a parent or an advisor has pressured them to do so. It's hard to be successful if you dislike what you are studying or if you are not especially good at it.

But on the other hand, don't simply avoid a class in college or an opportunity in your job just because it is unfamiliar or a bit too challenging. Most of you going to college will be required to take courses having nothing to do with your primary focus as a student. Courses in history and literature and psychology will have more far benefit than you may realize now. You will gain skills that employers say are more important than what your major is. In addition, exploring topics and issues unfamiliar will help you become a life-long learner." One former college president said it so well, "You want the inside of your head to be a reasonably interesting place to spend the rest of your life."

And if you are open to and on the alert for unexpected opportunities and new experiences, you may find some surprising results. Consider some of the circumstances that shaped your high school years — luckily discovering an inspirational teacher, getting assigned to a great study partner, or deciding to try theater or play a sport or run for elected student office.

A story from my son's freshman year in college is a good example of this. Completely clueless about his choice of major, and closed out of the class he wanted in African history, he found himself instead, unhappily, being forced instead to learn the history of Brazil . . . and loving the class and the professor. Four years later, he graduated with a dual major in History and Spanish and a concentration in Latin American Studies, having taken six courses with that same faculty member and also, happily, having circled back to study African History. We know luck works both ways, but there is truth in the cliché that by being alert to possibilities we sometimes make our own luck!



The same goes for experiences like studying in another country or taking an internship with an organization you know little about. Or becoming friends with someone who has a background completely different than you.

You will learn more if you explore more. You will find yourself feeling more strongly about some of your attitudes and opinions. But you will also find yourself thinking differently about things. None of this will happen unless at times you leave your comfort zone.

Number five, don't be afraid to change the world . . . one step at a time.

As you scroll through your twitter timelines and apple news feeds, you get a glimpse of the hatred and suffering in our country and our world. Never have our communities and our country been in greater need of active, compassionate citizens who act with integrity and respect all people of all backgrounds and cultures. We need women and men of strong character and strong values, whether in a corporate board room or an inner-city classroom, a health clinic or a newsroom, in government service or in the legal or criminal justice systems, in a church ministry or a social service agency, and even in a university. At Alvernia, we challenge out students, regardless of their career path, to be "ethical leaders with moral courage."

That's a tall order, especially in the world we live in. But take heart, you **are** ready to make a difference.

Start small and think local. You already have been involved in some kind of community service. So you know already that often we get back more than we contribute when we help others, especially those less fortunate than ourselves. Such experiences will shape who you are, what you think is important, who you want to become, perhaps in some life-changing ways.

And finally, let me add a bonus challenge to you all: Be Persistent and Resilient.

Perhaps the words of the late writer James Baldwin will illustrate this and provide a helpful summary of our reflections together on the road ahead of you. "Beyond talent," says Baldwin, "lie all the usual words: discipline, love, luck — but, most of all, endurance."

Baldwin cites endurance as the strongest predictor of success. And he knows of what he speaks. As a gay, African-American man born of a poor family in the middle of the last century, he was forced to overcome many obstacles en route to his world-famous success as a writer, just like



his far better-known contemporary, the baseball pioneer, Jackie Robinson, another man with extraordinary endurance.

Each of you, in less dramatic ways, can tell your own story of endurance. Think of some major obstacles that have challenged your spirit — illness, the death of a loved one, personal disappointment or even failure along the way. There is, to be sure, heroism in confronting and overcoming such obstacles. But there is a quieter, yet equally essential, heroism in the **daily** endurance required for success and achievement. If you are here today, you understand this.

In closing, let me congratulate as well as thank the generous donors here today for having faith in these students, for investing in the hopes and dreams. By your encouragement, you lift us. And by your generosity, you inspire us.

And to our students, whom we celebrate today, may you be grateful, gracious, and generous; may you be highly motivated and dedicated in all that you choose to do, may you explore the unfamiliar and stretch and challenge yourself, may you help others. And at all times and in all things important to you, may you persist and endure.

I did predict when I began that you will forget much, but I ask you to take with you the same challenge I give Alvernia's graduating seniors each May: Wherever your journey leads you next, make a commitment to "Do Well and To Do Good."

Congratulations and Godspeed.

Thomas F. Flynn
President
Alvernia University