

The Key to Success

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Commencement Address

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I would like to begin by congratulating the students graduating this evening. You have worked hard and come far.

I also would like to congratulate the parents, grandparents, siblings, other family members, and friends of the graduates. You must be very happy – and probably a bit relieved as well.

Finally, I'd like to express appreciation to the MCC trustees, administration, faculty, and staff. You all deserve to be proud.

I am very pleased and privileged to have this opportunity to offer some remarks to this year's graduating class. MCC and RIT are, and have been for a long time, close partners in higher education. Together we are a major presence in the Greater Rochester region. For example, together we enroll almost 40% of the students attending the 17 four-year colleges and the three community colleges in the Greater Rochester region.

Our bilateral relationship is also quantitatively significant. For example, 65% of MCC graduates are in transfer programs. Last year, 130 of these students transferred to RIT with junior class status. Over the course of a typical academic year, between 350 and 400 students with an MCC background transfer to RIT with 1st, 2nd, or 3rd year status. Since RIT admits 1,100 transfer students each year, MCC partners with RIT for between 32% and 36% of RIT's transfer class. This is significant when you consider that every year either RIT or New York University is the leading receiver of transfer students among the colleges and universities in New York State. The relationship is pervasive in that MCC students enroll in every college at RIT, including the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. Each year RIT awards more than \$3 million in scholarships and financial aid to MCC students over and above what they might receive from TAP, Pell, work study, and other outside sources of funding.

MCC and RIT faculty also work together in seeking outside funding to benefit MCC students on their way to RIT. For example, the National Science Foundation is funding MCC-RIT partnership programs in Optics and Imaging Science Education and in Engineering. We are jointly submitting proposals to the National Science Foundation to support undergraduate research in Chemistry and to support programs for Minority and Women Students in Science and Engineering. The National Institute of Health is funding a program to increase the number of Undergraduate Students in Biomedical fields. MCC and RIT are also partnering with community groups to develop programs in Homeland Security and in Business and Job Creation.

As you can see, MCC and RIT support one another in many ways. As each institution pursues its unique mission, collaboration in overlap areas results in each institution being much stronger academically and more responsive to the needs of its student body than it would otherwise be.

With the previous discussion as background, my primary goal this evening is to leave you with a message that you will remember, and one which will help you find your way

through life's challenging journey. This goal is particularly relevant since, as noted above, so many of you will find RIT to be a pivotal way station on that journey.

Accordingly, I want to talk with you about career success. More importantly, I want to talk to you about success over a full life. Specifically, I want to talk about the "Key to Success".

But what can I say?

You are here today because you are smart. You are here today because you work hard. You are here today because you are focused and motivated. And you are here today because you receive support and counsel from family, friends, and your professors.

What can I say?

I'd like to approach the challenge by asking you to think about some of the key items that have appeared in the newspapers and on television over the past year. You will recall a constant parade of stories describing violations of individual and institutional integrity. The violations are found in business organizations, not-for-profit organizations, philanthropic organizations, and churches. Examples are found among doctors, lawyers, politicians, business people, academicians, and priests. They include men, women – and even children – of all ages.

If you think back about the backgrounds of each of the individuals involved, you will recall that, virtually in every instance, each of the individuals was smart, talented, experienced, and often well-credentialed professionally. You will recall that each of the individuals worked tirelessly to achieve his or her level of leadership and influence. You will recall that, along the way, each individual had tremendous support from family, friends, and supporting organizations.

Yet, when these individuals came to their ethical "fork in the road", they took the wrong branch. I am sure there are many more individuals who took the proper branch – unfortunately, we do not hear very much about these individuals. The individuals who took the wrong branch are newsworthy and this is what the media tend to highlight. The damage that these individuals inflict upon the organizations they represent, and upon the many individuals who are constituents of the organization, is enormous.

You probably already have come to this fork in the road. You probably have come to it several times. I assume – I certainly hope – that you have always taken the proper branch. During the course of your lives and careers, you will come to this fork in the road numerous times. I believe that most of you will take the proper branch each time. If you hesitate for a moment somewhere along the road, please consider the fact that people before you who were just as smart, hardworking, and supported are now suffering embarrassment, loss of job and status, fines, and even imprisonment.

I want you to avoid these consequences. Even more importantly, you will want to do the “right thing” because that is what good people – that is, ethical people with integrity – do. There are many more people who do good things than people who do bad things. But, again, the harm done by the few has significant impact on the many.

I know that you will be ethical over your lifetime. That is because I know that you are going forward as leaders in your career and lifelong activities. What are the attributes of leaders?

Successful leaders work hard – just like you. They are smart, talented, and knowledgeable – just like you. They know how to work in teams and groups – this means they are good followers as well as leaders – just like you. They possess strong and effective communication skills – I hope just like you. They are loyal to their institution’s mission and to their colleagues – just like you.

However, there is one other attribute that a successful leader must possess. It is the most important of all the attributes. It is ethical behavior.

What is ethical behavior? Most of you will say “that’s easy” – it means you speak with candor, that you are honest and fair in your actions. You do not lie, steal, or cheat.

You are correct. However, ethical behavior is much more. It also means you treat people the way you would like to be treated – with respect, civility, and compassion.

Ethical behavior requires that you learn how to listen – which is a form of respect. That you listen – so you can find workable compromises. That you listen – so you can gain knowledge.

Ethical behavior requires that you do not quickly rise to anger – which is a form of civility. That while you “mean what you say and say what you mean”, you are also sensitive to the beliefs and viewpoints of others. It means that you follow through on your commitments.

An ethical person’s reward in life is not primarily dollars, power, or public recognition. Rather, it is the satisfaction of knowing you helped others along the way.

While behaving in an ethical way may not always be easy, knowing what is ethical may even be harder. And you have to know before you can act.

For example, what are the ethics of stem cell research? Of abortion? Of the Freedom to Information Act? Of the Patriot Act? Of the war in Iraq? Of nuclear proliferation? Of utilization of the environment? Of children in poverty? Of capital punishment? Of gun control? Of discrimination and harassment? Of outsourcing? Of news media reporting? Of advertising aimed at children? Of corporate self-dealing/stock manipulation/executive compensation? Of political lobbying? Of care for the elderly? Of K-12 education? Of labor

practices overseas? Of starvation and genocide in Africa? Of “don’t ask don’t tell” in the military? And the list goes on endlessly.

Reasonable people can disagree on each of these issues. One person’s ethics may be in total opposition to another person’s ethics. Can they disagree and take different actions, and still – each of them – be ethical? This is a tough, philosophical as well as practical, question. I think the answer is “yes”, as long as they exhibit the attributes of ethical behavior I discussed earlier.

What does all this mean to you graduates on this special day? It means that the career and life that are in your future are challenging, complex, and exciting. It means you will come to many forks in the road ahead. These forks will present very difficult choices. The wise philosopher Yogi Berra said that “when you come to a fork in the road, take it.” If only it were so simple.

As difficult as these decisions will be for you, I have every confidence that you will take the correct branch, that is, the branch that coincides with your sense of ethics. Your family, MCC faculty and staff, and your own introspection have prepared you well for the bumpy and forked – but exciting and rewarding – road ahead.

For many of you graduating tonight, that road will begin right here in the Greater Rochester area. Eighty-nine percent of you graduates who came to MCC to prepare for a career will go to work in this area. At RIT, 31% of the graduates will begin their careers in the Greater Rochester area.

I wish more of the RIT graduates would follow the MCC model in this regard. I have lived my life in Boston, Cincinnati, Honolulu, and Rochester. The Rochester area is my first choice as a place to live, work, and raise a family.

Rochester is an area rich in U. S. history and in American tradition and culture. For more than a century, it has been a model of how the free enterprise system should work. It is a world center for intellectual property and technology development, as well as for the arts. It is framed by the Adirondacks, the Finger Lakes, and the Great lakes. It has four wonderful seasons. It is affordable and a great place to raise a family. It is a hub for higher education.

Those of you (the 89%) who will be living and working in the Rochester area could not have selected a more choice location. For those of you transferring to a four-year college or university – and 71% of you will be attending a college or university in this area – remember the advantages of living in the Rochester area when you graduate again in a few years. For those of you leaving the area, come back soon.

Graduates, our future is in your hands. We want as many of you as possible to stay in this area to apply what you have learned at MCC, in this way improving the quality of life of everyone who lives here.

You are great. We take great pride in your accomplishments to date. We are counting on you in the future.

Congratulations and good luck.