

**Commencement Address**  
**Saturday May 11, 2024**  
**College of Arts and Sciences (Humanities and Sciences)**  
**College of Nursing**  
**Joseph Yancey, MPPA**  
**University of Missouri – St. Louis**

Good morning and thank you for that kind introduction. University administration, faculty, staff, family, friends, and most important, graduates. It is with deep humility and sincere gratitude that I have the privilege of sharing this joyous and celebratory morning with all of you. **Congratulations graduates, you have done it and have reached this important milestone in your lives. BRAVO!**

Growing up with family and church relationships that were involved with the civil rights movement in Chicago, I was introduced early to this concept of social justice which became a lifelong passion. As a 14-year-old I traveled with my mom and a charter plane full of other Chicago folks to Martin Luther King's funeral in Atlanta in April 1968 and that experience left an indelible impression on me.

I completed my undergraduate degree 50 years ago in 1974 with a keen sense of relief and accomplishment, but no real sense of the path forward or how I would incorporate my passion in whatever that future might be. Since my first job my entire career has been working with people who have mental health or substance use disorders across the lifespan. Because of the inequity between physical and behavioral related health in resources, insurance parity, research and access I saw this work as congruent with my passion. For the next twenty years, I held program supervisor roles with various organizations but recognized that my ability to influence policy was limited without an advanced degree. I was attracted to the MPPA program here at UMSL mainly because of the interdisciplinary curriculum, enrolled and received my degree in 1996. My experience with that program has served to be invaluable in my career as a leader, executive, mentor, and consultant.

One of the first classes of the first semester was an economics course. At the beginning of the first class the professor asked us to take out a piece of paper and write when we had last taken a math course. There were about 18 students in the class and most took their paper up and put it on his desk. I took my paper which had a big **20+ years** written on it directly to him and made sure he saw it. The class was a challenge, but I pulled together a few classmates and we worked together to help each other not just pass but truly learn the

material. I share this because achieving future goals will require hard work and perseverance, but also the humility to understand. Like your achievement we are celebrating today “we can’t do it on our own”.

Future success in your field or whatever you decide to do will require hard work and perseverance. **The fuels for hard work and perseverance are passion and joy and we need both.** Passion tends to be constant though it requires maintenance. However, we often must be more intentional in the pursuit of joy in both our personal and professional space. Self-care and attention to work/life balance are important. Pay attention to your fuel gauge.

We will make mistakes and things won’t always go as we thought or planned. While we gather here today to celebrate a significant milestone for each of you this is not a destination but rather a weigh station. Life is a journey of discovery and personal development. I think that one of the coolest things about being alive is that every day, even at my age, I have the potential for learning something that I didn’t know before both personally and professionally. **Be grateful for and commit to a concept I call continuous personal and professional improvement.** Every mistake or setback is really a gift that provides us with opportunities for personal and professional improvement. I like the wisdom of the mirror and the telescope. Don’t spend too much time in the mirror, only enough to internalize the growth and learning. Then move on to the telescope so you can clearly plot your next steps **moving forward.**

As mentioned before, we can’t achieve or be successful alone. Therefore, developing authentic relationships with others is important to both individual and collective success. Honesty, humility, genuineness, collaborative, mission- focused and value- guided are personal attributes that contribute to positive relationships and are recognized by both colleagues and leadership. One of my favorite quotes from Maya Angelou is **“People will not remember what you said, most won’t remember what you did, but all will remember how you made them feel.”** At the end of the day these personal attributes and a commitment to continuous personal and professional improvement reflect integrity and most folks value, gravitate toward and feel good when interacting with those they deem as having integrity.

Part of your journey required navigating through a disruption that we haven’t seen in over 100 years and its aftermath. **You have all demonstrated the ability to adapt, you have been tested, you are resilient, you are Remarkable,** and we all recognize and are proud of your accomplishment.

Now go forth with the knowledge and skills you have attained and those that you will acquire and develop over time, each of you in your own discipline, in your own field, in your own way, to make your contribution to improving the human and environmental condition and toward a more just, peaceful, and equitable existence for us all.

We need you!

Again, congratulations to all. Thank you.