

Warner Baxter
UMSL Commencement Address
May 10, 2024

Thank you, Chancellor Sobolik, for your very kind remarks. Of course, I want to thank you, President Choi, and the University of Missouri Board of Curators for conferring to me this honorary doctorate degree. I am very grateful, honored and humbled.

And I certainly want to express my deep appreciation to the entire UMSL community, past and present, for the outstanding educational foundation you provided me, as well as for all the life lessons you taught me.

Turning now to all of you...my fellow graduates. Wow...today is a big day for all of us! I want to offer my heartfelt congratulations to all of you, your families and loved ones who are here with you this evening on what is truly one of the greatest accomplishments that you will ever achieve.

It is my great honor to celebrate this special evening with you also. Needless to say, 40 years ago, I could have never dreamed that I would be up here today, receiving this very special degree, and on the same day, giving the commencement address to all of you.

And so, tonight I want to share with you a handful of lessons and insights I learned – sometimes the hard way – over the years that are not only “career lessons,” but also “life lessons” that have made my journey over the last 40 years enlightening, fruitful and joyful . I hope a few of these perspectives strike a chord with you. They are lessons on Preparation, Core Values, Humility, Service and Appreciation.

I will begin with Preparation. I have to tell you that one of the biggest career and life lessons that has made a huge difference in my life is recognizing the importance of preparation, or perhaps better said “having a preparation mindset.”

Now I know this doesn't sound particularly enlightening, especially after all the years you have spent preparing for exams, interviews, meetings, etc. It is important to understand that a “preparation mindset” is much bigger than preparing for that one exam, interview or meeting. Here is why I think this is so important...I am a big believer in the concept that Success comes about when Preparation meets Opportunity.

You see, I realized throughout the various stages of my career, starting here at UMSL, that I was rarely the smartest person in class or in the meeting room. While it was great to be surrounded by brilliant people, it bothered me that I couldn't effectively engage in conversations, offer my own insights, and propose solutions to problems.

I realized I needed to up my game...that I needed to take the initiative to become better prepared and informed about various subjects or topics. I figured that if I couldn't be the brightest in the room, I was going to do my best to be the most prepared.

What I have found is that this "preparation mindset" not only made me more prepared to address the issue or topic at hand, but it also drove me to be more curious about many other things, it drove me to be a continuous learner, and perhaps most important, it drove me to seek out various perspectives from others and become an active listener.

At the end of the day, all these factors have helped me to both understand various issues and topics better, as well as expand my thinking, connect dots, identify risks, make good decisions, and perhaps most important – capitalize on opportunities. The bottom line is that don't underestimate the value of a "preparation mindset." It has contributed mightily to the success I have had over the years.

Another life lesson I have learned along the way is the importance of being grounded in fundamental core values.

One thing that I am sure you have realized is that your post-graduate journey will have bumps along the road....I knew that as well. What I didn't fully appreciate is the fact that during much of your career and life, you will encounter a host of issues, dilemmas, and conflicts that are not straightforward. Frankly, we live in a world where you must often effectively operate, professionally and personally, in areas that are very grey. This is why you need a strong foundation of core values to keep your moral compass and your priorities pointed in the right direction.

To me, those core values include – first and foremost – faith and family. These are critical anchors. And they also include honesty, integrity, respect, empathy and stewardship.

This is not something you may have at the top of your mind, but I can tell you keeping these core values at the top of my mind has centered me and kept me focused on what is important during a host of challenging times.

Speaking of staying centered and grounded, another important life lesson I learned is the need to be humble. Now, you can find all kinds of quotes and perspectives about what it means to be humble....you can look them all up.

To me, being humble doesn't require you to deny your strengths or things you have accomplished. Instead, it is acknowledging that your strengths and accomplishments were likely due to the fact that you had others help you along the way. And it is also recognizing that you don't always have all the answers and that you have areas for improvement.

Now I recognize in the competitive business world, or life in general, this can be hard. Having said that, and speaking from experience, being humble will gain you two important qualities in business and life...respect and trust.

And let me be clear, it is far better for you to “be humble” than to “be humbled” by someone else.

Speaking of things that will gain you respect and trust, and frankly, bring you a great deal of joy in your next chapter of life is serving others in some fashion.

As I look back over my 40 years since I graduated from UMSL, many of my greatest joys and sense of accomplishments have been when I am giving back my time, my talent, and/or my treasures to others. I am sure you have heard this before, and I am sure some of you have already experienced this: “giving back” is far better than “receiving.” The smile you put on peoples’ faces, the stress points that you relieve, the tears that you wipe away are priceless. Now, that should be good enough – but there is more. Serving has even greater benefits...benefits that I didn’t realize sitting in your chairs many years ago.

You see, when you “authentically” serve others, you are showing that you put others’ needs ahead of yours. That exhibits an important quality of a person – that you care about others.

And there is another benefit of serving. While serving, I have been blessed to work with so many incredibly talented people and leaders in this community, in our country and around the world. Not only have I had the benefit of working side by side with them on important causes, but I have also had the opportunity to pick their brain about so many other things, including leadership. And along the way, I have made life-long friends.

So, as I look out to all of you sitting in front of me, I know that there is so much talent, so much ability to serve and make a difference, whether it be at your future workplace, whether it be in your community, or frankly, right here at UMSL like I have. Find your passion when it comes to serving, and as the Nike commercial says...”Just do it.”

And finally, one other life lesson I have learned is the importance of showing appreciation...authentic appreciation...to others. The rationale behind this is so simple...it is because an individual or group of individuals deserve it.

To be clear, people don’t have to do extraordinary things to win your appreciation...small things truly add up. And you don’t have to be over the top in doing so...sometimes a simple thank you or note is good enough. The most important thing is that you are intentional

and authentic about it. I can't tell you how much you can lift someone's spirits and confidence by simply saying, "I noticed what you did, and I really appreciate it."

Do you recall how I started my speech tonight? I started it with appreciation for receiving my honorary doctorate degree and for the invitation to speak here. I meant it.

And so I am going to close the way I started...with appreciation. I am going to express my deep appreciation to my wife, my four wonderful children, their spouses and fiancés. Thank you for your incredible love, the sacrifices you made and unconditional support over the years. There is no way I would be standing up here tonight if you weren't there to lift me up during the challenging times, to give me encouraging words, and to give me grace when I dropped the ball on something at home. Thank you.

And now, I turn to all of you and ask you to look around this auditorium tonight. Like me, you are surrounded by your family and loved ones who have stood by your side all these years, and who are going to be there to support you for many more years in the future. Now I am going to give you the same opportunity to express your appreciation to all of your family and loved ones that are here tonight who have supported you all these years. Please join me by standing and thanking all of our incredible supporters.

Now that is the way to show appreciation!

It is time for me to get out of the way and get to the real business at hand...the conferring of your degrees.

Thank you again for allowing me to share some of my insights and celebrate this special evening with you.

Congratulations again to all of you, and I wish you the very best in the future. Thank you.