

Kellogg Graduation 2018 - Faculty Remarks

by Professor Brian T. Melzer

Congratulations Class of 2018! And thank you so much for honoring me as Professor of the Year. It's a privilege to be part of this ceremony and to celebrate this special occasion with all of you.

Before beginning my formal remarks, I should first mention that I had the Class of 2018's resident stand-up comedian, Rob F. Gleeson, write the first draft of my speech. Rob, I appreciate your help but I couldn't get your version through standards and practices. So I'm going with Plan B, which strikes a slightly more serious and family friendly tone.

So what's Plan B? I figured I would share a final bit of wisdom and perhaps provide some inspiration as you head out into your careers.

You've spent the last few years getting smarter, learning how to work in teams, and building community with your classmates. These experiences will serve you well. What I want to highlight today, though, is something else you'll need to thrive in your careers: perseverance. For many of you, the skill that will define your future success is your grit – your grit to keep working hard through difficult times, to bounce back from adversity, and to pursue your goals relentlessly.

Let me develop this point as I would do in the classroom, by giving a simple and memorable example to make the idea stick in your minds. My students know that I am a sports nut, with a particular devotion, perhaps even an unhealthy one, to Northwestern basketball. So they'll find it fitting that I have worked a Wildcat hoops reference into this speech.

The Northwestern Basketball motto is "Pound the Rock." This motto refers to a parable about a stonecutter who, in trying to fashion that perfectly shaped stone, pounds away at a rock with his hammer and chisel. The author, Jacob Riis, writes:

"When nothing seems to help, I go look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it, but all that had gone before."

Through the years, I've adopted this as my own mantra as I've come to see the value in perseverance.

I came to Kellogg a decade ago as most newly minted PhDs do – full of ideas and enthusiasm, but with little wisdom about how to share those insights in the classroom. I struggled, and not just in the first few years. But I was passionate about the course material and I cared deeply about serving the students. So I kept at it. I listened to my students, I studied my successful colleagues, and I kept pounding the rock.

Along the way, I found great motivation in the idea that those initial blows were bringing me closer to my goal even when I couldn't see the progress. I also found strength in the idea that the first hundred blows are just as important as the last. By taking joy in all of my work along the way as opposed to the external recognition at the end, I developed the resolve I needed to shrug off disappointment and go back to pounding the rock. And let me tell you, from where I stand today, it's pretty sweet to have broken the rock and to know that you've earned it.

So that's my message – keep pounding the rock and use that idea to find motivation and joy in your work. I hope you'll get as much from this mantra as I did. And I hope my own example – the path I took to the podium today – can serve as inspiration to some of you.

So that brings me to the end of my remarks. I received some more advice on a proper ending for this speech from a younger colleague in the Finance Department. His email read:

“OMG!!! You really have the opportunity to do an epic mic drop here.”

[Checks mic to see if it can be removed...]

I completely agree with this sentiment, and I would love to drop this mic, but it seems pretty well bolted down. So let me conclude instead by expressing gratitude and wishing

you all well. Class of 2018, thank you for the energy, engagement, and curiosity you brought to the classroom. And thank you for this incredible gift of finishing my Kellogg journey on top as Professor of the Year. I love you guys, I'm so proud of you, and I wish you all the best in the future.