Catholic Campus Community Speech
November 17, 2013

Introduction

I am going to start this evening by stating a fact you already know: College is difficult. It has been a long time since I was a student, but I haven't forgotten how challenging it can be. Studying is arduous. Research is complicated. Sleep is fleeting.

What I want to tell you today is that your effort is worth it . . . that you are on the road to becoming university men and women—and that means something.

My first point is simply an assertion that when you decided to go to university at UT Tyler you signed up (in my book) for the entire deal—to become a university man or woman. People are helping you get this degree—your families, taxpayers, donors, and the Church with this wonderful Catholic Campus Ministry right here—and you have a responsibility to understand and join this great tradition of being a full university graduate.

Becoming a university graduate is a major accomplishment:

- Only 18 percent of Texas adults have a university degree.
- 16 percent have a bachelor’s degree in Tyler (source: Tyler Economic Development).
- 8 percent in the Tyler area have graduate degrees.

So what does it mean to be a university man or woman?

The obvious first attribute is that you are a knowledgeable person. You have professional knowledge that will enable you to build successful careers. You are here to learn to be accountants, educators, artists, musicians, engineers and nurses and to do great work. Notice, I didn't say to get a “job.” A university man or woman doesn't want a job. They want to work. In addition, you have what is known as liberal knowledge—or broader cultural knowledge—that allows you to work with others and connect ideas in order to adapt and solve problems.

At UT Tyler, we pride ourselves in giving you the best knowledge base possible, of both types, and in holding you to higher-than-average standards. Doing so, we help enable you to have successful careers—to be productive and successful for yourself, your families and for society.
However, a work credential—a certain degree that says you can be engineer, accountant, nurse, teacher—is NOT the only thing employers want, maybe not even the most important thing.

Numerous employer surveys show that the primary reason some recent graduates cannot find employment or advance in their careers is not because they have not learned their subject matter, but because they did not learn the other skills that have nothing to do with a degree plan. Those other things are every bit as important as what is in the classroom, and some would say more so.

Employers and UT Tyler—and your family and the rest of society—want you to be more; to be the total package; to become a true university man, a university woman.

1. A university man or woman can think analytically. They think things through logically, critically and robustly, bringing all their knowledge to bear in a focused and thoughtful (or serious) way with an eye to getting to the essence of the matter and find solutions.

2. A university man or woman can communicate effectively. High levels of both written and oral communication are the most critically needed skills—and the most lacking in applicants—for most positions. You can learn to write. Doing so helps train your brain and gives you orderly thinking skills.

3. A university man or woman exercises sound judgment. Judgment is the ability to weigh facts and arguments and to evaluate alternative outcomes and their consequences as part of a good decision-making process. Haven’t you known people or certain friends who could take information and ideas—even regarding where a group should go to eat—and make better-than-average judgment calls?

4. A university man or woman pursues excellence. He or she subscribes to the adage: “If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing well!” A university man or woman gives anything his best effort; gives a buyer or neighbor more than they bargained for.

5. A university man or woman loves to persevere. They are willing to give anything they decide to do “the old college try.” Even more to the point, they do not quit.
   - “No,” “never” and “that can’t be done” are not in their vocabulary.
   - Employers do not want to hear all the reasons an employee cannot do something (“should not” might be another thing).
• When challenges come, a university man or woman will find a way to say, “Yes, that can be done, if you do it this way.”

6. A university man or woman is honorable, which includes so many attributes. University men and women:
   • Cares about others.
   • Are civil (at least) or cordial (preferred) with each other in all matters of discussion, debate and interaction.
   • Honor all bargains, even those sealed with a handshake.
   • Tell the truth and never cheat—and help others do the same.

7. A university man or woman has courage.
   • Takes prudent, well-calculated risks in order to achieve the unachievable.
   • Stands up for what they believe is right and fair.
   • Stands up for those who have a smaller voice, or no voice at all.
   • Tells others (with appropriate tact) when they believe those others are wrong.

8. A university man or women is a leader.
   • They are informed—they read and listen.
   • They are willing and able to make decisions that consider available information and the views of others.
   • They can prioritize—know the difference between what is important and what can be left for another time.
   • They are engines of action that can persuade others to follow and get a task done.
   • When necessary, they are agents of change.

9. They have soft skills. These are the needed communication and interpersonal skills to perform in a professional environment. A university man or woman knows how to:
   • Carry on a decent conversation (in the workplace and with clients) and have dinner easily with co-workers and the supervisor.
   • Be on time; be prepared; work hard; and do the very best he or she can.
   • Ability to write cogently and succinctly.
   • Ability to really listen.
   • Able to be a team player (can get along in, and make productive use of, small groups).
   • Know how to shake hands and look someone in the eye—at the same time.
The Importance of Soft Skills

Those last characteristics have nothing to do with your GPA, and yet if you dedicate yourself to acquiring them or learning them, you will find yourself pursuing an excellence of character that will be vital to your success.

How important is it to develop these skills?

• The need for the skills I just mentioned – which are called “soft skills” in the workplace world – is vital enough that the lack of them in recent college graduates has garnered articles in publications such as Time, Businessweek and Forbes.
• The U.S. Department of Labor has a web page dedicated to aiding workers in soft skill development. It’s aimed at young people transitioning into the workforce.
• In fact, in an article just last week on Time’s business website, 60 percent of employers said they could not find applicants with the necessary communication and interpersonal skills.
• A second survey, by staffing company Adecco, was quoted by Time as stating “44 percent of (employers) cited soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, creativity and collaboration, as the area with the biggest gap.”

What I am telling you today is that your ability to communicate with others and to perform tasks in a group environment – skills you often practice in the classroom – will have a real-world impact on your professional life.

Gaining the Skills to Pursue Excellence

So how do you gain these skills?

Believe it or not, here at UT Tyler we work to equip you with both the knowledge you need for your job field and the skills you need to be able to succeed in the workplace. All you need to do is remember that some of the tasks you may not enjoy often teach you the most important skills.

• **Write, write, write, write.** The ability to communicate on paper is essential in every job.
  o Yes, I did say every job. If you are an engineer, you will still need to write
reports. If you are a nurse, you will need to be able to write updates on a patient’s condition. If you are in education, you will write regular emails to parents, principals, district administrators and other audiences.

- No matter what your job description is, writing will be a part of it. So learn to write concisely, descriptively, and with as few errors as possible.
- Don’t just rely on autocorrect or spell check. We’ve all seen what funny errors can result from letting a computer do your writing for you. There are whole websites dedicated to those errors. Don’t end up on one of them.

**Learn to shake a hand and discuss your ideas.** If you are that person in class who is always in the middle of a discussion with the professor, congratulations. You will probably be supervising many of your quieter classmates someday.

- Learning when to talk and when to listen will hone your communication skills and make you a vital employee.
- In fact, in a November article in Forbes, author Dan Schawbel said when his company interviewed employers about traits they look for when hiring students, 98 percent said “communication skills.”
- So learn to speak to others, build strong presentations, and share your thoughts orally and in the written word.
- Warren Buffet once said to a group of business students that communication skills increase an employee’s value by 50 percent.

**Develop a strong work ethic.** Your word is your bond. If an employer can trust you to be there every day at 8 a.m. and work diligently until 5, you’ve got a much better chance of having a future with that company. And even if you don’t want to stay in that job, still keep that ethic. You never know when you will need the bridge you didn’t burn.

**Develop the four cardinal virtues.** The idea of four main virtues is not new. The Greek philosophers—Socrates to Plato to Aristotle—as well as many philosophers since have spoken about the importance of developing the following traits:

- **Temperance** – which means self-control, moderation, the ability to abstain from things that distract you from your main goal
- **Courage** – Endurance, the ability to confront fear, uncertainly and intimidation. We are all afraid at times. Just don’t let it get the best of you and you will do fine.
- **Practical wisdom**, also called prudence – The ability to assess the consequences of your actions and act appropriately.
Justice – the idea that we all get exactly what we earn, and that we should all fight to make sure we all earn our keep.

Closing

Now you know why I said college isn’t easy. Not everyone has the lively mind, bravery, and willingness to work hard enough to be a university man or woman.

But you will make it. You have already begun to develop these traits. These years are the ideal time to continue that development. These years as a college student are when you learn to question everything and find your own answers regarding life. The years when you learn to strive for excellence and celebrate a job well done. The years when you learn to get along with those who sometimes think and believe differently.

That’s what it means to pursue excellence as a university man or woman. It means never quit on a project, learn all you can, and always grow in wisdom, knowledge and skills. Do that and you’ll not only have a successful career, but you’ll make a difference in the world.