Faculty of Applied Health Sciences

Erin Sharpe's Convocation Address

Faculty of Applied Health Sciences
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Chancellor Goodman, President Lightstone, members of the Administration, fellow members of the faculty, proud parents, and, above all, graduates:

Let me begin this address by first, congratulating you on your achievements, graduates. Your degrees are hard-earned and well-deserved. You endured four years of early morning and late night classes, large lecture halls and small seminar rooms, essays, tests, presentations, labs, field experiences, and exams to get you here today. You drank, I am sure, a lot of coffee.You rode packed buses, parked in a different city, or walked up a mountain on a regular basis. You balanced school with jobs, other commitments and responsibilities, and hopefully some fun. And, a lot has happened at Brock since you arrived. Campus looks different. How many new buildings have opened since you arrived? You were the class that ushered in not only the laptops but wifi and smartphones into the learning environment. You endured threats of strikes, actual strikes, tuition hikes, tuition drops. The years that you have been at Brock have not passed quietly.

I am honoured to be delivering the convocation address. It is a great responsibility, or so I thought until I conducted my own informal poll of what my friends remember from their own convocation addresses. I have found a fair bit relief in the fact that quite a significant number can't rememember who gave their address and most can't remember a single word that was said. I am an exception; I remember vividly who spoke at my commencement, because it was no less than the American rock icon John Cougar Mellencamp. I was graduating from Indiana University, his home state, so the choice was appropriate. For me, it was a thrill because I was a huge fan, and still am. The song Jack and Diane brings back a flood of childhood memories of Saturday afternoon roller skating and warm spring nights in the park. I don't remember much of what John Mellencamp had to say, but I remember that it was a hot day and he wasn't 15 seconds into his address when he got too hot for his robe, so he unbuttoned it, threw it off with a flourish, and proceeded to carry on his speech in a white t-shirt and black jeans. Those actions spoke louder than words, and the lesson I took was that if you are a rock icon like Mellencamp, robes aren't really your thing and you need to be true to yourself no matter what the circumstances around you might require.

Now, onto the meat of the message. As I prepared for today, I thought about what I really wanted to leave you with as parting thoughts as you began your life after Brock. I don't have a lot of advice to

give. I really have only one thing that I am compelled to say to you. It may not be what you are expecting but here is my message: Don't ever change.

That's right Brock students, that's what I'm telling you. Don't ever change.

Once in a while I get asked about Brock students from people who are not familiar with you, maybe people who teach in a different university, or people who are curious about what university students are like these days. And so it is in these moments when I get to distill your essence and share it with the world beyond the walls of Brock. And here is what I tell them about you. I tell them, you are curious. You don't take yourselves too seriously and you don't have a high tolerance for people who do. You are, in other words, a little bit irreverent. You would be great to invite to a party. You care about each other. You care about the world. You push yourself. You put yourself out there. And, you go on to do big things. So in terms of all of those qualities, don't ever change. The world needs more of them in it.

You are students now. At least you are for the next ten to thirty minutes or so, depending on if you gets to go first, or you have to wait all the way until the bitter end and people are itching to take pictures with their loved ones. But once you have that diploma on your hand, things change for you. You officially stop being 'a student' and you have entered what some people have frightfully termed 'the real world.' Now, this dichotomy – the dichotomy between the 'school world' and the 'real world' is one I have some trouble with. I think it is false, absolutely false, and even moreso, we should be trying at every turn to dismantle it. It is bad for everyone. It keeps those of us who are in the 'school' world free of any kind of responsibility to engaging you with the real world so as to inform your studies. We are also missing out on an opportunity for you to share your talents with that world so it can become a better place. But addressing that side of the equation is my mission, not yours. On the flip side, I also think the dichotomy is problematic for you. Now that you are in the supposed real world, the belief is: the learning is done, the process is complete, you are educated. Is that how you feel? I never felt that way, which might explain why I kept going back to school, I kept hoping that with a little bit more I would be able to be that expert I was expected to be without feeling like a fraud. However, even after I went as far as they would let me go, at the end I still felt, as I said to my advisor one day, like a worm trying to eat a watermelon. So, I did what any person with little job security would do, I tried to fake it for a while, a good two, three, or five years. It was brutal. And it led to some deeper questioning about the whole notion of being an expert. In my mind, it seems to assume that you have reached some static, end point. It allows little room to grow and change. And, it forgets that the whole idea of mastery and expertise is probably an illusion because what we are attempting continually changes.

So, my 'don't ever change' point in all of this is, even though in a few minutes you will no longer officially be a student, I hope you don't ever change taking a student approach to life. We never achieve mastery, we only ever become lifelong apprentices. Sorry, this applies even those of you who

are getting your master's degrees. Even including those with a Master's degree, we are all works in progress.

Now for the last point. A lot has changed since you have come to Brock in 2008. At Brock, you are the class that ushered in the era of wifi, laptops, smartphones, and online learning into the classroom. You are also likely the class that took Facebook out of its early adopter stage, although I could be off on that by a few years but definitely, Twitter came to life during your time at Brock. What else can we add to the list? Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, G20 protests, Obama's statement on gay marriage. The world as we know it, and the way we live in it is changing faster than it ever has before. As we have heard, our kids will have jobs that don't even exist yet. It is clear: we are moving into a world of permanent white water.

This world can be troubling. We may feel a desire for solid, familiar ground, and out of a sense of uncertainty we may be feeling fearful and insecure. However, that's how someone like me feels. You on the other hand have adapted with such grace and facility that I don't even think adapting is the right word. You inhabit them untroubled. You understand much better than we do that life is not a process of accumulation but reinvention; and that as you move along you slough off as much as you build up. And that is a quality that will take you far, far beyond where any of us stand today. Your comfort with uncertainty will make you the harbingers of creativity, as uncertainty causes us to rethink our established, fixed ways of seeing things. Creativity and uncertainty are two sides of the same coin. And so using my best jedi mind trick yoda speak what I really want to say is…don't ever change your ability to change. And, do what you can to help us be comfortable with it too. We're going to need your help here.

So, what I really want to say to you graduates, is that it has been an honour to have come to know you, to share in your time at Brock with you, and be part of your journey. You have graced our halls, our sportsfields, and our community with your energy, commitment, inquisitiveness, and perseverence. From our end, I hope that we have done our job well, and that you are heading out these doors a different person than who you were when you first walked through them in 2008. Indeed, at its very best, the university is a place of possibility, a space where we take risks with our thinking, challenge conventions, and come to change our minds. It is a space where we encounter, either in story, narrative, or direct experience, worlds beyond our own. And when it all goes well, what comes out of it are new understandings of who we are and how we are to be in the world. In the clamor and clutter of today's world, these moments are rare, precious, and to be cultivated. After all, this is the way that we develop the wisdom we require to transform our world into a more humane place, and at the end of this journey this is as much as we can possibly hope for.

Congratulations Brock students. Don't ever change. Stay true to yourself. Keep Brock close to your hearts. Have a wonderful convocation and celebration with your family and friends.