

2017 December Commencement

President Eli Capilouto

December 15, 2017

At the end of every academic semester, I have the honor of standing before an arena filled with freshly minted University of Kentucky graduates.

Today, I stand in awe as president. Celebrating with you and your families and friends, bidding you farewell, and wishing you only the best in pursuit of lives of meaning and purpose.

The holiday season and the University's Commencement ceremonies offer the opportunity to express an extraordinary sense of hope and gratitude.

I am grateful to you for choosing to see blue with us as fully contributing members of the UK family.

I'm gratified by your stories of success. Among you are students:

- Who leave here poised to begin competitive graduate and professional programs that attract the best and brightest.
- Who are prepared to enter classrooms, social service organizations, government agencies, and non-profits to teach, serve, counsel, and nurture the character and well-being of community.
- Who leave here to join the world of commerce, through top-level firms and organizations, or launch bold ideas with the determination to invent and reinvent a career or to create jobs.
- Who will join the ranks of thousands of past UK graduates who choose to serve our country as members in the military.
- And still some who may not have settled on the next step of their journeys, but who are guided by UK values, armed with a 21st century education.

And while we have prepared you with a tool kit of technical, social, and cultural competencies, you have been our teachers, as well.

And so, my gratitude runs deep for what you have taught us, as we learned with and from our students.

You taught us about the grit that helps you confront financial challenges, as you balanced a job or multiple jobs or family responsibilities and studied at odd hours with little sleep to reach this day.

You taught us about the courage it takes for a survivor of sexual harassment or assault to report what happened, even at the risk that your privacy would be jeopardized, to ensure these violations are no longer covered in a shroud of secrecy and darkness.

You taught us about the unshakeable strength needed to overcome the disease of addiction or the challenges of mental illness, post-traumatic stress, or visible and invisible disabilities, to be here today.

And even those who were not victors in this often-misunderstood fight, you taught us that it was not a failure in character or judgement. Yours was an ailment for which cures elude us.

Your continued struggle strengthens our resolve to find a cure.

You taught us how to be brave when faced with words, perspectives, actions, symbols and thoughts that were offensive, thoughtless, and hateful, and those that crossed a line to be harmful.

You taught us through your determination and honest sense of self to be yourself. You defined for society who you are, rather than allowing society to define you.

You stood steadfast to challenge with evidence and spoke calmly without aggression when faced with ideas contrary to yours. You did not shout down to silence those with whom you found disagreement.

You didn't answer hate with hate. You reached—alone and with others—for the better angels within us to teach that civility is a standard which we must uphold to work across our differences and preserve our democracy.

You taught us how to persist even while accepting the deeply emotional experience of losing a loved one or carrying the burden of hurt that comes with broken relationships or families.

You taught us the determination necessary to return to an education interrupted by military deployment overseas; sometimes returning with the mental and physical scars of war, yet persisting to this day.

For these stories of life, I am grateful.

Now let us pause—collectively, we can turn to those who helped us thrive in the turbulence that comes with the college experience.

Turn to the stands and see and feel the extraordinary embrace of your champions over the last several years.

Help me extend our collective gratitude to your professors who helped prepare you to exist and thrive in a competitive world ... who, by example, showed you the importance of exercising mutual respect even as we must be willing to challenge each other with new ideas and ways of seeing and understanding the world.

Help me extend our collective gratitude to your friends and family who stayed up with you preparing for an exam, who picked you up after a bad grade, who encouraged you every step of the way. Who, on days you failed, told you that you were not a failure.

Because of your college experience, you stand as examples that boldly rebut those who believe you are coddled or bubble-wrapped.

I am grateful to you and your professors and families for reminding me, and all of us, that you are strong, persistent, and resilient.

You have met and mastered most challenges. Carry with you, always, your grit, your tenacity, your persistence.

Be reminded of the lasting value of those attributes—grit, tenacity, and persistence—in the unpredictable and unknown path that lies beyond the doors of this arena and of this special place.

Remember that “courage,” as Mary Ann Radmacher wrote, “doesn’t always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says, ‘I’ll try again tomorrow.’”

Your minds were strengthened on each tomorrow that you tried again to overcome doubts, fears, and despair.

In those times of challenge your hearts received and sent messages of triumph, affection, appreciation ... of beauty, of cheer, courage, and hope.

Remember the importance of gratitude.

Congratulations, Class of 2017, and thank you for being a part of the University of Kentucky family.

May you continue to grow in wisdom, courage, and compassion. May you always summon the better angels.

We can’t wait to see what you do next. Remember that you are always part of this special family.

We hope you always see blue, wherever you go.