

Be Mr. Knapp

Thank you Dean Saxenian, distinguished guests, faculty, family, friends, and most of all -- you -- the Class of 2013!

I can't adequately express how honored I am to be your commencement speaker, but, let's set the tone right for the rest of today and start by being brutally honest with each other.

Right now, at least one of you is silently praying that I'm going to give this talk in 140 character snippets. Come to think of it, I suspect that it's really Dean Saxenian who has her fingers crossed since she hasn't read what I'm about to say today.

At this point in the day, I am the person standing between you finally being able to update your LinkedIn profile. So I'll keep this short. If it gets too long, you can start tweeting at me and my phone will start buzzing. I'll take the hint.

I realize this is a commencement speech and you are expecting me to share something insightful. Here is the problem with that for your class -- with the amount and rate you have learned, I would argue you are the ones who are already teaching us. Why? You are an order of magnitude faster at finding information than we have ever been. When we were in college, it would be incredible to be a participant in a single global trend. Your generation does it on a monthly basis. Even if it is the Harlem Shake or mimicking the latest K-pop dance steps.

You have grown up fully immersed with information at your fingertips. And as a result, you seamlessly interact with technology in a way humanity has never seen. Over the next twenty years, you will have casually documented your lives more than any other person has in history. In fact, through Google, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, LinkedIn, YouTube, Yahoo, Foursquare, Reddit, Yelp, Instagram posts and whatever comes next, each of you **individually** will create more than 5 exabytes of data. To put that number in context, up until the turn of this millennia, that is how much data we had created collectively as a species. At this point, we can safely say you are the the ones creating most of the world's content.

So, what am I supposed to tell you? My first piece of my advice is to respect your elders because they made it through to graduation without Google, just saying.

There is something really unique about a commencement. This is a human experience and we are here to celebrate you. So I would like to start with the story that involves no technology.

I want you to remember back to high school and the different kinds of kids in your class, the smart one, the cool one, the athletic one, and the one that was always in trouble. The one that trouble just seemed to seek out. Remember them? Well that was me. Proof? During the first 90 days of my freshman year of high school I had been suspended, kicked out of my math class, and been read my rights. None of which were related incidents. You know things are bad when you start to know the names of your

high school administrators. Mr. Knapp. To this day I can remember his office and what it felt like sitting in the chair next to his desk while he rendered the next sentence.

When you are constantly in trouble, you quickly learn to make sure you are the first one to the mailbox. Thankfully, email was not a popular thing at that time. And during a summer day between my sophomore and junior years, I did my usual interception plan, and it paid off. There in the mailbox was a plain white envelope with my name on it. It was thin and light, with our school logo in the upper left. The kind of envelope that elicits panic because only two things come in it -- trouble or rejection. And there in traditional, bureaucratic font, was the latest recommendation by the school administrators. As a top student, I had been selected to join a brand new, elite group of future leaders.

I asked my friends and none of them had been picked for the group. I began to think this was an epic practical joke. So, I agreed out of curiosity. And when I arrived at training a month later, it was one of those made for TV moments. The coolest and smartest kids were all there, and when I walked, in it was pretty clear that **everyone** thought I was the person they were supposed to mentor. To top it off, the person who was leading the training: Mr. Knapp. With that mix, let me assure you, you can't make up that kind of awkward moment.

Still, I figured what the heck, I would take advantage of the school's mistake, and here is the crazy and lucky thing -- I was actually really good at the work. I enjoyed the program so much that it became a turning point that sparked a set of positive chain reactions. After a year I had become a transformed student. My grades still were not very good, but to my parent's relief, I wasn't getting suspended. I got to thinking how great it was that someone's mistake turned into such a life changing experience for me. So I decided to look into it and found, I, in fact, I had been hand picked by Mr. Knapp. **Mr. Knapp?!** The very same person who had suspended me earlier. Why pick me? Here's a brand new program, which he created, and he personally took a risk on me.

Through that, Mr. Knapp taught me one of the most important lessons in life: we cannot make progress without someone taking a chance on us. Now if we take a moment to reflect on our lives ---- actually let's do it. Take 10 seconds and think about someone who took a chance on you. Got it? Now, think about what it cost them? I suspect if you measure it in the grand scheme of things, it didn't take much effort on their part. Now compare that to the impact it had on you. In my case, it was little effort for Mr. Knapp to pick me, but it led to a giant impact on my life. Small choices can lead to big outcomes. But it is not going to happen unless you are willing to take chances on people.

By attending this University and in particular this program, you've already proven that you have what it takes to succeed. Because of that, you will quickly find yourself in positions of power where you will have the ability to have an immediate impact on someone's life. So here is what I implore you to do - **actively** seek out those you can take a risk on. The key word here is actively. Passively is easy. Actively seek them out.

Why? It will help you grow as an individual. By actively helping others, you will also learn a tremendous amount about yourself. The things that make you tick and what you really value. The ties that form between you and those you have taken a risk on are

some of the most powerful bonds that can exist. The gratitude you receive in return, will be a gateway drug to a lifestyle of supporting and encouraging people, rather than tearing them down. And right now, we have a world where we could use much more of the former.

When I was in college and nearing graduation, I didn't really know what to do next. So I went around and started to ask people for their advice. One of my mentors, Reggie Brown, suggested that I go talk to Jim Yorke, who is best known for coining the term Chaos Theory. To which I am sure my own thought was "One does not simply email the father of Chaos Theory."

I finally worked up the nerve to write him a quick email about joining his research team and without thinking too much hit the send button. And then that moment of panic, where you stare at the screen, hands frozen, wishing there was an undo button on life.

To my great surprise, I actually got a reply and remember being so excited by the note that I didn't care that he had actually politely blown me and suggested that I apply through the usual process. There was one major problem. I was pretty sure my grades would not make the cut.

When I told my father about it, in his infinite wisdom he suggested one thing -- road trip. A special one that might just "happen" to take us near the campus so we could meet Professor Yorke in person. The plan worked. We met and had a fantastic conversation. Thanks to Professor Yorke, it would turn out to be the only grad school I was formally accepted to. From there, Jim and I, and yes I now call him Jim, would work together first as student and advisor and then as colleagues for over a decade.

The thing is, none of this would have happened if I obeyed the rules. There are no rules, only guidelines. By finding a way to talk to Jim, I put myself in a position where he could take a risk on me. And to you I say, seek out those that will take a risk on you. Put yourself in a position so people can easily help you out. It did not take very much effort on Jim's part to take a chance on me, but I had to make it easy for him. A central component of Chaos Theory is that small changes can lead to big impacts. Similarly, those small risks can lead to big impacts.

Everything I have shared, you already know. In fact, you have lived it! Think about the first time you arrived here. Remember when you didn't have a clue what was going on? The moment at orientation where you met each other for the first time? You didn't even know where the bathrooms were. Or how about your first class where the professor asked if there are any questions and you didn't dare raise your hand out of fear of being the stupid one? In fact, no one raised their hand and together you were collectively lost. But, at least you were lost together. And now look at you - you are the ones who will soon be teaching the next generation. When you are at the front of the room in class or in front of a team and when you ask for questions, you will recognize that same moment when no hands will go up.

So how did you do it and how did you make it here today? You sought out individuals that would take a chance on you, and you actively took chances on each other.

Remember those late nights working on problem sets together? Or the times when you were about to fall and one of your peers was there to save the day? You learned to be vulnerable and trust in each other. You **actively** looked out for each other and had each others backs when the times were tough. You picked each other up when one of you stumbled emotionally, academically, and even financially.

Now it's our turn as a society to take a chance on you. All of you, through your hard work and tenacity, have gotten here to this ceremony and have established yourself to earn our trust. That is, in fact, what the piece of paper you are about to receive represents. A certification of our trust in you. And it is not a moment too soon. Because we have to take a chance on you. The challenges we are facing as a society are steep. We have real threats to our environment, our health, and our well being as a species. We have a society that is rapidly losing faith in public service, which is the highest embodiment of a willingness to take risks on those that need it most. To help solve these pressing challenges for our current children and for your future children, we have to place our faith in you.

So there is my advice to you:

1. Actively take chances on others, even when it is at a risk to you.
2. Seek out those that will take a chance on you.

Today is an awesome day to celebrate you and all you have accomplished. Remember to say thank you to those that helped get you here. I want you to take a second and ask yourself who is **your** Mr. Knapp. That person that took a risk on you. Maybe they are even here today. One of the most important things you can do in life is say thank you to them.

To make sure I put that in practice, I want to say thank you, to all of you, the Class of 2013 for all that you are going to do in the future. Finally want to say thank you to Mr. Knapp who is here today after 25 years since suspending me; and, making a career of taking risks on students like me.

Class of 2013, who are you going to be a Mr. Knapp to?