

2019 Spring Commencement Speech

May 4, 2019 | Analese Alvarez

Good afternoon. It is truly my honor to have been selected to speak at this glorious and important event, to stand in front of some of the smartest and brightest talent this world has to offer.

I have to start with a confession: I did not let my family know I was chosen as the speaker for today's ceremonies. I wanted it to be a surprise for them. So wherever you are out there--mom, brothers, sister, nieces, nephews, tias, tios, primas, primos, to my best friend, to all of you that traveled from California to be here today, you traveled all this way in the name of family and to be here to see me hooded as a doctoral candidate. Regardless of the work I did to this point, today isn't about me. Graduates: it isn't about any of us. Today is about standing in front of family, friends, colleagues, or significant others and acknowledging and celebrating an accomplishment. Whether you are here because you finished a master's degree, a PhD or doctorate, you are here to share in the celebration of all the work you've done to get here. But it is not about us. It's about the us of the past: the child that felt out of place, the teenager that was told they weren't good enough, the young adult that decided to stay curious. We are here to honor for the lineage of our ancestry: immigrants that started with nothing and had little to no access to education, family members that dreamed of higher education but did not have opportunity, elders that had to make hard decisions between pursuing their dreams or putting food on the table. We are here because of the lineage of our future: to show the children in our families exactly what is possible.

And maybe I'm projecting a little. I may have been the first in my family to attend university and earn a bachelor's degree; I may have been the first to get a master's degree; I may be the first to earn a doctorate. But I certainly won't be the last. Today I am here to celebrate exactly that--the evolution of my family lineage and the proof that there is no barrier that can keep us from achieving. That education is not only our right, but that we can demand access to it and we can put the work in to succeed.

We each have our own path that led us here, and some of us have amazing, heartbreaking, terrific, terrifying, spectacular stories of survival and strife. Today we are here to celebrate the work it took in the classroom but more than that, the work it took to overcome our barriers. To those of you that earned this degree while raising children: I honor you. To those of you working multiple jobs to earn this degree: I celebrate you. To those of you that learned the English language to come to the United States and earn a graduate degree: I praise you. And to all of us having earned a degree in an educational system that maybe isn't yet built for all of us, where there is no guarantee we will have what we need to graduate: I see you. There is no one single path to get to this point, and there is no one single right way to earn a graduate degree. We are all here because of the resiliency and strength it took each of us to earn our degrees.

But maybe I'm projecting again. According to statistics, I have no business being here: my parents did not obtain high levels of education, there was not a direct role model in my life with a college degree (or if there was, I grew up in a Mexican household and we never talked about it), and I grew up poor. My parents worked extremely hard to keep from us the fact that we were poor, so I also grew up not realizing that not everyone had boxes of government food on their shelves, that not everyone at school paid for their lunch with food tickets, that it was more than just getting out of the house during the summer and visit the local rec center to eat lunch. While they kept me from truly knowing we were poor, the one thing my parents did, especially my late father, was stress the need for me to get an education. Filling out the FAFSA must have been terrifying for them. Being told by a government entity how much they were required to pay for me to attend my dream university must have been frustrating. But I never knew. All I knew is that my father wanted me to attend UCLA and major in Chicano studies. But he made one mistake; he took me to a football game where the 14-year old trumpet player version of me took one look at the USC Trojan Marching Band and made a decision. We left the game and I told him I wanted to march in that band. And I did. And my parents supported me throughout my undergraduate years, as unknowing about navigating higher education as I was. And today I thank them by joining an elite group of people that have earned a doctorate degree.

If there is one thing I've learned, it's that luck is when hard work meets opportunity. As I've learned from my own life, I have shared this simple equation with countless numbers of students that have come through my classroom, I have shared this simple equation with all the youth that I coached in sports, and I share it with you all now.

I say I'm lucky to have recently accepted a job in my hometown of Santa Barbara, that at the end of this month I will be lucky to return to the beaches that knew me as a child, that I am lucky I get to be a school administrator at my own high school alma mater. But that luck is really an opportunity that came knocking on my door because of the hard work I've done since I started my freshman year at USC in 1996, since I became a teacher in 2000, when I earned a master's degree in 2007, and as I stand here today as a doctoral candidate.

So what I ask of all graduates today is this: find your luck. This degree isn't the end of something but the beginning of greatness. Keep working hard, keep breaking the glass ceiling, keep fighting the status quo, and keep finding opportunities to affect those around you with leadership, kindness, and love. At USC, we have a little phrase we use that embodies this idea, it's when we say "FIGHT ON!" So I ask of you to fight on, to keep going, and find your luck though the opportunities that will present themselves to you because of all the hard work you've accomplished.

Thank you, and congratulations to every single one of you.