

Convocation 2011

Keynote Address by Laura (Laurenson) Foster '82

Good afternoon. Thirty-three years ago, when I was an incoming freshman sitting next to my parents, probably up at Stetson Chapel; I never imagined that 3 decades later I would be standing on this stage addressing a group of Kalamazoo College students, parents and faculty.

I have so many reasons to be grateful to Kalamazoo College. Not only for this opportunity to speak, but also for all the things I learned and experienced here -- and I want to honor that today.

There is not a single day that goes by when I don't feel that gratitude. My husband, also a K graduate, and I know that the skill set, knowledge and confidence we received from our liberal arts education has given us the foundation to think clearly and act decisively. It has established a framework for how we view the world, approach issues and problem solve. It has helped us become what we hope is seen as positive leaders in our community and business.

I congratulate you today for picking a great school and getting into Kalamazoo College. You've clearly had an accomplished life so far, excelling in academics and outside activities, being top students and citizens in your communities.

Your generation is known as the Millennials. Cynical researchers say that you are primarily motivated by movies, videogames and Chipotle. However, I have a bit of experience with your age group having raised three boys who are currently post-college, in college and aspiring to attend college next year.

And what I see, and what researchers have reported, is that your generation is a confident, upbeat, ethnically and racially diverse group. You are more likely than previous generations to get along with your parents. You are deft at multi-tasking and your use of technology makes your generation distinct, yet few of you actually know how to write cursive. You embrace multiple forms of self-expression:

- 1 in 5 have posted a video of themselves online;
- a quarter have a piercing in some place other than an earlobe;
- nearly 40 percent have a tattoo.

You are known as experiential and exploratory learners. Millennials are on course to become the most educated generation in our history – mainly due to the demands of a knowledge-based economy.

As the freshman class entering K College, a third of you are musically inclined, a third played varsity sports, a fifth participated in student government, and many of you were in some type of honor society. If you are like my boys, you've done this in a highly structured way: camps, lessons, SAT prep, and more. Parents have helped provide this structure. Perhaps in many students' minds they have helped too much.

But your world ahead is far less structured. The key to these next four years is to take advantage of all that Kalamazoo has to offer: from the K Plan; to the fabulous professors; to smart, diverse classmates; to life changing experiences that will teach you as much as you'd learn in a classroom.

This is a gift. You are starting with a blank slate and have all the tools necessary to create a purposeful life. You'll have the chance to analyze, to synthesize, to learn to critically think and to apply these thoughts to your life. The beauty of K College is that it will foster independence and enormous personal growth over the next four years. This type of education, more than ever, is going to be very important. Denise Pope summed it up well in her book, *Colleges that Change Lives* when she described K College students as "being deeply engaged, broadly prepared and heavily invested in a sense of community".

Parents, I can relate to the mixed emotions that you are feeling today. Even though you've tried to prepare and you've spent eighteen years working towards it, this moment is bittersweet. Your child is moving on. They're making new friends. Building their lives. Soon-to-be impressing faculty with their energy and knowledge. The good news is you can leave and be comforted by the fact that they are at a world-class institution – opportunities and adventures await them. Unlike when we went to school, there are many more modes of communication to contact home, but they somehow don't seem to remember to use them very often. You likely will not hear from them much. This generally means things are going well. A piece of advice my husband and I got when we dropped off our first son at college was this: When there is an absence of communication, send a letter telling them you hope all is well. Mention that you've enclosed a \$50 bill for them to take all their friends in the dorm out for pizza. Do not enclose the money. This is guaranteed to elicit a swift phone call or text.

Students, thank your parents. They've made huge sacrifices to get you here. They want the world for you and love you deeply. They've given you the opportunity to be in this remarkable place. These four years will fly by: take advantage of them. Time is your truest form of wealth and we are all born equally rich in time. How are you going to utilize your time here these next four years? Try to do something that challenges your self; something different; something that makes a difference. Cherish the friendships that you will forge. Relish the 1:00 am study group. Have meals with your professors and be sure to go on Foreign Study.

As Conan O'Brien said, "Work hard, be kind and amazing things will happen".

Recently, I saw a phrase on a bumper sticker that really resonated with me: "Driven by vision, not by fear". "Driven by vision, not by fear". Today's world is highly complex and at times a little scary. It offers fantastic opportunity and tremendous uncertainty. Those who are adaptable and apply their cognitive skills have a bright future. And, while there is no single recipe for success, two key ingredients will assist you: chutzpah and generosity. Chutzpah -- meaning having the audacity to fail, as well as to succeed. Having the courage to fail at times and fail with grace. Chutzpah – meaning being willing to step out of the mainstream, the group-think and being willing to explore the edges, the borders and become comfortable there.

Steve Jobs' vision for Apple wasn't for it to be another IBM. At the very end of his 2010 speech at the iPad's debut, Steve Jobs mused on the secret to Apple's success. He said, "It's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough. It's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields the results that make our hearts sing." He illustrated his talk with the image of a street sign at an imagined intersection between "Technology" and the "Liberal Arts." He meant it as a description of the kind of thinking—multidisciplinary, sensitive to human needs and potential—that created the products. But it also describes the broader social impact of his company. Before Apple, that intersection was largely deserted. Today it is a virtual Times Square. Steve Jobs walked and walks the edges...and changed the world.

And the second ingredient: Generosity. Generosity is about connecting to the people and the places that surround you. It's not to be confused with charity or volunteering or giving \$5 away. It's about being a real citizen and having an empathy that's engrained in the very fabric of your being. It's weaving goodness, compassion and clarity into your daily life. It's being engaged in the world around you.

Chutzpah will help you realize your vision and get you where you want to go. Generosity will give your vision and what you do, meaning.

“Driven by vision, not by fear”. Class of 2015, I challenge you to be driven. Not by fear of the unknown, but by the fact that you are being given the most incredible of gifts: the opportunity for a superb liberal arts education. This, combined with global exposure and the ability to adapt, will give you a strong foundation to lead productive and meaningful lives. Our world needs leaders and community members who possess both chutzpah and generosity. If you become that type of leader, you will have made your parents, K College, your community, and yourselves proud.

Class of 2015, I welcome you and hope that your experience is as transformative as mine was 30 years ago.