

Today we welcome more than 2,400 students and 13,000 guests. We have students graduating from all 50 of the United States, six continents and 26 countries around the world, making APUS a truly global university!

For those who know me, I always say that there are three critical decisions in life that will impact your future, forever. I will mention them in no specific order.

The first critical decision is if you get married.

The second critical decision is if you decide to raise children.

And the third critical decision is what you decide to study.

At APUS, we don't intend to influence whom you do or do not marry or your decision to raise children. But we do intend to play a critical role in your brave decision to pursue an academic career.

What you study is something that will impact your life forever. If you really think about it, deciding what to study is a life changing moment. For example, if I had studied to be a medical doctor my life would be vastly different. Better, worse, it does not matter, but my point is that it would certainly be very different. As an example, for sure I would not be here today; I would probably be living in another country and most likely I would not have met the mother of my son, and my beautiful boy would not be here among us today.

Think about it for a second...how powerful it is...think about your life...how different would it be if you had not pursued your dream of getting a college degree. What would life look like? I believe what you study will impact your life in unimaginable ways. It will influence what you do, where you live, and whom you meet throughout your lifetime.

It has been over 20 years since my graduation. I remember a lot of things about that day. I remember I had a throbbing headache from attending a never-ending party the night before, I remember one of my best friends asked to marry his girlfriend, and so the party continued that night, and I remember a profound sense of excitement about being ready to formally start my professional career.

Of all the things I remember, I have zero recollection of what the president of the university said in his speech. So if I can't make my speech memorable, I will at least try to make it short.

Today I would like to share with you some lessons about life that I've learned along the way. Specifically, I would like to share five simple lessons. That's it. Only five (I said I would make it short!). What I am about to tell you is based on my experience and it is not meant to be the absolute truth. Think about it as a summary of my experiences and what I believe has worked for me and for many others I've encountered along the way. I am sharing with you in the hopes that they will have some value and that you can apply them in your own lives, should you wish to do so.

Commencement marks an extraordinary milestone, a rite of passage if you will, and you should all

be very proud of it. But your new professional career really starts today. Today you start writing your future, forging your path, and building your life with the degree you've worked so hard for.

Before we talk about the five lessons, I want to briefly speak about success.

The most important rule of success is to know where you want to go. You need a vision. If you don't have a vision about where you want to go, how will you get there? I see success like a GPS. You know where you are and you know where you want to go, but along the way, things might happen, and they will happen, and the routes might change depending on traffic, accidents, construction, you might stop for coffee, etc. But if you know where you're heading, most likely you will get there.

My grandparents and parents were born in a small village of about 200 people in Portugal where I spent most of my childhood. My grandparents influenced and shaped my personality on so many levels. They were humble and modest farmers that did not know how to read or write, and they lived on the other side of the Atlantic. They made a living out of selling the vegetables and fruits they cropped, and the animals they raised in their small farms.

My parents were the first ones in my family, and in our small village, that graduated from the university. Just like many of you they were first generation...my father became a lawyer, and my mother became a university teacher.

Because my parents had access to education, they have transformed themselves, their lives, and consequently, my life as well. THAT is the extraordinary power of education. Had my parents not pursued their dreams of a better life, I most certainly would not be here with you today.

This is commonly named as the butterfly effect, where small changes in starting conditions can lead to vastly different outcomes. For example, a butterfly flapping its wings in Asia could create a storm in the Midwest. My butterfly effect started 55 years ago, even before I was born, when my parents decided to pursue a better education for themselves. That single life event changed my future, forever, as I am sure that your decision of pursuing an academic degree will change yours.

This takes me to lesson number 1: Play the long game and always have a vision.

I was born in 1976 in Portugal, on the other side of the ocean. Portugal had just ended more than 40 years of a fascist regimen and was opening itself to the world. As I was growing up, and especially in the late 80's as a young teenager, I remember watching American shows on a black and white television at my grandparents' house. In particular, I remember watching Dallas – I am sure some of you remember it – and being impressed with the huge buildings, the high-rises, and the multilane freeways. In my village, the highest house had two floors, and most of the roads were unpaved. And, I clearly remember, every time I saw it, saying to myself that America is where I want to live. America is where I want to develop myself. Since a very early age I wanted to come to the United States. That was my dream, but as a young kid, it was, as you can imagine, a dream, and I had no idea how I was going to make it a reality.

Once my parents were able to establish themselves after graduation, I can remember moving to a large city. It was terrifying for me to leave my small village of 200 people and go to a city of almost 1

million people. I felt inadequate, out of place and, at times, insecure. My parents worked very hard, they knew the value of education, and they wanted the best for me, so they put me in a private school that was attended by “rich kids”. I remember thinking how could I compete with all the other kids that seemed so much smarter, sophisticated, and better prepared than me. But, as time went by, my mother would always tell me to believe in myself and to work harder than anybody else. And so, I did, and as time went by, I came to realize that those kids were not smarter than me, and that regardless of your background and where you come from, success and performance are mostly a factor of hard work, dedication, ethics, and discipline.

Along the way I never forgot my dream. My vision was strong and I never deviated from it. After graduating from my university, I always pursued opportunities that I thought would open the door to eventually come to work and live in this country.

But it was never easy; this is why your vision needs to be bold and you need to be absolutely convinced about it. Because the road to success is never easy. If someone tells you something different, that person is not telling the truth. The road to success is always hard, but if you put your mind to it, it is certainly possible.

And so, I’ve started my professional career and, after a long and exciting journey living in eight different countries around the world, on March 2, 2008, I landed in Miami and became the youngest SVP of the company I was working for. It was because I had a goal, I had a vision, and I worked really hard to achieve it.

My advice to you is to always visualize your ambition and go after it with everything you have. Give your career a purpose and stay determined, even in the face of adversity. You must give your career a purpose if you truly want to succeed.

Lesson number 2: Life is not easy.

It is a hard world out there and nothing comes easy. Life is not easy, never was and never will be. Do not fall into the entitlement trap of feeling you are a victim. You are not. It is just how life works.

Everyone wants to be successful, but not all have the discipline and the resilience to get there.

Work harder than anybody else you know. It is not a guarantee, but your chances will become much better.

Samuel Goldwyn once said “The harder I work, the luckier I get”. It is funny how that works.

Each day of hard work brings you closer to your vision and to success. Never quit.

Is it always fun? No. But think about yourself as a high-performance athlete. Do they truly want to be running in the cold at 5 a.m., working out four hours a day, and measuring every ounce of food they eat? I assume no one enjoys that, but their willingness to succeed and their desire to win is bigger than any sacrifice they need to make.

Sometimes life will hit you in the head really hard, but stay focused. Along the way you will face

adversity, but those are all building blocks that will take you to your destiny. I remember the famous words of Winston Churchill, who said “if you are going through hell, keep going.”

Lesson number 3: Play to win and be the best at what you do.

Success rarely takes a direct, upwards trajectory, but successful people are never satisfied with the status quo. If you’re going to play, you need to play to win. Being deeply convinced, almost on a cellular level, that you can achieve spectacular results, is a necessary step for success.

Striving to be the best at what you do is the only way to find true fulfillment in your career. For me personally, I most likely will never be the very best, but I will strive to do my very best in everything I do, because that is who I am. And I invite you to share the same mentality now that you are graduating.

Go out there and be the best you can be, and never settle.

I believe that in a successful career, you are your own biggest competitor. Not anybody else. In my career, I never had the feeling I was competing against someone else. It’s really a race against yourself. Sure, there were times where I didn’t get a role I was pursuing, but I used that as motivation to do better and prove myself.

Life is a game of inches, like Al Pacino said in the movie Any Given Sunday and, every day, you have to fight for that extra inch that brings you closer to the touch down. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, but keep fighting. Life is a game of inches and when you add all those inches you’ve worked so hard for, it will make all the difference between winning and losing.

Lesson number 4: Take risks and don’t listen to your critics.

People will say that something is impossible. Guess what? It is not.

When people say no. You say yes.

When people say it can’t be done. You say, yes it can.

If anyone questions the American dream, today is your answer. Don’t ever let somebody tell you that you can’t do something. Not in this country.

I stand here today, grateful for the diversity of my heritage and for the diversity of our student population. I stand here today knowing that my story is part of what America is all about and that, most likely, in no other country on earth, would my story be possible.

So don’t ever let anyone tell you that you can’t do something, that you can’t achieve your dreams, that you can’t be successful, whatever success means to each one of you.

Don’t listen to the pessimists, and forget the naysayers.

Take risks. Make mistakes along the way and learn from them. I’ve found that the most successful people are willing to take appropriate risks and capitalize on gaps that have been created — either by

customers or neglectful competition. When you are being creative and disruptive, making mistakes is ok, as long as you don't make the same mistake twice. Learn from those mistakes and move on.

Life is full of surprises, good ones and bad ones. At times you will fail, most likely you will fail often, and it will not be pleasant. It will be discouraging, and it will test how deeply you are committed to your cellular level vision. Do not fear failure, but please run away from regret as much as you can.

Stay focused and always look forward, trust your faith, karma, gut, destiny, life...whatever works for you, but stay focused and keep moving.

Lesson number 5: Focus on your family and be a good person.

Along the way you will change jobs, change cities, change houses...but your family, however you define it, will always be there for you, and you need to always be there for them. Everything changes, except for the love of your family.

Along the way, always try to be a good and ethical person and treat others with respect. No one can be successful alone, you need to nurture relationships, do good deeds to receive good deeds back, and sacrifice yourself, at times, for the greater good. Individual success is very important, but contributing to the greater good of society, is equally important.

Maya Angelou wrote, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." As you go out into the new world, strive to make a positive impact on those around you – to lift them up, to inspire them, and to make them feel seen, heard, and valued.

Stay humble, and never think you are more than anybody else, because you are not. You might be more gifted at certain things, but others are more gifted than you at others. Everyone has different strengths and that diversity makes us strong as a society.

I've recently learned that the average American will meet around 80,000 people in their lifetime. That's a lot of people, but think about if each one of you changes the life of just two people, per year, and those two people influence two more people each per year, and then those influence two more people each per year, and so on...in 10 years the class of 2023 will have impacted the lives of 13 million people. So, go out there, make an impact, and fight for your vision.

As I conclude, I would like to leave you with a small poem from Marianne Williamson:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness
That most frightens us."

Congratulations, Class of 2023!

