

Fairfield University
Graduate Commencement Address 2011

Father von Arx, members of the Board of Trustees, honored guests, distinguished faculty, family, friends, and fellow graduates:

I stand before a crowd of talented, motivated, and accomplished individuals. I feel so honored to address you all today. It is especially meaningful for me, as Fairfield has long been a “home” as both my undergraduate and now graduate alma mater.

Apparently, I just couldn’t get enough of the Jesuits!

Milestones such as this naturally lend themselves to reflection on where we’ve been and the journey that lies ahead. No doubt, this graduate degree will help each of us to further our careers and intellectual pursuits, but there is something *very uniquely* different about a Jesuit education that you signed up for when you came to Fairfield. We are all striving for some measure of success, but a Jesuit education has prepared us for something much greater: We are called to lead extraordinary lives.

Leading an extraordinary life is the pursuit of excellence in *all* that you do. This sense of excellence is deeply rooted in our Jesuit traditions. St. Ignatius Loyola called it the *magis*, striving for the “more”. But what is this “more” and how to do we achieve it?

In order to achieve excellence, you must first understand who you are as a person, your relationship with others, and your calling in this world. This is no easy task. We are all flawed human beings. By taking the time to reflect, we open ourselves to recognize and acknowledge our imperfections so that we can continuously strive to improve, and have compassion for those who, like us, are imperfect. I like to think of it as “soul maintenance”—an opportunity to see if

who we are today aligns with who we are called to be. Through reflection, we can bring about the change we need in our own lives, so that we are prepared to enact change in the world.

Excellence means seeking greatness in small things.

In *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, Jesuit author Fr. Jim Martin wrote “*Anyone* who dreams of doing great things for God can live out the *magis* – whether you are a father caring for your young child, a middle-aged woman nursing your aging parent, or an inner-city teacher working overtime to tutor a needy student. Great works are often quiet works.” This concept seems so contrary to what our society values when public recognition is often used as the measure of success. Too often we lose ourselves trying to achieve some grand idea of “greatness” that we can forget about the impact we have on the people around us in small, yet influential ways.

No doubt, many of us here will go on to become leaders in our respective fields, but this doesn’t mean that we all have to become “President of the Free World” to achieve greatness. True greatness begins with small acts of kindness. We must never forget that we can always make a difference in someone’s life through these small acts of kindness—taking the time to appreciate someone by offering words of encouragement and thanks. This is compassionate leadership.

I’d like to share an example of compassionate leadership that inspires me to strive for personal excellence. Most of you are probably familiar with the little disclaimer at the bottom of your job description that says “other duties as assigned”. In my case, this often translates into working nights and weekends, driving to a FEDEX shipping warehouse to recover lost event materials, and road trips to Albany on a moment’s notice to support our basketball team. While this is bound to wear anyone out over time, there has never been a day that I have felt

unappreciated by my boss, Janet Canepa. She genuinely cares for my personal well-being and has been one of my biggest supporters in pursuing my graduate degree. Although I don't need to be thanked for doing "my job," her small, daily acts of kindness, her thank you notes, and her friendship are the greatest gifts of all – they affirm who I am as a person.

Excellence means living passionately.

We have a responsibility to share our talents that have been bestowed upon us to be "men and women for others". I can think of no better example of someone that espouses this Jesuit ideal than fellow classmate Susan Serven. It was Susan's passion for Chinese language and culture that led her to found two non-profits: Chopstix in 1998, and then the Chinese Language School in 2002, so that her two adopted girls from China could preserve their language heritage. She continues to serve as the President of the Chinese Language School, all while pursuing her MBA and taking on a leadership role in the Dolan Graduate Business Association. I'm not sure where she finds the time or the energy, but Susan's passion for life and for making a difference in the world is contagious. It's no wonder she is our Loyola medalist! May we all follow Susan's example to selflessly share our gifts to improve the lives of those we touch.

Excellence means loving generously.

Blessed Mother Teresa, one of the world's most revered figures, changed the world by being open to her calling as a missionary to serve the "poorest of the poor" in the slums of Calcutta. The good news is that you don't have to renounce all worldly possessions or be a "saint" to do good work in the world. Thank God – otherwise I would have given up a long time ago!

Instead, we must recognize the poverty that surrounds us in our everyday lives. Mother Teresa said, "There is a terrible hunger for love. We all experience that in our lives—the pain,

the loneliness. We must have the courage to recognize it. The poor you may have right in your own family. Find them. Love them.” We can learn from Mother Teresa how to live out our personal vocations by respecting the dignity of all people, starting with those in our families, at work, and in our communities. There is real truth in the ancient African proverb: “It takes a whole village to raise a child”. I know I would not be able to live out my vocation without the love and support from my family, friends, and this Fairfield community.

Excellence means transforming the world with our hearts and minds.

We all have a calling to be ethical and responsible, not only to our employers, but to the common good. Those in business must work to ensure that the company and the community thrive, through investment in both. As graduates of the Dolan School of Business, we affirmed our commitment to serve as ethical leaders when we signed the MBA Oath introduced at Fairfield this past fall.

Those who are educators will be the frontline – inspiring the hearts and minds of tomorrow’s leaders. How many of us remember that influential teacher who never gave up on us and encouraged us to pursue our dreams? The Graduate School of Education and Allied Professions nurtures such excellence through the Mighty Math Club, where many of you helped elementary school students discover that there’s much more to math than just numbers.

Those who are called to be engineers are charged to design and build a brighter, more efficient future for us all. And, with the new and prestigious Clare Boothe Luce Professorship to the School of Engineering—an honor bestowed on only three universities in the country—the selection of an accomplished female scholar will highlight the growing community of women in the sciences. We hope that this will encourage all students to see that there are no limitations on what they can accomplish—only opportunities.

Those who are writers connect us through language that enlivens us and reveals to us who we are through stories, poetry, novels, and memoirs. Among us today are the first graduates of the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program, whose art is the outcome of inspiration, patience, and perseverance. May we all learn to harness the demands on our time to refocus our attention on what's truly important and employ our words to bring about positive change.

Those who are health care professionals play a critical role caring for the whole person, from shepherding life into the world to helping transition souls to the next. Through the School of Nursing's master's and Doctor of Nursing Practice programs, Fairfield's first doctoral program, our nurses are well-poised to shape the evolving health care landscape, especially in advocating for quality patient care in public policy.

Our honored commencement speaker, Rear Admiral Brian Monahan, Fairfield Class of 1982, strives for the *magis* by living out his vocational calling in medicine. Through his contributions to the field of hematology and oncology in clinical research, Rear Admiral Monahan has helped to improve the lives of thousands by giving many a second chance at life. Today, he continues to serve the community as the Attending Physician for the United States Congress and United States Supreme Court. We all have a role to play in this world and we must have the courage to strive for excellence in whatever we are called to do.

Excellence means never giving up on your dreams.

I would like to recognize another special graduate among us: my mother. Growing up, she put the needs of her family ahead of her own, sacrificing her aspirations to pursue her bachelor's degree. After sending three daughters to college, I am pleased to announce that she received her Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Western Connecticut this morning (with honors, I might add!). Never one to rest on her laurels, starting in August, she will be pursuing a

Master in Nursing Education. Mom, thank you for serving as an inspiration to your family, for never giving up, for pursuing your dreams, and for teaching us to live with purpose and meaning.

At times, this constant longing for excellence may feel like mixed blessing where there is never a sense of complete satisfaction. In some respect, that's the point. We will never be completely done with our work in this world. We can always strive to be and to do "more".

So how shall we, Jesuit-educated leaders, redefine and measure success? Not by the amount of money we make, but by the positive impact we have on those around us. By striving to improve who we are as individuals, by treating one another with dignity and respect, and by living out our vocation with passion and courage. I am certain the more we begin to measure our "success" in these terms, the closer we will get to finding true meaning and happiness in our lives.

Congratulations, fellow graduates. We all have much to be proud of and much more to look forward to in life. May we all lead extraordinary lives, as shown in the smallest, most ordinary, deeds we do. Thank you.