

Lesley University Commencement Address
May 2004

President Wilbur, families, friends, alumni, members of the faculty and administration, and especially the class of 2004, thank you for this opportunity to address these graduates as they transition from the challenges of Lesley to the rigors of life. I know that today is about much more than the completion of college or rejoicing at the prospect of newfound freedom. For these remarkable young men and women, this graduation day represents a triumph over their learning differences. Through courage, determination, and persistence, they have surpassed everyone's expectations—especially their own.

This afternoon I want to talk to the graduating class about success—what it means to be successful in life. In today's society we are being bombarded with images of success that are simply not authentic: spoiled athletes, popular musicians, and flawed celebrities—to name but a few. Consider the reality TV craze for a moment—is it really reality? The Apprentice, the Bachelor, or American Idol—while sometimes entertaining, are they really the images of today's successes? Unfortunately, all too often we are confusing success with wealth, talent, and fame—none of which truly make one successful. Of course, neither do wealth, talent, and fame prohibit success. So, the question is, how do we or should we define success? Over the next ten minutes I would like to share with you my journey toward realizing success—a journey that admittedly is far from complete.

Let me start by telling you that preparing for this address has given me a wonderful opportunity to reflect on my own personal achievements, my many failures, my deep-seated fears, and unbridled dreams. President Wilbur asked me to speak to you because of my resume: the impressive sounding jobs, the advanced degrees, the writing, the speaking—several months ago at a national educational conference I was even asked to deliver the keynote address titled, “The 21st century headmaster, the changing face of school leadership.” All of that that sounds so wonderful...impressive even, but here is the truth—none of those things mean a darn thing—that's simply achievement—in itself not success. What President Wilbur doesn't know about me...and, in fact, what I rarely talk about with anyone but my wife, I have decided to take the risk in telling you today in the hope that my journey comforts, or perhaps inspires, even one of you. So here we go—all of my vulnerabilities and insecurities fully exposed.

I have struggled with the notion of success for as long as I can remember. It started in grade school and continued through the first 13 years of my academic life—a long stretch of decent but unremarkable achievement. In retrospect I have come to understand that my “just ordinary” educational experience resulted from my being uninspired in school. I hated textbooks, lectures, and tests—my mind worked differently than the minds of my classmates. I was far more interested in attending sporting events or concerts and trying to determine the net profit from the event by estimating the size of the audience multiplied by the average ticket price minus the event expenses—always including things like security, insurance costs, and utilities. Unfortunately, in those days this type of analysis didn't necessarily help my GPA.

It wasn't until my sophomore year in college that I hit my educational stride. I declared my major in Organizational Leadership—a then novel upgrade to the classic business

management. It was absolutely perfect for me—allowing me to combine my academic strengths with my actual interests. From that day forward I never received a grade other than an “A” at any level of school. I had found my niche, my island of competence, my area of intelligence. Was that success? No, but I had found competence...and perhaps a path toward success.

I parlayed my newfound competence into a position with 3M Corporation—a multi-billion dollar fortune 500 five hundred company. It was everything that I wanted—a dream job by everyone’s standards...I was the envy of my college classmates who were struggling to find positions in a tight job market. I lived in New York, my home office was in Philadelphia, and my future was bright and clear...in my mind it was simply a matter of time before I ascended through the ranks and took over as CEO. Life was great...or so I had convinced myself. 3M was and remains one of the finest companies in the world, but for me it was exactly like school. While I was seeking new and innovative ways to improve systems and streamline production, they were seeking people who were willing to execute the existing models. I became stifled, frustrated, and yes, again uninspired. My path toward success had taken an unexpected turn for the worse. For the first time in my life I experienced what I understood to be failure. Who was I if I wasn’t who everyone else thought I should be? In time my 3M experience would prove to be one of my greatest assets—it gave me some perspective, a little wisdom, and a touch of humility.

By then my recipe for success consisted of a tablespoon of interest, a teaspoon of competence, a touch of perspective, a smidgen of wisdom, and a dash of humility. I had most of the ingredients, but no idea what to cook. I took a huge leap of faith—betting that my business acumen could turn around a sleepy little school that was on the brink of bankruptcy. When I arrived things were far worse than I imagined—enrollment was way down, teacher attrition was way up, the physical plant was atrocious, and the school had just taken out a \$500,000 loan to stay open. Come to find out the board of trustees were betting on the fact that I was either too naïve or too motivated to let the school fail—a conclusion they had secretly considered inevitable. Well, 11 years, three strategic plans, and eight building projects later Eagle Hill is educationally, financially, strategically, and physically strong. Assuredly this was success? While it sure felt like it, we must not confuse progress with success.

A funny thing happened along the road to Extreme Makeover—Eagle Hill Edition; I fell in love with the kids...and with the school. What started out as a business venture turned into a passion. I quickly realized, however, that to make a lasting difference I needed to do more than build buildings and balance budgets—I needed to be an expert on learning. Six years of night school culminated in a dissertation that challenged the traditional discourse on learning disabilities and changed the way we think of students at Eagle Hill. The findings were simple: learning disabilities do not exist. Yes, I said learning disabilities do not exist. A radical notion for a headmaster whose school specializes in serving students diagnosed with learning disabilities? Perhaps...at first...but once we had the courage to embrace this reality our entire community changed for the better. To emphasize our philosophical shift we began simply by putting parentheses around the prefix “dis” in (dis)ability—recognizing that others in the profession would need a reference to that term. At the same time, we refused to consider our students disabled. Here’s the point—we consider it a truism that each of our brains is wired differently, just as we have different hair color and tastes in music. The problem is that in contemporary

society, the curriculum rests almost exclusively on the foundation of reading, writing, and mathematics—the very areas in which our students often struggle. Ask yourself this question: if the criterion for a high school or college diploma were familiarity with technology, how many of you would be labeled disabled?...and would several of these graduates now be labeled geniuses? If the measure were accomplishment in the performing arts, how many of you would be labeled disabled? What about compassion, would you then be called disabled? School is a terrible place for students with these talents. But here's the good news—a whole world of opportunity awaits those who can make it through school in one piece.

There is a second outcome of my dissertation that I hope everyone in this room will remember. Individuals who look at a child and see learning disabilities have a negative and dangerously limiting outlook on that child's future. Those individuals who look at the same child and see diverse learning abilities see hope and promise in every student. If we do not view kids as capable and set high expectations for their performance, they will never, ever reach their full potential.

And so when I thought—here's a place to rest, a philosophy I can really hang my hat on, it got personal. On July 31, 1999 my son Griffin was born after a complicated delivery. Very early on it was apparent that Griffin was not developing apace. In an ironic twist of fate, at 3 years old he remained a non-communicator and was diagnosed with severe developmental apraxia. In laymen's terms, his brain was not connecting with his mouth. Suddenly, all of my beliefs and convictions about learning were called into question. Could I view my own son as having learning abilities the same way I had asked countless other parents to view their children? Quite honestly, it was a difficult proposition at first...but I've gained some first-hand experience of the power of this perspective. After our first long day at Boston Children's Hospital, my wife and I collapsed on the couch after tucking in the kids. I sat there wishing that what we had learned about Griffin was a mistake, an error—that he would really not have to face the difficulties that we were told he would. Absolutely devastated, I said to my wife Kathryn, "I'd trade anything for Griffin not to have this problem." And with her usual grace, Kathryn reminded me that what I would be trading was Griffin himself—and that our children are not the sum total of their skills and challenges—and beautiful idiosyncrasies. They are individuals, each unique. Not surprisingly, what once was a professional passion soon became a life commitment.

As part of that life commitment, 18 months ago at our annual board retreat, I asked each of our trustees the following question about Eagle Hill School: who are we and who will we become? Each response was more thoughtful and insightful than the last. There was talk of multiple schools, additional scholarships and financial aid, a larger student population—all aimed at allowing Eagle Hill School to touch the lives of more students. But even the most far-reaching of these visions allowed us to educate only several hundred worthy students at a time. When it was my turn to answer, I said that in addition to being the finest school of our kind in the country, I envisioned Eagle Hill School becoming the premier professional development site in the nation—a mission of training tens of thousands of teachers to better educate hundreds of thousands of students...just like Griffin. Over the course of that weekend this vision progressed from possible, to probable, to inevitable. We have since developed a comprehensive strategic plan toward this vision, and this past January we completed the first of three 40,000 square foot buildings needed to make the dream a reality. The goal is to have the professional

development site open in within ten years, unless, of course, Alex Rodriquez or Pedro Martinez—two of the most spoiled athletes—suddenly becomes selfless and donates just one year of his inflated baseball salary to the cause. Imagine...a decade of children that wouldn't have to experience the misery of traditional schooling.

So—would accomplishing our latest strategic initiative finally be success? By now, of course, you know the answer is “no.” I would like to close today by sharing with you what I consider the keys to success, as well as one very recent experience that I hope will crystallize what I believe is success.

- ◆ Find something you love to do and pursue it with passion, vigor, and purpose.
- ◆ Surround yourself with superior people...and separate yourself from those who are not. All of my achievements rest squarely on the shoulders of my closest colleagues—all of whom have been with me from day one.
- ◆ Create goals and live to achieve them. Every single year you must do a personal and professional strategic plan that encompasses every facet of your life.
- ◆ Learn and work while your competitors sleep. With the exception of working smart, there is no substitute for working hard. You must put in the time and effort if you expect to be the very best at what you do.
- ◆ Make lots of mistakes. In the words of Winston Churchill, “Success is the ability to go from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm.” Or, perhaps a more appropriate quote, “learn from other people’s mistakes, you don’t have time to make them all yourself.” Celebrate your vulnerabilities and keep asking “why” did this fail.
- ◆ Give freely and generously of your time and resources to make a difference in the world.
- ◆ Take time to reflect on your life, and, lastly, always take time to thank your parents.

When I listened to my voicemail yesterday afternoon, I smiled as I heard the faint sound of Griffin’s unique and cherished voice say the following: “Hi daddy, it’s Griffin. I got my medal in Karate today. I really like it. I did a good job. I’ll see you tonight, daddy. Bye.” That, my friends, is success...making a profound and enduring difference in the life of someone else.

Go forth from here today and find all the success in the world.

Congratulations...and thank you.