Thank you, Provost Abbott, for that kind introduction. And thank you and President Shonrock for inviting me to speak on this momentous occasion. And to you, the Lindenwood University class of 2016, I say this—getting me up here was the President and Provost’s idea, so you should blame them and not me if I fail to inspire you this morning! Providing inspiration is a pretty tall order, after all. I’ve listened to a lot of these sorts of speeches in my life, and I can’t remember being inspired by any of them!

Lots of commencement speakers, for instance, tell stories about their lives and college days. They sometimes list three or five or however many steps for success based on whatever happened to work for them in their lives. Others offer clichés about how it’s only up from here, or you only get out of life what you put into it, or some other vaguely motivational saying they saw on a poster in the waiting room at their doctor’s office. But I’m not going to insult your intelligence. That sort of thing might work for brand new, wide-eyed freshman. But not you. You’re college graduates. You deserve better.

In fact, I won’t even try to inspire you. I have something entirely different in mind because commencement is an important occasion. It may feel like a bit of a hassle right now. Ok, it may feel like a big hassle! Maybe you’re here only because your family wants to see you walk across this stage and, if left to yourself, you’d be anywhere but here, listening to one of your professors talk at you one last time. Trust me—the feeling is sometimes mutual! But I want us to take a step back for a moment to see why commencement is such an important occasion.
We need to remember that commencement exercises are the one and only time that we gather together all the people who have a stake in this thing we call your college education. Your family and friends are here. Members of the Lindenwood University Board of Directors are here. Representatives of the various staffs that make Lindenwood tick are here: administrative, athletic, maintenance, library, student life, and so on—it’s a very impressive list! And, of course, you are here, and we are here. And by “we” I mean my colleagues and I, the Lindenwood University faculty.

When it’s all said and done, this whole university thing—it’s about us, you the students and we the faculty. Everyone else in this spacious room has put themselves at our service, at the service of our relationship. The relationship between this faculty and their students. The relationship between these students and their faculty. That’s why we lined up and clapped for you on the way in this morning, and why you returned the favor once we were all in our ceremonial places. You came to Lindenwood to be educated, and we’ve tried our very best to ensure that you have been educated. And so you will always be our students and we will always be your faculty. This is an enduring bond that will be with us all for the rest of our lives. Five, ten, fifteen years from now we’ll run into each other at a Cards game, or in a restaurant, or who knows where. And we’ll smile, and say hello, and that bond will still be strong. You’ll remember that fascinating class discussion, or that timely and encouraging advice given during office hours. We’ll remember that paper you wrote for us, or the look in your eyes when the last piece in that conceptual puzzle finally fell into place.

This intellectual bond between us is not only the result of shared experience, however. It does not come only from the fact that we—faculty and students—have spent a great deal of time in each other’s company over the past few years. This intellectual bond is also a bond forged by
common participation in a great tradition, perhaps the greatest tradition. For we, your faculty, have labored to induct you into that ancient fellowship of women and men who can claim to wield one of the two greatest technologies ever devised.

Now, it is my considered opinion as someone who has a PhD and wears funny-looking robes, that the two greatest technologies ever devised in human history are whisky, and a liberal arts education. I’ll leave it up to you to decide which of these two is the greater. After all, this choice is a matter of holy conscience that each individual must make for themselves. At Lindenwood University, we put some restrictions on one of these great technologies, and I know that isn’t always popular with you. And I don’t think I’m letting you in on too big of a secret if I tell you that I’ve overheard members of your faculty express similar sentiments from time to time. But if we restrict the one, it is only in order to better serve the other.

All of us at Lindenwood University—students, faculty, Board of Directors, the various staffs I mentioned—we are all committed to education in the liberal arts tradition. And I take this as a mark of great distinction. Because this technology, this tradition of liberal arts education, is not a fly-by-night idea. It isn’t an elaborate scam to sell bad steaks, for instance. And it isn’t a get-rich-quick scheme. In fact, it is the exact opposite. It is hard work. Its rewards are hard to quantify. It measures its return-on-investment not in terms of dollars earned and not in terms of living a life full of riches, but in terms of living a rich life, a life full of meaning and significance for you and those around you, for your family and for your community.

Traditionally speaking, the liberal arts encompass aspects of what we refer to today as the sciences, humanities, and fine and performing arts. They are disciplines like astronomy, history, literature, mathematics, music, philosophy, religion, and theatre, just to name a representative sample. These are disciplines that are not simply interested in finding you a job when you
graduate, although they are seldom given enough credit for their ability to do precisely that. Instead, they are primarily interested in helping you find purpose in life. They try to understand something of the human condition and our place in the universe. While you may not major in one of these disciplines at a liberal arts institution like Lindenwood University, you nonetheless complete general education requirements in these disciplines. Which means that even if you major in more purely vocational disciplines such as communications, exercise science, or international business, your approach to those subjects is shaped and enriched by the liberal arts.

And this liberal arts tradition is rich indeed. It has been incredibly successful as a technology, which becomes obvious when you consider how long it has been with us. It goes way back. It goes back to Mary and George Sibley founding Lindenwood in 1827. It goes back to one hundred and forty years before the United States existed, when Harvard University was founded in 1636. It goes back to the University of Bologna in Italy, which was founded in 1088 and is the oldest university in Europe. It goes back to Al-Qarawiyyin University in Fez, Morocco, which was founded in 859 and is the oldest continuously functioning university in the world. It goes back to the academy founded by Plato in Athens, Greece in the fourth century BCE, and to the one-man-faculty of Master Kong—otherwise known as Confucius—in China in the fifth century BCE. Every general education course you took, every graduation requirement you met, every paper you wrote, presentation you delivered, book you read, experiment you did, equation you solved, journal article you analyzed, and any other sort of intellectual work we as a faculty have thrown at you—each of these things has been as the stroke of a chisel, wielded with care by your faculty, slowly but surely crafting you into something much more complex and interesting than mere “graduates.” We have been crafting you into ambassadors and representatives for a way of being in the world that is virtually as old as recorded history itself.
You may not be aware of this, but higher education is currently going through something of an identity crisis, and this, our cherished liberal arts tradition, is under attack. There are people out there—and I know this is going to shock you, but I’m not kidding, these people exist and are more influential than you might expect—there are people out there, who believe the liberal arts education you sought and found here at Lindenwood isn’t for everyone. It’s a luxury for the privileged few, they say. Better to send students through a program that is quicker, easier, and cheaper. Get them plugged into the workforce as soon as possible and leave a rigorous education in the liberal arts tradition to the students who can afford it and—so they imply—who can appreciate it. Such an approach to higher education would deny true participation in this venerable tradition to those who come after you. They would deny them access to this greatest of all technologies. Why? Because they didn’t win the pre-natal lottery to be born into the right kind family.

It is my distinct pleasure to report that this is not the Lindenwood way. That your *alma mater*—and, perhaps most importantly, we your faculty—reject this undemocratic, elitist nightmare. We stand committed to providing students—you, and others like you—with the opportunity to become bearers of this great tradition regardless of what sort of family you are born into, or where you are born into it. It is this commitment that makes Lindenwood stand out from the pack, from all those other institutions out there that only want to take your money, shove a “degree” in your hands, and send you on your way. It is this commitment that makes a Lindenwood education truly like no other.

And so today, we—the various Lindenwood staffs, our Board of Directors, and your faculty—send you out as ambassadors and representatives. And not only as ambassadors and representatives for the liberal arts tradition, as important and meaningful as that is. But also as
ambassadors and representatives for us, for Lindenwood University, for everything that we have worked to accomplish from Mary and George Sibley on down to today. We know what we have accomplished with you, we are proud of it, we are proud of you, and we have faith in you. Keep faith also with us. Thank you.