

# Convocation Speech for Univ. of Illinois, Department of Chemistry

Hye Kyung Timken, 1987 Ph.D. in Physical Chemistry

May, 2025

Thank you for the kind introduction. It is an honor for me to be a part of this convocation. As a fellow alumna, a graduate of the 1987 class, I am thrilled to come back and stand before you to salute your achievements.

Graduates! Congratulations for your achievements! You should be proud to have earned a tough degree from one of the best chemistry departments in the country! It is a degree that I also hold dear with great pride!

Family and friends of the graduates – congratulations for your accomplishments as well! Your unwavering support and encouragement produced this fine moment.

Now I ask to all of you, pat your own shoulder or each other's back and say that "I did a great job!" or "you did a great job!"

Now, I am going to spend a few moments sharing a few bits of advice that I have come to appreciate after working in the chemistry-related industry for 38 years.

The first piece of advice - Learning never ends! Your degree has proven that you have learned how to learn. So, as you start your career or further your education, consider that your current degree is a learner's permit. I strongly encourage you keep learning!

In my case, I learned in Illinois under Prof. Eric Oldfield, how to conduct research using solid-state NMR, then started my industrial career in the analytical department analyzing catalytic materials. My first job was kind of an extension of my Ph.D. graduate schoolwork. After a couple of years, I came to realize that I could use my chemistry background more broadly to generate ideas for improved catalysts. This motivated me to learn the fundamental chemistry and engineering of solid-state catalysis, and this allowed me to transition to a new team focused on development of key technologies for the company. The transition was what really jump-started my career as an industrial scientist.

As my career progressed, different projects required more opportunities to keep learning. For example, I had to learn about catalytic chemistry in ionic liquids in order to replace hydrofluoric acid in a petroleum refinery process. In my current project, I am learning about the chemistry of plastics recycling.

Let me tell you again, a commitment to learning is what will keep your career fresh, interesting and sometimes fun. It will help you keep moving toward to your career goal.

The second piece of advice - Ask thoughtful questions and ask for advice. I know that everyone here is really smart! But sometimes really smart people, especially new employees or new graduate students, think that asking questions might reveal some kind of deficiency. Do not think that way. In fact, a question, particularly a question to which you have given some thought, reveals your wisdom and confidence. So, as you join a new team after the graduation, do not hesitate to ask questions or ask for advice from your more experienced team members. Likely, they will welcome your questions, and happily share their thoughts with you.

The third and the last piece of advice - Have a positive attitude and trust your problem solving ability. Your attitude affects how you react to adversity, your ability to grow and learn, and how you overcome challenges. By maintaining a positive attitude, you can navigate challenges more effectively and find opportunities for growth.

You do have the problem solving ability, and you know it. You have just completed your education successfully during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of you suffered through Covid infection, for some of you maybe it was more than once. Perhaps, for some of you, the pandemic disrupted your finances and resources, it caused high stress and anxiety, even depression. You and the university fought back with masks, 6-feet of separation, and distance learning. Your education continued and you finally made it! You proved that you have the persistence and the resilience to succeed under difficult circumstances. I have a real admiration and respect for what many of you might have gone through in your educational journey.

It appears that you may be graduating into a period of some uncertainty. Unfortunately, this year, there are higher uncertainties in business, industry, academics, and government. As you proceed, I encourage you to remind yourself of what you have already achieved under the past challenging circumstances. Remind yourself that you can continue to succeed under the next challenge that is coming to you.

Best wishes, and congratulations, again. Thank you!