

Department of Chemistry
2019 Convocation Remarks
Dr. May D. Lee

Thank you, Prof. Hergenrother, for the kind introduction. Thank you Professor Gruebele and the faculty of chemistry department for inviting me to address this graduating class. It is a great honor in deed.

Congratulations, Ladies and Gentlemen for reaching an important milestone.

What you have learned in the past 4 years or more provides you with a solid foundation to go forward in the next stage of your life. Formal training will continue for those of you going on to graduate school or professional schools, but learning will continue for all of you. Learning in areas outside of chemistry or your particular specialties in chemistry is particularly important for those of you going into a job and starting your career. Learning does not stop when you get your first job. A good first job is the starting point of a career; it is not a career by itself. Your career, the next 30 - 40 years of your working life, depends on what you do with your degree, what you do with what you have learned at this great institution.

Chemistry is at the interphase of many other scientific disciplines and technologies today, and facilitates the understanding and advancement of these fields. You are well prepared to move into many new industries, in addition to, the traditional chemical and pharmaceutical industry, provided that you have the interest and are ready to do a lot of on-the-job learning.

I started my career in a microbial fermentation based natural product screening program in a large pharma. I learned work related microbiology and biochemistry from my colleagues and by reading. I developed expertise in research information management in order to increase the productivity of the program I was in. My interest expended into genetic regulation and control of metabolism when I moved to biopharma startups. Somewhere along the way people began to think of me as a biologist who really understand and can talk chemistry. I simply followed what interests me and make sense, to solve the research problem on hand without restricting myself to chemical methods. In fact, I solved my very first assignment in the natural product screening program back in 1977 by such an approach.

Now, I have a few special words for the female members of this graduating class. My maternal grand mother who was born in the very late eighteen hundreds, encouraged all her daughters to go to university, said that how can women have equal rights if women are not equally educated. This was in China, in the thirties and forties. My mother was a BS majored in chemistry.

When I stayed behind to finish my PhD study while Ving moved ahead to postdoc at Harvard, my mother in law was angry that I did not move with him, my mother thought I made the right choice. After the birth of our daughter in 1978, my mother in law assumed I will quit my job and stay at home to look after her grand daughter, my mother, on the other hand, made it possible for me to go back to work after a 3-month leave.

I gave the same support to my daughter who is a BS chemist, with interest in computer programing and laboratory automation and data management. Her major in chemistry got her first job, her diverse interest in combination with her training in chemistry allowed her to grow and develop her career path.

Ladies, now that you have achieved equal education as men, please do not drop out of the work force even as you take time to have children. Please also do not strive to be super women; it is a balance you need to work out between you and your partner.

In closing, I encourage you all to follow and develop your interest outside of chemistry while using your training in chemistry as the foundation to go forward in your career. Soft skills such as communication and social networking are just as important as STEM once you are on a job. Your training in STEM get you into the door of a job, you soft skills well propel you to excel in your career.

Congratulations! March forward to a successful career!