

# The Common Messages in Our Commencement Speeches

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Truth. Kindness. Dignity. Courage. Hope. They are not fields in which you can earn a degree. They are not things you would normally list under “other experience” on your résumé. And they do not necessarily represent subjects covered in college courses.

Why then did so many commencement speakers at universities across the nation focus on them this year? Most likely it is because today these values seem to be in short supply.

This year, underlying the usual college humor, tips about starting a career and upbeat “find-your-passion” advice offered to graduates was an unmistakable uneasiness and concern about the growing divide in our nation along political, cultural, socioeconomic, racial and gender lines. Speakers from across the spectrum, from university and business leaders to politicians and Hollywood celebrities, voiced concerns about these issues. Many also expressed optimism and confidence that the newly minted graduates are well equipped to deal with these emerging challenges.

Purdue University president [Mitch Daniels](#) cautioned graduates against joining what he called the new privileged elite of highly educated Americans who, after graduating from top universities, too often wall themselves off from the less fortunate in society. He urged graduates to use their education to build relationships with others from diverse backgrounds as a hedge against the tribalism taking hold in America. At New York University, Canadian prime minister [Justin Trudeau](#) spoke along the same lines, asking graduates to reach out to people from different backgrounds, beliefs and values as way to bridge cultural divides. Similarly, [Nicholas Zeppos](#), chancellor of Vanderbilt University, told graduates that, along with their new diplomas, they inherited a responsibility to apply their education as advocates for civil discourse, thoughtfulness, reflection and deliberation.

In welcoming new members to the journalism profession, [Oprah Winfrey](#) spoke about the challenges to truth, honesty and public trust that await the graduates of the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California. She outlined a world in which internet and social media users actively work to erode trust in public institutions, and she encouraged graduates to overcome cynicism with truth, skill and facts. Another speaker who lamented the distrust in government facing new graduates was billionaire philanthropist and former New York City mayor [Michael Bloomberg](#). He told graduates of Rice University that dishonesty and lack of trust in Washington are among the significant challenges graduates will confront, but he expressed confidence they could and would overcome them.

U.S. senator Cory Booker did not discuss specific political challenges facing the nation in his remarks to Princeton University graduates, but he did recommend they “reject the ‘great man’ theory of history” that would have them rely on people in powerful positions to address the challenges we face. Pointing out that men and women whose names most will never know are those who make the greatest difference, he urged graduates to use power within themselves to make a positive difference in the world through small acts of kindness, decency and dignity. That, he said, is the way to change the world.

At my own university, Notre Dame, Brazilian judge Sergio Moro, noted for his work to fight corruption in his country, urged graduates to find and develop within themselves the courage, creativity and determination to pursue justice and just causes wherever they find them. Moro’s message was not unlike one Apple CEO Tim Cook shared with graduates at Duke University. Cook pointed to wisdom imparted to him by his friend and mentor Steve Jobs: “the great idea comes from a restless refusal to accept things as they are” and then finding the courage and creativity to change them.

Although the themes discussed by these and other speakers were understandably broad, their underlying message was clear: the challenges we face today and will encounter tomorrow cannot be solved with intellect alone. No matter how academically rigorous its education or how high the starting salaries of its graduates, a college or university that fails to stress a student’s continued moral development does a disservice to the individual and society. By focusing on such fundamental values, the remarks by 2018 commencement speakers provided a fitting capstone to the ideal of higher education.

I imagine this may also have been on the mind of Drew Faust as she delivered her farewell commencement address as president of Harvard University. With the wisdom that comes from more than 10 years of serving in that role, she concluded with an overriding message of hope - hope in the power of higher education to change the world, hope in the Class of 2018 and hope that future graduates may lead us all to do better. I agree.