“College Life as Reality TV: Embrace Your New Alliance!”

Faculty Speaker’s Remarks for the 2012 MavsMeet Convocation

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Thank you, Holli, for that kind introduction. I’m honored to be one of your mentors. And to all of you out there – Welcome to Mav Country! How are you doing today?

Great! Well, let’s keep things at today’s convocation going with one of my favorite group activities: a quiz. Now don’t worry: This little quiz won’t count toward your final grade. And I know you’ll do fine, assuming that you have some experience with watching television.

Have any of you out there ever watched TV? Let’s see a show of hands...

Here’s how it goes: I will quote a famous line and, as a group, you tell me the name of the TV program from which it comes. Got it? To make this a bit more fun, I’m going to use the name of some real people.

“Dean Michael Moore and Dean Pam Jansma? You are the last team to arrive.
I am sorry to tell you that you’ve been eliminated…”
(The Amazing Race)

“Dr. Frank Lamas, the tribe has spoken.”
(Survivor)

“By a vote of eight to one, Jennifer Fox, you have been evicted from…” (Finish it for me…)
(... The Big Brother house)

And, after my speech at today’s convocation, I suspect that I might hear these famous lines...

“Dr. David Silva? You’re fired.”
(The Apprentice)
So, how many of you earned a perfect score? Great! You earn an “A” in “Reality TV 101.” (Too bad it’s not part of our curriculum.) But seriously, let’s think about what reality TV can teach us about, well… reality.

While it’s true that each program has its own unique characteristics, they all share common traits. For example, the fundamental premise is the same: The producers say, “Let’s throw complete strangers into a stressful situation and watch what happens.” In the world of reality TV, contestants are flown to a special location where:

▶ they share close living quarters
▶ they spend hours getting to know one another (for better and for worse)
▶ they eat together
▶ … make new friends (or enemies or “frenemies”)
▶ … form, break, and reconfigure alliances
▶ … compete, confront, console, and canoodle …

Now, let me see…

What does that sound like? Maybe… uhm… Going to college?

**You’re all about to embark on your own version of Reality TV – minus the “TV” part.**

*Very cool.*

Now, having “been there, done that” about twenty-five years ago, I can say this: You are in for some of the best experiences of your life. Enjoy it. Get involved. Connect with others who share your interests. Try something new! But never forget that your primary responsibility is to your education. So above all else, what are you going to do?

**GO TO CLASS!**

What did I just say? (“Go to class!”)
I can’t hear you! (“Go to class!”)

Excellent!

Yes, indeed: Your college years are sure to be great. That said, not every experience you have will be easy - breezy - fun and frolic. To paraphrase a bumper sticker, “stuff happens.” There are going to be challenges – Just like on the magic TV box.
On each episode of *The Apprentice*, teams work to exhaustion on a “business task,” always looking to please “The Donald.”

On *America’s Next Top Model*, participants have to “step it up” and “work it, gurrrrl” during those crazy photo shoots.

On *Big Brother*, House Guests compete for food, luxuries, the Power of Veto and Head of Household.

And on the *Amazing Race*, teams are confronted by Roadblocks, Detours, U-Turns.

College life is remarkably similar. You’ll face all sorts of challenges:

- You’ll have read *far* more than you ever had to before
- Much of what you read will be difficult to understand
- You’ll have assignments that you can’t simply toss off on the bus on the way to school. (How many of you did *that* in high school? Raise your hand... Don’t be shy. I did, too...)
- You’ll write essays that you think are awesome ... only to find that they’re returned to you bleeding red ink.
- You’ll be challenged over and over in form of quizzes, midterms, projects, and finals.

You’ve got a whole lot of work ahead of you. *But don’t despair.* Despite what you might be thinking at this point, I’m not here to get you all depressed. Not at all. I’m here to tell you how it is and, more importantly, to let you know that you can do it.

Just remember this:

**In life, you will not be judged or defined by the obstacles that you face.**

**Rather, your ultimate happiness and success will be determined by how you respond to those obstacles.**
So …

▶ When you hit a roadblock, will you come to a complete stop and give up?
  • Or will you confront the challenge so that you can press forward?

▶ If you feel as if you’ll be the next one “voted off the island,” will you go into a funk and shut down?
  • Or will you maintain your focus, continue to work hard, and trust that your efforts will pay off?

▶ When think that nobody else can possibly understand what you’re going through, will you simply withdraw and fade away?
  • Or will you acknowledge the fact that everybody has those kinds of feelings and then seek guidance from those who can help you out?

Keep this in mind: No matter how tough things might get, you never have to go it alone. There are lots of people out there to offer encouragement, advice, and assistance. Surround yourself with supporters; draw strength from them. In the crazy world of Reality TV, the winners aren’t usually those who operate in isolation; rather, they are typically those who know how to form and employ the power of an **ALLIANCE**.

In the 21st century, being able to work well with others is **vital** for success. Then again, this isn’t news... The importance of “the team” is as old as humankind. Indeed, most of history’s important figures – both famous and infamous – worked in the context of a team. It might have been an army, or a committee, or a band of disciples. Even fictional characters appreciate the power of teamwork. Take superheroes. They’re strong and they’re smart: they know that they are even **stronger** when they work together. The list of superhero alliances comprises such illustrious groups as:

▶ The Justice League
▶ The Avengers
▶ The Fantastic Four
▶ The X-men
▶ The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles
▶ The Thundercats
▶ The Powerpuff Girls
In each case, the power of the alliance exceeds the sum of the powers of its members. So part of my advice to you today is this: as you move forward in life, forge strategic alliances. Start now.

Look to your left... Now to your right... In front of you... Behind you... Every other person around you or up here on this stage is a potential ally, somebody who can work with you and help you navigate your academic journey as a friend, a study-partner, or a mentor.

Let these members of the UT Arlington family be part of your alliance...

Your fellow students, your professors, your advisors, administrators, staff members...

Let us be your X-Men...

your Avengers...

your...

your Powerpuff Girls.

Alliances are critical to success. They provide companionship and support. They also protect you from elements that can cause harm. Yes, indeed: every superhero has a weakness... The most widely documented case is that of Superman, for whom danger comes in the form of ... what? (Right! Kryptonite.) Captain Marvel is vulnerable to lightning; Wonder Woman loses her powers if she’s bound by a male; for the Green Lantern, weakness comes when he’s exposed to the color yellow.

And then there’s Batman. His powers derive not from supernatural sources or scientific experiments gone awry. Rather, he is a hero of a different sort, a hero whose chief vulnerability can be summed up in one word: “Bruce,” as in “Bruce Wayne.” You see, Batman’s powers are limited by the simple fact that HE... IS... HUMAN.

As am I, as are we all: human. We are all vulnerable. Each of us has our own achilles heel, our kryptonie, our “color yellow.”

So, Mavericks: It’s time for a quick self-assessment.

WHAT’S YOUR KRYPTONITE?

▶ Do you struggle with keeping things organized?
▶ Are you prone to sleeping late and thus missing class?
▶ Are you ashamed to ask for help when you need it?
Are you afraid that if you speak up in class, you’ll ask a stupid question and reveal your ignorance?

Do you suffer from a lack confidence? Are you inappropriately overconfident?

Whatever your personal kryptonite might be, deal with it. Identify your weaknesses and then take ‘em down. Don’t let a little bit of kryptonite stand between the person you are today and the person you are destined to become tomorrow and beyond.

And when you find yourself struggling on your own, turn to your alliance and ask for help. Everybody can benefit from the support of faithful accomplices. I know...

During my first three semesters as an undergrad, I was no academic Superman – not by a long shot. I struggled. Part of my difficulty was a lack of preparation, not so much academic, but cultural. I arrived at college not knowing what to expect. While I might normally look to my mom and dad for support, they had little to offer, as they hadn’t earned bachelor’s degrees. (I, like many of you, I am a first-generation college student.) And I certainly couldn’t reveal my ignorance to my new college friends, especially since they seemed to know what was going on. I was so lost. This situation gave rise to the other big problem I confronted: a profound lack of confidence. When it came to being in college, I felt incompetent, like an imposter. I sensed that I didn’t deserve to be there. I tried to cope, but nothing worked. I was losing hope, and it showed.

Thank goodness for my alliance. When my friends recognized that I was struggling and unhappy, they stepped in. One of them suggested that I spend time with an academic counselor, somebody who would guide me toward a better understanding of myself and my academic passions, and then help me figure out a way to fit them together. After a few counseling sessions, things began to change – dramatically. For example, I discovered the discipline known as linguistics and realized almost instantly that it was “my thing.” I switched my major from applied math, and soon found myself being more engaged in all of my courses. I also made the difficult decision to quit my off-campus job (which I had started before entering college) and find employment on campus. I landed a job as an undergraduate research assistant in a psychology lab. The position saved me time traveling to and from work. More importantly, it gave me a taste for what it felt like to do so research. I liked it – lots. For the first time in my post-high school life, I stopped thinking in terms of failure and began to think in terms of success. In just one semester, I went from being a “C” student to a straight-“A” student. I eventually applied to four graduate programs at top universities and got
accepted – to all of them – with generous fellowship support. The rest of my career followed from there.

Through this experience, I realized that I did deserve to be in college. I began to nurture the academic hero within. I also developed a deep appreciation for the power of the alliance, an appreciation that inspires me to assume a leadership role in the academic community... to pay it forward... to help make our university as vibrant and effective as possible ...

Most importantly, I learned that I could take on almost any challenge. Whatever the competition or roadblock, there was always a way to keep myself moving toward my goals.

If my life were a reality TV show, nobody would be more surprised than I am to see how far I’ve come. Growing up in a working class immigrant family, I could hardly imagine that I would have:

▶ Earned three academic degrees from great universities;
▶ Won the right to wear this robe & hood, indicating my status as a “Doctor of Philosophy”;
▶ Take ownership of these cords and this pin, from the Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi;
▶ Been awarded this medallion for outstanding teaching, from The University of Texas System Board of Regents.

To some, these things are meaningless “academic bling-bling.” But to me, this bling is very important. Each item isn’t so much a reminder of what I’ve accomplished but of what I have overcome. The bling is sacramental to me. It serves as:

an outward sign
of an inward grace
set ablaze by an voracious appetite for learning
and a fierce determination to beat the odds.

And there’s one more thing of which I’m proud: Having the privilege of standing before you today, sharing my story, and providing a few words of encouragement and advice.

I’d like to close by making a final observation about life in college versus “Reality TV.” On most reality TV shows, there’s only one winner.

▶ One apprentice.
▶ A single next top model.
▶ A sole survivor.
Here’s where “reality TV” is not the same as “reality.” When it comes to college, especially here at UT Arlington, there isn’t just one winner. Every single one of you has the potential to succeed.

- To win that final challenge.
- To be the ultimate survivor.
- To reach the final destination of your own “Amazing Race”: Graduation.

I look forward to being here in four years when you graduate, cheering you on as you cross this very stage. Until then, I want each of you to study hard, play fair, perform honorably, never give up and most importantly… What are you going to do?

GO... TO... CLASS!

Excellent!
Thank you!