

**“A Letter to the SMU Class of 2020”**  
**Remarks to 2016 SMU Convocation:**  
**Provost Steven C. Currall**  
**21 August 2016**

Thirty-nine years ago, during autumn of 1977, I was in the position that you are in today, as a first year student. All those years later, today, I am delighted to have the opportunity to share thoughts for you to contemplate as you begin your life at SMU.

Although this may be your first college convocation, you probably know that such academic ceremonies have a certain agenda. Typically, the University asks a person to give you a speech full of obvious platitudes such as, “Listen to your inner voice!” “Be true to yourself!”

In a few moments, I will share my thoughts, some of which I hope that you may not have considered before.

By the way, I once heard an outstanding speech at an academic ceremony like this. The speech was the form of a verbal “love letter” from a mother who attended her daughter’s graduation at another university. In the speech, the mother recounted the daughter’s upbringing, how the daughter had frustrated her mother so terribly, how the mother wondered if the daughter’s wicked temper would prevent the young lady from doing anything meaningful with her life. But, now the mother was so proud of all her daughter had accomplished as she was graduating. The speech emotionally touched each person in the audience.

How did I know that it was truly a great speech? Because it passed the “knitting test.” What do I mean by the knitting test? During the speech, there was a grandmother who was sitting in the front row doing her knitting to pass the time. Halfway through the speech, the grandmother put her knitting aside and listened to the speech with her full attention. That’s what I mean by a great speech passing the “knitting test.”

Today, I am relieved to see that none of you have brought your knitting! And, I am also relieved that I have not yet seen any of you looking at your cell phone, which, for today’s young people is similar to a grandmother’s knitting because you use the phone to pass the time when you are bored. In fact, a recent survey found that 76% of 13- to 24-year-olds said they were addicted to their devices! I will return to topic of addictions later...

During the next few minutes I will suggest what I believe you must now begin to think about more deeply as you begin your SMU adventure. I won’t say “worry” about these topics in the traditional sense of anxious worrying. Rather, I raise some topics about which I hope you have constructive and productive intellectual struggles during your time at SMU.

In a sense, I will suggest what you should worry about and what not to worry about.

First, you should be fully confident, that you have made an extraordinarily wise decision in electing to come to SMU!

You are entering a world-class university. For example, a recent ranking showed that SMU is in the top 15% of the leading 1,000 universities around the world!

As SMU begins its second century, it is positioned like no other university in the United States to continue to fulfill its role as a truly a “global research university with a liberal arts tradition.”

Why do I believe so strongly in the future of SMU? Because we have a unique confluence of several strengths that are propelling us into the future:

First, SMU has a tradition of excellence in faculty and students. SMU faculty members have been elected as members of the National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. They have won Grammy Awards, and many others. I urge you to take the opportunity to meet your fascinating SMU faculty members during their office hours to seek their counsel and advice.

And, SMU students are excellent. In terms of SAT test scores, you are the strongest class in SMU’s history! Beyond test scores, each of you have demonstrated an affinity for leading others.

In fact, each one of you has been hand-picked to be a member of the SMU community and because we believe in your ability to contribute to our community and to impact the world in a positive way.

Indeed, we take seriously the description of SMU as “World Changers Shaped Here.” We are expecting that you, through whatever your life and career path, will benefit society, the community in which you choose to live, and your families.

Second, in addition to faculty and student excellence, the University recently finished the largest comprehensive fundraising campaign its history, with the lion’s share of the new funds dedicated to academic programs and facilities.

Third, SMU has been ranked by some publications as the most beautiful campus in the nation. As President Turner likes to say, “Life is too short to go to college on an ugly campus.” You have chosen to be a student on one of the most beautiful campuses anywhere in the world!

Fourth, SMU is fortunate to be located in the great cosmopolitan and global city of Dallas. In Dallas, we place little importance on a person’s social class, gender, race or religion. Opportunity is created by hard work, individual initiative and leadership toward a common goal, even if it takes several failures to get there.

I’ve lived in cities around the world such as London, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and San Francisco where much greater importance is placed on one’s family background, the school one attended, one’s ethnicity, and religion.

Our American, and especially Texan, values are the antithesis of that. We care much more about where someone is going than where they have been. We care not about family background or ethnicity. These values are what you will experience as an SMU student.

Lastly, and importantly, SMU has a deep sense of community. SMU’s faculty and staff members wake up every morning thinking about how to provide a stimulating and meaningful educational experience for you. You are the reason that we have dedicated our work lives to creating new knowledge and disseminating it to enrich your intellect, leadership skills, character, and spiritual life!

Indeed, SMU is distinctive, in that, it is one of the few universities in the world that is dedicated to fostering your intellect, leadership skills, character, and spiritual life. The multi-dimensionality of your SMU experience sets your experience apart from what students receive at other universities.

So, for all those reasons, your excellent judgment is already apparent by your presence here today!

Now, on to the thoughts and advice that I wish to share with you and that I hope you will think about more deeply beginning today...

In my role at SMU, I feel a great privilege to work in service of all of you.

To be clear, mine is not a parental role. I would not presume to imply that I am one of your parents. I am not. And, no one can replace the nurturing care that your parents have provided.

But, an exciting aspect of my job is that it involves nurturing your educational life at SMU.

Every day, I work tirelessly to help create the conditions that help you flourish and have a life-changing educational experience that will position you for success in all aspects of your future life.

My role involves supporting you, encouraging you, and sometimes providing guidance about how you should think and act differently.

So, I will share with you what I have learned in the 39 years since I sat in the chair where you sit today.

Those many years ago, on the day that my parents had finished helping me move into my dormitory room, I walked them to their car in the parking lot to see them off. There, on the sidewalk, as I can still see in my mind's eye, my parents gave me words of encouragement and admonition.

They also gave me a written letter of advice and counsel.

So, similar to what my parents did for me, I have written you a "letter."

It is what I would write to each one of you if you were my children, all 1,800 of you who are freshmen or transfer students!

So, I will now read my letter to you:

*Dear (insert your name),*

*You will probably remember when the high school counselor told you that you can be anything you want and that you can accomplish anything.*

*So, how exactly do you reach your potential? What choices do you make that will enable you to find your path?*

*I have five recommendations that will help you find your path.*

*Others have told you to "follow your passion." In contrast, I believe that is incomplete advice.*

*My first recommendation is that there are actually not one, but two criteria to follow to finding your life path.*

*Following your passion amounts to finding what you are intrinsically motivated to do.*

*By “intrinsic motivation,” I am referring to what you do simply for the pleasure of doing it.*

*Some of you will love doing mathematics or accounting simply because you love the precision of numbers. Others of you will be fascinated by studying history or literature because you are enthralled with the narratives of others’ lives and perspectives. Some of you love to build things, which will lead you to engineering. Some of you love to dance, play music, or be a visual artist.*

*But, finding what you are intrinsically motivated to do is not enough. You must find something for which you have some aptitude and talent.*

*You need not be the most talented person in the world at something. But, pick something where you learn relatively quickly and that you can do a competitive level.*

*Besides, even if you love to do something, it’s no fun if you have no capacity for actually doing it.*

*That’s not to say that you should fear failure. As J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter stories, said in a graduation speech: “It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously, that you might as well not have lived at all; in which case, you’ve failed by default.”*

*By the way, one of the thrilling things about life is that it has a series of phases whereby you transition from one passion to another.*

*You won’t have only one passion in your life. There may be different passions during different phases of life. That is why I urge you strive to continually learn throughout your life, well after your time at SMU.*

*Now, my second recommendation to you: Make choices that lead to additional future choices.*

*That is, make decisions that lead to a greater number of future opportunities. During your time at SMU, you are in the business of creating future options for yourself.*

*For example, choose subjects to study at SMU that offer many job or graduate school prospects.*

*Do not make choices that constrain what options you might have available to you in the future. Especially, avoid life and/or career limiting decisions such as substance abuse or other addictions, criminal acts, or abusing someone else emotionally, physically, or sexually.*

*By the way, on the addiction point, alcohol, and its effects, are vastly over-rated!*

*Also, don't let anyone tell you that marijuana is not a gateway drug. It is a gateway drug to harsher and even more dangerous drugs. I personally saw this happen in a close friend of mine when I was young. He started with marijuana and later died in his 20s from a heroin overdose.*

*Here's recommendation number 3: Develop and protect your reputation for having the highest ethical standards.*

*As you continue through life, your reputation for good character and judgment will be the single most important factor that determines whether you progress to positions of greater responsibility.*

*Your technical skills will help get you a job but they will not get you promoted, certainly not to higher levels of stewardship. Your credibility and trustworthiness are vital to your character:*

*Years ago, I used to teach a course on how to negotiate with others. One of my favorite readings to assign was an article entitled, "When is it Legal to Lie in Negotiations?"*

*The answer? Never, never, never!*

*This leads me to one of my favorite Mark Twain quotes: "If you tell the truth, you don't need to remember anything." You don't need to remember anything because the facts will always show what you did.*

*And, remember this quote from the poet Maya Angelou: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."*

*Here's recommendation number 4: Recognize, and accept, that you may fall in love with someone you don't expect to.*

*As you know, I am from Missouri so I fully expected to marry a nice Midwestern girl.*

*As it turned out, I did marry a nice Midwestern girl. It's just that she was from the Midwest of an entirely different country on an entirely different continent!*

*Our team at SMU has gone to great lengths to create a student body that is diverse with respect to geographical origin, race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, religion, etc.*

*Don't run in a herd of other students who are just like you. Spend time with people who are very different from you. Those relationships will yield the greatest learning.*

*My final point is actually not a recommendation but a question that I contemplated when I was your age: Is it more important to be less traditionally successful, yet be relaxed and happy and spend time with family?*

*Or, is it more important to work hard, perhaps start a business or a non-profit, maybe even make the world a better place along the way?*

*To answer this question, consider the following parable, developed by Richard Light a professor at Harvard, of a happy fisherman living a simple life on a small island.*

*The fisherman goes fishing for a few hours every day. He catches some fish, sells them to his friends, and enjoys spending the rest of the day with his wife and children, and napping. He couldn't imagine changing a thing in his relaxed and easy life.*

*Now, let's tweak the parable: A business person recently visits the island and quickly sees how this fisherman could become rich.*

*He could catch more fish, start up a business, market the fish, open a cannery, maybe even issue an initial public offering on the public stock markets. Ultimately he would become truly successful. He could donate some of his fish to hungry children worldwide and might even save lives.*

*"And then what?" asks the fisherman.*

*"Then you could spend lots of time with your family," replies the visitor.*

*"And, you would have made a difference in the world.*

*You would have used your talents, and fed some poor children, instead of just lying around all day."*

*The answer is up to you. But, I hope that this parable will lead you to think about what really matters to you, and what each of you feels you might owe, or not owe, to the broader community.*

These are ideas that you must reflect upon throughout your time at SMU.

I will conclude by reminding you that “to whom much is given, much is expected.”

In being admitted to SMU, you have been given a great deal.

Use this great blessing to its best purpose.

Congratulations and good luck, good health and good fortune to each of you. Thank you.