

GSBS Commencement • May 6, 2006 • Stephen P. Daiger, PhD • Faculty President

Thank you, Dr. Stancel, for the kind introduction. It is an honor to be here this morning.

I am speaking as representative of the nearly 500 faculty members in the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences. We offer our congratulations to all of you in the room for the many successes that have brought you here this morning. This includes you, our graduate students, of course, but it also includes the members of the audience who have been an important part of your lives.

The reasons for congratulating you graduates are obvious, based on the degrees you are receiving and the importance of the research you have done to get to this point. But in addition, all of the families and friends here also deserve congratulations for their successes, both large and small, that have allowed *you* to accomplish so much.

I hope it goes without saying how happy the faculty are to have worked with such fine students and how proud we are of your accomplishments. Maybe less apparent is how envious we are of your chance for a fresh start, and the opportunity you have to make a real difference for the better in the world.

Every rational person is driven by a desire to make a difference. However, you graduates have the nearly unique combination of training, passion and medical relevance to improve the lives of *many* others, or perhaps all of us. The GSBS faculty share this commitment with you. We hope we can continue to work with you, in the future, to solve the pressing medical problems of the day.

Oh, and incidentally, we particularly encourage you to work on diseases of the aging.

So, up to this moment, have we told you that everything in your future will be sunshine and roses? Have we even hinted that there might be a dark side to a career in the biomedical sciences? Well, I hope you have heard nothing but positive thoughts from the faculty, but as highly perceptive individuals, I suspect you have also gotten a whiff of distress.

For example, have you heard that it is becoming increasingly difficult to get a federal research grant? Have you heard about the cumbersome rules and regulations we face daily, from IRBs to HIPAA to accountants and lawyers looking over our shoulders? Have you heard how competitive this business can be?

Somehow it doesn't seem fair to only accentuate the positive, and ignore the negative. For this reason, I am reminded of a classic commencement address given by Kurt Vonnegut in the 1960's. He said "Things are bad; they are going to get worse; and they will never, never get better!"

I would love to end on this note, out of pure perversity, but I don't have the heart. Instead, let me tell you what I *really* think about these all-too-legitimate concerns.

Federal funding for research waxes and wanes through the years. Things are tough now. History shows that it will get better, but perhaps not soon. But, at the same time, alternate sources of funding, from private philanthropy to university-industry collaborations, have never been more abundant.

My advice in dealing with hard times is the same boring advice you have heard all your lives: make a plan and stick to it. Make a plan spanning months and years. Carefully plan your research, your publications, and your grant applications. Have a plan B and a plan C in case things don't work out. A plan is not a guarantee of success, but I can assure you that things *a/ways* go better with a plan.

What about the never-ending rules and regulations? As irritating as they are, you should remind yourself that they are the price of success. If it weren't for the fact that biomedical research has an enormous impact on the lives of all of us, and has the potential for bad as well as good, then no one would care what we do on the job. If it weren't for the fact that large amounts of money flow into biomedical research, with real potential for conflicts of interest, then the accountants and lawyers would look elsewhere.

But you shouldn't simply acquiesce. My request is that you get involved personally. Help shape the public discussion; work to make legislation fair but reasonable; serve on regulatory committees and councils. And remember, as is said in a related context, if you don't vote you can't complain about the turkey who gets elected.

Then, what about competition? It's very real in this case. This too is the price of success. Unfortunately, at some point in your career, probably at several points, your competitor will publish first, the review of your grant will be downright nasty, or your brilliant idea will be credited to some undeserving twit.

My first piece of advice is - find time to feel sorry for yourself. After all, wallowing in self pity is one of life's great pleasures. Then - get over it. For one thing, competition is not unique to biomedicine. Any career with great challenges and great rewards is competitive, just ask any lawyer, or accountant, or architect.

But also keep in mind that we have a secret weapon in dealing with the stresses of our jobs. In spite of all the anxieties, the work we do in the biomedical sciences – whether, for example, as a researcher, or a counselor, or a writer - has a direct positive impact on the lives of others. What you do really *is* on the side of the angels, which few other professions can claim. So, quite seriously, count your blessings.

Finally, I can't end without one more piece of advice. The best advice I ever heard was from Dr. Jack Schull at a much earlier graduation.

(If you don't know him, Jack is an emeritus professor in the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, and one of the great genetic epidemiologists of the 20th century. To give you an idea of his stature, when the University was considering him for a prestigious award, we received a letter of support from the Crown Prince of Japan. Needless to say, he got the award.)

Jack had this to say: You should always take your work seriously, but you should never take yourself seriously.

Therefore, on behalf of all our faculty, congratulations – and have fun!

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