Dr. Drake, thank you very much for that kind introduction. We all appreciate your leadership of this remarkable university and I look forward to continuing to partner with you, as you said, to further the mission of the University and also to ensure that the University’s growing role as a global leader in research and education continues to grow. It’s really amazing.

I also want to thank the faculty-student staff committee for inviting me to speak today and I want to thank the Board of Trustees, including the Chairman Alex Shumate, my friend and former colleague. And then most importantly, I want to say congratulations to the 2017 graduating class of The Ohio State University. Way to go! What a day.

I know you probably know this, but you are record breakers. This is the largest fall graduation in the history of Ohio State. You’re a record-breaking class not just because of your size, but also in so many other ways with your many accomplishments. I have gotten to know some of you over the past few years, and today I had the chance to meet others. It’s an impressive group. Many of you are first in your family to attend college. From age 17 to 64, and from 44 states and 66 countries, you are a diverse, talented, focused and restless to make your mark. And you know what? You’ll have some help doing that, because with your graduation today, your family just got a lot bigger. You are joining more than 550,000 Ohio State graduates worldwide and more than 285,000 Ohio State graduates living in the state of Ohio. They’re there to help you.

My graduation gift to you today is that I’ll be brief. Even though this is your big day, for starters—let’s celebrate somebody else. For many of you, the support and encouragement from your family and your friends, from the professors and administrators, have played a major part in your ability, first to be able to attend this great university, but also your success in reaching this amazing milestone in your life.

For some of you, they were your strength on the days when you didn’t think you could make it. Maybe they believed in you when you didn’t believe in yourself. Maybe they encouraged you to apply—maybe they helped you to stay in. Maybe they join you today in celebrating the end of tuition checks! But the success we celebrate today is not just your success—it’s their success, too. So, to the class of 2017, let’s give everyone here supporting you a round of applause.
To the moms and dads who are in the audience today, about six months ago, Jane and I sat in the audience and watched our last child graduate. Enjoy it. Frankly, I wish I had taken more time to let that sink in because it is the culmination of so much love, and support, and work, and sacrifice.

It’s an honor for me to be here today to join a distinguished list of Ohio State commencement speakers. From George W. Bush to Barack Obama, and plenty of others, this institution has welcomed a wide variety of views and, in general, the University has encouraged spirited—but respectful—public discourse. That tolerance and respect for other points of view is part of what makes America extraordinary—and what should be the hallmark of any great university.

As President Drake said, before running for the Senate I co-taught some courses at the Glenn College, and there I had the chance to get to know some of the secrets of Ohio State. I learned that when some students said they were up all night at ‘The Library,’ they were actually talking about a bar on High Street. But I also learned that going to the Thompson Library is important because that’s where you need to go before your finals to rub the statue for good luck. I learned that for some students, including some of my students, their finals week diet consisted entirely of Buckeye Donuts and coffee.

I learned that TBDBITL isn’t an acronym for some government agency in Washington, although it sounds like it, but a source of pride for all Buckeyes as ‘The Best Damn Band In The Land’ marches ‘Across the Field’ to perform ‘Script Ohio’ in front of more than 100,000 fans. By the way, the orchestra was awesome this morning and the band was awesome. The last time I got to see the band march was at the Penn State game, where I learned something else: never give up on Ohio State!

I know you’ll have your own special memories and you will cherish them from your time at Ohio State. I hope graduation is one of those because it’s an incredible accomplishment. To be honest, I must say I don’t remember who spoke at my college graduation. I doubt you will either. But let me share a few thoughts for you just to think about.”

First, hard work was mentioned earlier, don’t make the mistake of underestimating the value of hard work. I know all of you are already pretty hardworking, otherwise you wouldn’t be graduating from this prestigious university. But it’s easy sometimes to fall into the trap of believing that getting ahead is somehow out of your control, or a matter of luck. I have found in my life that the harder I work, the luckier I get. Hard work is the ingredient to success over which you actually have the most control. Circumstances and conditions will change, but the role you play in your own success never changes. You alone have the power to decide your own
potential. So take pride in the work you do regardless of what it is, and as you climb your ladder of success there will be some tough jobs you’re asked to take on. Take pride in that, and work hard. Which brings me to my next point.

Follow your dream—not someone else’s dream for you. You will be more inclined to pour all of your passion and energy into the things you love. That’s a good reason to do it. That could mean continuing in the field you are getting your diploma in today. Probably your family would like that since this is a lot of sacrifice to get this degree. But you know what? For some of you it could mean changing the direction your life is heading. Whatever the passion is that gets you out of bed in the morning is the one worth pursuing, even if it is going to involve—which it likely will—taking some risks.

The truth is that this journey is now yours alone, and the choices you make should be in pursuit of your dreams, your goals. Your parents, professors, and friends have helped you get this far—and they can continue to support you from the sidelines—but what you do next is up to you. Don’t let the expectations from others overshadow your dreams and your goals. And, by the way, for those wondering ‘do I really have a passion?’ Don’t worry about it. It’s OK to be unsure about your exact direction in life at this point. Trust me—I didn’t plan on being a United States Senator when I was 22 years old. Nor did my professors by the way—especially the microeconomics professor who gave me a ‘C.’ In fact, I graduated with a degree in cultural anthropology, which I think has helped me understand the unique culture and strange rituals in Washington D.C, but beyond that, frankly, the degree doesn’t overlap too much with public policy or government service.

Shortly after graduation, I worked in government and I recognized that was my passion: public service, and ever since then I have looked for ways to contribute through government and public policy. You don’t need to have your life mapped out right now—but try different things and follow what you think you’ll like, give it your most every day, be willing to take a chance, and I believe you will find your passion—or it will find you.

My final piece of advice for you is really pretty simple: be kind and true. This is an old family saying that came from my grandfather, and my namesake. I grew up with him telling me that all the time—and my kids have grown up with me telling it to them. They roll their eyes when I end my text with ‘BEKAT’ or ‘be ever kind and true,’ but I hope it sinks in, because nothing is more important. All of your relationships, whether in your personal life or in your professional life, are going to be based on trust, and trust comes from a sense of someone’s honesty and good will. That’s as true in a family as it is in a business—as true on the shop floor as it is on the Senate floor.
It sounds simple, and it is, but we all need to be reminded of it once in a while. You will find that it will work for you, too. Just as you’ll never regret doing your best or following your dreams, you’ll never regret practicing kindness and honesty in pursuit of your goals.

I love that graduations are called commencements. Look at today as commencing a new exciting phase in your life. Your families, your university, and all of us in Ohio are proud of you. Proud for what you have achieved today, and we can’t wait to see what you’ll do next. Godspeed, Ohio State Class of 2017!

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