

Feature Address

49th Convocation

University of Guyana, Turkeyen campus



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Chancellor
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I congratulate All of you graduating today on achieving an important milestone in your lives. Many of you have reached where you are today because of the support and sacrifice of family members, friends and those who have taught and mentored you through the many years of your education. In these circumstances, one often returns to the African proverb that says “it takes a village to raise a child” – each one of you is the product of some village of people who helped and guided you to this point and even as we acclaim your achievement, I ask that you give them thanks.

It is an honour and a pleasure to be here today for the very first time to address this gathering of graduates and others as Chancellor of the University of Guyana. I thank the Council of the University of Guyana, the Minister of Education and the Government of Guyana for placing their faith in me and I promise to do my very best to advance and promote the interests of this institution.

The University of Guyana has been home to intellectual greats such as Professor Clive Thomas, Dr Ulric Trotz, Dr. George Walcott, Dr. Walter Rodney, to name a few. Many of your graduates have gone on to distinguish themselves nationally, regionally and internationally. You should be very proud of the contributions that this institution has made.

Many of those accomplishments go unrecognised and I urge you to become familiar with the history of your university and in so doing gain a better appreciation for the absolute need for you to continue to remain engaged as alumni, mentors to current and future students, adjunct lecturers, advocates and donors of scholarships and other gifts that will build this institution.

Getting a University education is an extremely valuable acquisition both for yourselves and the society (societies) in which you will live. Countless studies have shown that a university education provides graduates with increased life time earnings, greater chances of job mobility, a greater sense of fulfilment in life and the capacity to be better informed and socially involved citizens. University graduates are more likely to be involved in social, political and cultural activities of their communities, which contribute to the enrichment of their societies and to their own wellbeing. There are other benefits to a university education. Graduates have been shown to have improved life styles and to live longer than those without university education.

The benefits of higher education extend too to the children of graduates where studies have shown that children of graduates are less subject to child abuse and neglect, have greater intellectual ability, lower failure rates and more likely to pursue higher education goals. Thus a university degree benefits not only graduates themselves but can extend to succeeding generations.

While the good news is that a university education may be a clear advantage to you, a degree by itself will certainly not be the sole determinant of your personal advancement. I believe that there are three essential ingredients necessary for advancement in whatever field one has chosen, they are *initiative, passion, and persistence*.

The first of these, “initiative” is in my own mind and in that of many a manager and employer the most important. In common parlance, “initiative” from the word initiate refers to persons who are “self-starters”, persons who will be agents of change, person with the ability to work beyond their specific responsibilities.

I believe that it is important to have a ‘can do’ approach to life rather than waiting for others to do for you.

It is true that “initiative” alone may not be enough. One does need some intellectual ability and common sense, but all other things being equal, it is oftenest those who are prepared to go the extra mile at whatever they do who will prevail. If your life’s journey turns out to be like mine, you will find there is often little correlation between those who are the top of the class and those who will ultimately do best –whether that best is becoming leaders of organisations in which you will work, or making other outstanding contributions to communities in which you will live. It is those with initiative who will prevail.

Grades may be important in landing you your first job but they will probably not be enough to land your second or third job.

Once you have landed a job, initiative begins with you becoming thoroughly acquainted with what it is you are expected to do. Even if that first job is in your discipline, your education will probably not be sufficient to provide you with the knowledge and skills you need to do to perform at your best. A major complaint of employers I have met in Guyana and in the Caribbean is that university graduates are not prepared for the jobs available. My response is that we cannot prepare students for every job –indeed in today’s rapidly developing world, the nature of jobs will change many times in the course of a life time – who would have predicted the internet, i-phones, Wikipedia and the like 30 years ago. What we should expect of our graduates is that they will have the initiative, passion and persistence to become very acquainted with whatever task they must do by aggressively seeking out knowledge using ICT modalities, reading journals, manuals and other sources of information to be best at what one is doing and to keep current as new knowledge evolves in their field.

Initiative expects that you are continually looking to improve the service or the products or systems your organisation is providing. Confining yourself only to the 9 to 5 job, where you restrict yourself only to work given neither helps you nor the organisation employing you.

One of my major concerns dealing with government departments and businesses in the Caribbean is that too often there is absence of sufficient desire among employees and their managers to engineer improvement and change. We live in a world that is galloping along with new technologies, niftier ways of getting tasks accomplished, more efficient means of collecting and analysing data. Yet so many in our space seem content with the status quo. I believe that we need a culture – on in which we actively seek to solve problems, to make processes easier, to seek customers who will select our organisation, our country, our region over the rest.

Initiative involves thinking outside the box, being bold, taking calculated risks to undertake new ventures. I have been struck in recent years by the number of young graduates like you in the USA and increasingly in the Caribbean who are starting their own businesses – many are venturing on their own to provide innovative services or to produce goods that may be new and attractive. There is an interesting book by Richard Florida called “rise of the creative class” which argues that the most successful people today are those who are most creative – they include scientists, engineers, architects, educators, writers, entertainers and so on. They share common characteristics of creativity, individuality and an appreciation for diversity and meritocracy.

To quote Richard Florida,

“It is conventional wisdom that to boost one’s economy it is necessary to attract large companies and thus create jobs. In fact, companies locate where talent exists. The talent itself will create new jobs.”

Unquote

I have spoken primarily about initiative, but mentioned two other characteristics that really flow from initiative and that is passion and persistence. I am not going to prolong a long evening speaking about these latter traits but I speak of “passion” with respect to developing an enthusiasm for what one is doing.

Everything in life may not be ideal, but the ability to develop a consuming interest in whatever one does is an important factor in doing a job well -looking back on my own life where I have had a variety of jobs and tasks, friends have accused me of being too focused on given endeavours, perhaps too passionate about what I do –in truth this has its shortcomings, but this gave me the joy and satisfaction in undertaking any job I had.

A word about persistence. Seeing projects through to completion is a critical ingredient to success, even if in circumstances like those in which we live may require more time and effort. One of the invidious features I have found all too often is that people give up easily – in the context of our region, everyone seems able to recite what ails our region and there are an abundance of ideas about how to fix our ailments, but the determination to translate ideas into action and the persistence needed to see projects to completion, circumventing obstacles as they arise is often missing. In my previous job as VC of the UWI, we have taken on projects that required committed work for 3, 4 and in one case 10 years –true even with such persistence, some did not work out, but in the main I have found that our societies have sufficient talent in our midst to get much done providing persons are imbued with the initiative, possessed with the passion and determination to get things done.

It is true that no one can predict how any of your lives will evolve, but I urge you not to limit yourselves the job assigned you, but strive to identify new ways to make better whatever organisations of which you will become a part, go beyond the routine day to day drudge of an assigned job, be bold and daring, be passionate and persistent and in this way, you will fulfil the promise and hard work that brought you to this point today. Go out there and make a difference.

In closing, let me express on behalf of the whole University and Guyana our thanks to Vice Chancellor, Professor Jacob Opadeyi, who will demit office in another few months. I have been Chancellor for just about two months, and I believe that VC Opadeyi has gone to great personal lengths to promote the growth and standards of the university.

Among his achievements have been enhancement of the financial accounting and management systems of the university; reduction of the university's deficit by negotiating additional government funding; facilitating the promotion of a number of faculty members while working to ensure that a greater percentage of academic staff has higher degrees; he has played a major role in managing the WB UG technology Support Project which I hope will help transform Science, Technology and Engineering education at UG. Professor Opadeyi has worked on enhancing linkages with the private sector, in particular facilitating a gift of 2000 classroom chairs from Mr Sattaur and Ms Ameena Gafoor which has served to alleviate some of our furniture shortages –our heartfelt thanks to Mr and Mrs Gafoor for their generosity. I wish to take the time too to thank all the private sector organisations that have contributed to the University of Guyana, including those who contributed to today's event. VC Opadeyi's tenure has not been without its challenges – inevitably issues of an underfunded institution, non-competitive a staff salaries, gaps in capacity to undertake some teaching and research programmes, inadequate infrastructure, and differing views about how best to address these issues create difficulties for both managers and staff. On behalf of the University of Guyana, let me say thanks again to professor Opadeyi for his efforts to improve this vitally important institution and wish him well in the future.

Going forward, I firmly believe that as a nation Guyana must address decisively some of the challenges facing UG. To this end Council approved yesterday the creation of a UG Transformation Task Force that will work with all Sectors of our Nation to devise a credible Plan to address some of the chronic governance and resource problems we face. UG is not a government responsibility alone, not a UG management and staff responsibility, it is a national responsibility and it is critical that all sectors of our nation re-engage more to carry this institution to the next level for our sake and for the sake of generations to come.

I thank you for the attention you have given me and ask our graduates their families and all gathered here to commit to doing all that is necessary to make this University of Guyana one about which we can all be proud.

Saturday, November 14, 2015

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