

Dear Students,

I am writing this letter to you from my apartment in Rome, Italy where I have been granted the opportunity to lead this semester's Roman-Greco study abroad trip. While I deeply regret not being able to be with all of you, I do not regret that it absolves me of the need to wear 10 pounds of velvet robes designed for keeping warm in unheated medieval churches during the middle of winter, and now worn on hot late summer days in Minnesota.

Since I write this letter knowing that I will not be the individual delivering it aloud, it gives me the opportunity to compose my remarks with greater bluntness, and for the sake of everyone in attendance, greater brevity.

Welcome, or welcome back, to Saint John's University and the College of Saint Benedict. Convocation addresses are meant to be words of encouragement, wisdom, humor, insight, and truth. I will aim to satisfy at least one of those, you can decide if I succeed and at which one.

Since I know this is a busy and exciting day interrupted by the formality of this symbolic event, I'll give you the TL;DR (too long/didn't read) version of my advice first: "You will struggle and you will fail: Fail fast, fail epically, fail better". Uplifting, I know.

You will struggle and you will fail

Everyone thinks they should do what they are already good at. Many of you may be leaning toward a specific major based entirely on this approach. Unfortunately, this is a terrible manner in which to process through life. If something comes easily, and you succeed immediately, it indicates that you are doing what you already know how to do. You are intellectually standing still. It is the things that are hard, challenging, and that cause you to struggle where you have the opportunity to grow. One of my fields of research is in comparative and evolutionary cognition: How humans differ from other species in our ability to think and how we as a species evolved to be uniquely intelligent. The tendency to seek complacent success is universal in most animals. If an animal gets all their basic needs met with little effort, they use the rest of their time to take a nap, rather than try to find something interesting and different to do with their time. If our entire species suffered from the same cerebral listlessness, we would still be stuck using heavy stones as hand axes rather than making iPhones, sending probes to Pluto, or writing symphonies.

Seeking out challenges means magnifying your likelihood of failure, but trying and failing is usually met with shameful disappointment. It should not be. Instead failure should be taken as an opportunity. Decades of research on infant and child learning has shown that kids are most successful when the world clashes with their expectations. Multiple times a day, babies find out that their beliefs about the world around them are completely and utterly wrong. Parents don't cease to exist when they walk beyond a baby's line of sight. Solid objects don't fall all the way to the ground if another solid object blocks their path. The strange noises that adults make around them tell stories of worlds they can't yet imagine rather than being meaningless grunts. Infants fail in predicting what will happen all day and every day. Babies respond exactly the way they should to these failures of expectation: by recognizing them as opportunities to learn. Now that you are college students and "*adults*" do not forget to embrace your inner infant; failure is an opportunity.

Fail fast and fail epically

Fail fast is a term popularized by tech companies and their risk loving financiers. It means to try something novel, and when it inevitably fails, to rapidly try something else (before the money runs out). It reflects the fact that learning is not an all-or-none process. When you fail, even if you learn from mistakes, you will likely drive onward only to fail in a new and different way, so you might as well speed up the iterative process in the pursuit of eventual success. Important progress comes from failing repeatedly, quickly. Instead of worrying about every mistake and becoming paralyzed by your own fear of failure, grit and determination to fail in any and every way possible in the pursuit of your goals is what is needed for achievement.

Accepting that failure is likely, or even a near certainty on really hard problems, should be freeing. Failure isn't the end of the road, it is part of the process of success. Why just try to succeed or fail in small ways, when you can go big and fail epically. Try to say something new and profound. Try to think great thoughts. Try to create masterpieces. You will almost certainly fail in sensational and entertaining ways; the internet is full of the detritus of epic attempts and their hilarious but inevitable catastrophes. Once in a while, however, you will also learn epic and delightful things about yourself and the world. Failing epically is a stepping stone to succeeding spectacularly.

Fail better

As a society, we don't tend to appreciate failure. Too many autobiographies of great individuals selectively edit out the author's own history of failure. We love the image of a grand invention appearing wholly formed by an effortless genius. The reality is that stories of instantaneous success leave out the years of toil and preparation and the thousands of failed attempts already shoveled under the rug or crumpled in the waste bin. While others may not appreciate your failings, you can embrace them and fail with enthusiasm. Mistakes that lead you toward attainment are just as important as the eventual triumph.

College in general, and these schools in particular are filled with knowledgeable professors who are here to help you fail better. Utilize the compassionate expertise you are surrounded by and the community that will scaffold your effortful failings into eventual struggles toward success.

I wish you all the best, and hope to meet some of you in my classes when I return to CSB/SJU in January, a time of year where the heavy medieval robes might be more welcome, although sadly no more fashionable.

Sincerely,
Ben