

Commencement Address

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To Atty. Danilo Concepcion, UP President;
Vice-Presidents and College Deans, Board of Regents, Faculty and Staff;
Students, and their proud parents and families,
Good morning.

I'm sure you're all excited: finally, you're getting a degree from the best University in the country. Some of you probably didn't get to sleep last night. And as you receive your degree today, I'm sure you look into your future with great anxiety and anticipation.

That's how I felt when I received my first of three degrees from the University of the Philippines.

For me, the UP is not an unfamiliar territory. I have spent many years in this University teaching economics. I still have an office at the School of Economics.

I have taught more students, at least cumulatively, than the students I face today, and yet this is the first time I have asked myself: what do these kids want to hear? When I teach Public Economics, I don't ask myself that question-students have to dutifully listen to what I have to say whether they want to or not.

I suppose what lends difficulty to this task is how much the times have changed since I was in your position, sitting on a chair, anxious to be called up on stage so I could get my own diploma.

You see, during the 60s the UP Campus was much different. UP then was an island into itself. That's why we call it the Diliman Republic. Once you arrive at the campus, usually by riding a bus, you are impervious to what's happening in the outside world, until you take the bus ride back to wherever you came from.

Nowadays, you are constantly with your handheld phone. At the touch of the button, you are connected to your friends and family; you are connected to the rest of the world. Nowadays, you can watch an NBA game in real time. You now live in a much better world, not only in terms of technological innovation but also in terms of quality of life.

What I'm going to say maybe controversial but I am truly convinced that we now live in a much better world. I graduated at a time when the Cold War was at its peak, Germany was divided, and the Vietnam War was raging.

Now there is only one dictatorial government in the world -North Korea. Despite their differences, China is talking to the US and US is talking to Russia.

What is clear is that you and I are almost two generations apart. That makes me old, very old. While I'm looking back at the half century of my adult life, the roads I have travelled, you are looking forward to your future.

Allow me to level with you and ask: where do you see yourself 25 years from now? That's approximately one generation¹. Think about this for a while.

I imagine, as UP students, most of you here aspire to succeed, to be leaders in your own field or industry. When I was your age, I also aspired to be a leader in my own right, and, even then, I was sure I would do this in and through the public service. That's why I took a course in Public Administration here in UP. I had a baccalaureate degree and then took a masters in Public Ad almost immediately after. At 21, I was already working with the Philippine Senate technical Staff on Finance as a Subject Matter Specialist. I was on my way to becoming either an Expert in Public Finance or a politician.

If you have a clear career path in mind, then good. Work hard, purposely, for the career that you want. I had a clear career path. And I worked hard for it. But remember: life is not linear.

When martial law was declared on September 21, 1972, my work in the Senate was disrupted. As a consequence, Congress was closed, and I found myself jobless.

To those of you who are like me when I was young—with a clear, straightforward career path in mind anticipate that life will throw challenges at you that will put you off-course. My advice is this: Be flexible, roll with the punches, because life is unpredictable. Life has its ups and downs, its twists and turns.

Then again, some of you are still probably figuring out what you want to do with your life. That's perfectly alright. You, the young generation now, is often accused of being confused or lost. Many have labeled millennials "the lost generation."

You may have had a plan in mind a few years ago, which led you to taking your degree, but now maybe you feel like you have something else in mind. That's alright. You are entitled to change your mind. Don't feel bad for wanting to do something else other than what you studied for. Don't be afraid to try different things. What's two to three years of trying different jobs just to know what you really like?

Here's my take on changing careers: you are entitled to change your mind up to three times at most. **That's the strike three rule.** *Kapag sumobra sa tatlong palit, baka di mo na talaga alam kung anong gusto mong gawin sa buhay mo.*

So what did I do when I lost my job at the Senate? I had three options then: (1) a lucrative career in the private sector; (2) an exhilarating career with the Board of Investments; and (3) a budding academic career with a promise to go abroad for my PhD, on Rockefeller Foundation fellowship.

This leads us to my next advice to you: **take risks.**

This sounds cliché, but this kind of attitude has opened so many great opportunities for me that I want you to have as well.

Among the three options I could take after losing my job at the Senate, I chose the third one -the one that could get me a PhD on the Rockefeller Foundation fellowship. It meant a pay cut and, because I was competing with other students all over the world, the odds of getting the fellowship was low. But I took a risk and it paid off. I got the fellowship and I was able to study abroad.

Let me stress here though that taking risks has to be complemented with working hard. That's really what will open up opportunities for you.

The next piece of advice I can give you is this: the most important skill right now, given the fast-changing environment, is the ability to learn and unlearn.

Technology and innovation are developing at an exponential pace. And this will change not just lifestyle[s]. This will change not just the way we communicate with our friends and family. This will change industries. This will change the job market. As such, the most important skill will be your ability to learn and unlearn so you can adapt to these changes.

Apart from the technical knowledge and skills you have acquired from your respective degrees, UP has taught you, not just **what to think**, but **how to think**. Some of the things you have learned here may someday be outdated or disproven. But with your ability to learn and continue learning, you can adapt and meet the challenges of the future.

When you try to look 25 years into the future, you might see yourself in a secure, high-paying job, with your own desk in your own office, or you might see yourself driving your own car on the way work. For most Filipinos, the indicator for a comfortable life is if they own their own car. That's according to AmBisyon Natin 2040.

But when you look 25 years into the future, do you ask yourself questions like - *may traffic pa ba, mausok pa rin ba sa daan, may mga nangongotong pa rin kaya?* You see, I think that's what we conveniently ignore when we fast forward to the part where we do well for ourselves. In 25 years, regardless of your personal accomplishments, you are going to face the same problems as everyone. You will not be spared from traffic, pollution, corruption or red tape, if we do not do anything about them now.

Of course, you might not think this is your responsibility; you might argue that it's the government's responsibility. And for your information, the government is confronting these problems now. Hopefully, our large investments in infrastructure will pay off soon, since it will not only fix our traffic mess, but it will decongest urban centers and also energize the economy. We're trying our best in proposing and implementing transparency and accountability measures for all of government through the Freedom of Information (FOI) and the Open Government National Action Plan.

But here's the thing - addressing social problems is always a team effort, a partnership between government and the private sector, and it requires us to confront problems using approaches across various disciplines. We often complain about how the government is slow and incompetent without thinking about our own involvement in the perpetuation of problems we experience as a nation.

So my final advice to you is to get involved. And there are two ways of doing this: (1) Use what you learned in the University to propose innovative solutions and give constructive criticism; or, (2) you can join the government.

Now, government may not offer you the highest pay or the most comfortable working environment, but it can offer you the chance to create impact at such a large scale. In 25 years, your choice to be involved will make a lot of difference. It marks the difference not just between whether or not you experience traffic, but whether or not we change the lives of the majority of Filipinos for the better.

Every year, men and women aspiring to become soldiers line up to take the entrance exam for the Philippine Military Academy. These talented individuals get trained, and the best ones are sent abroad, to West Point, Annapolis or Coast Guard. This system is being sustained by the military, guaranteeing that every year, a new batch of students will come in, keeping every post filled. **This is one thing we don't have in the bureaucracy.** Right now we don't have enough people manning government posts, especially the technical ones. And this is a problem that must be addressed immediately.

Back in the mid-to late 1970s, the government would send out scholars abroad who would come back and work for the government, applying their advanced knowledge and expertise. **But this was not sustained.** The highly trained people working in the government now are getting fewer and fewer each year, some of them retiring, the others leaving for greener pastures. The harsh reality is that there is no replacement of technical talent, and that makes the government weak and vulnerable.

How important are the technical people in the government? Extremely important. They are essentially the backbone of the entire system. The technical people draft the reports, manage complicated processes, handle inter-agency transactions, and so on.

What is the ultimate consequence of this problem? Well, for us, in the Department of Budget and Management, this would mean poor budget utilization; and, for the entire bureaucracy, it means the under provision of essential public goods and services.

The simple fact that some college deans and professors are being drafted as heads of government agencies is a symptom that we don't have enough qualified people in government. Taking from the academe should only be a temporary solution. Because when these deans and professors are pulled out of schools, who will teach the next crop of students?

Let me highlight something here, too: The presence of a strong and competent technical staff in government is a strong buffer against corruption, inefficiency, and ineffectiveness in the government. How so? When you have enough people in the government who are competent and confident in their skills and knowledge, it's much more difficult for illegal and unethical transactions to pass through.

With more knowledgeable workers in government, the delivery of public goods and services will be more efficient and effective.

This is where you graduates come in. With your level of education, your talent and determination, there is so much you can do.

The University of the Philippines has a great history of producing graduates that eventually occupy top positions in government. These UP graduates set the direction for our country's economic, social, and cultural development in monumental ways.

But for our political and economic institutions to mature, they need more than visionaries. They need frontliners, support staff and mid-level managers to streamline, processes and establish practices so government performs well at all levels.

From the moment you will be asked to flip your sash from your right shoulder to the other side, you would officially be a UP graduate. But there's more to being a UP graduate than having a nice framed picture with your maroon and green sash. Being a UP graduate means living a life of **honor and excellence.**

These ideals I find are well **encapsulated** in the **Oath of Athenian**, a powerful oath of citizenship, engraved prominently in the lobby of Maxwell Hall, the building that houses the Maxwell School Citizenship and Public Affairs of Syracuse University where I studied for my PhD. It captures my own attitude when it comes to the work that I do; it goes:

"We will ever strive for the ideals and sacred things of the city, both alone and with many; we will unceasingly seek to quicken the sense of public duty; we will revere and obey the city's laws; we will transmit this city not only not less, but greater, better and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us."

I have spent about 40 years in government and this oath has been my guide all along. Whether you follow the same path or not, I believe it can guide you as well. It should guide our leaders, the legislators, the local chief executives, the industrialists, the educators, the ordinary workers, the gardeners, and so on. This oath reminds us of our joint responsibility, as citizens, to transmit our country, the Philippines, "not only not less, but greater, better and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us."

That is **honor**, and that is **excellence**.

Again, thank you and congratulations UP Class of 2017!

¹ 25 years for females; 30+ for males

http://www.ancestry.com.au/learn/learningcenters/default.aspx?section=lib_Generation