University of South Florida
Commencement 2005
Graduate Commencement, May 2005
"Family, Opportunity, Civility"

President Genshaft, I am honored to receive the President's Fellow Medallion. I have long admired your leadership, your courage, and your unswerving commitment to the quality and reputation of the University of South Florida. I consider you one of America's most distinguished leaders.

Graduates, I am delighted that the president invited me to speak at this ceremony. I skipped commencement exercises when I received my Ph.D., and, a few days later, much to my surprise, the president of the University of Miami saw me on campus and scolded me for not attending. I regretted not participating, so being here with you today means a lot to me. I congratulate you not just for successfully meeting the challenges of your graduate programs, but also for being here--being here to receive the recognition you have earned.

In my 14 years as president of Rollins College, I presided over 40 commencements and heard many speakers give advice to students. The best speeches I've heard are personal, so I have been looking back at my own life to see what I might share with you. There are three important things that, in hindsight, I understand more fully: family, opportunity, and civility.

First, about family: Like many of you, I had juggled family, work, and community service while completing my degrees. Sometimes, I thought I would never finish school. (Sound familiar?) My children's early memories are of Mommy with a book in her hand, telling them to play quietly. If I had it to do over, I would give my family a greater priority. I am grateful that they have forgiven me for focusing so much time and attention on my education and my career. (Although, to be perfectly frank, when I told my son what I was planning to say, his response was, "Who says we've forgiven you?") I know that your families are an important part of your achievements. From the number of children in this audience, I can tell that this is a real family occasion and that your pride is their pride. Treasure that.

Second, about opportunity: Because I got a late start on my professional career, I said "Yes" to every interesting opportunity offered me, although there were times I felt completely unqualified. Others often see promise in us that we do not see ourselves. It wasn't until a professor here at the University of South Florida, Jim Dickinson, nominated me for a presidency that I began to see myself in that role. I have heard many commencement speakers recommend that graduates make a long-range career plan. I never made such a plan, and, if I had, becoming a college president would not have been on the list. Every stage of my career path has been rewarding, but none was predictable and none was traditional. Many of you are already launched in your careers; others of you are seeking your first professional position. Keep your options open; your future may bring opportunities and choices beyond your imagining. Did Condoleezza Rice, academic vice president at Stanford, imagine that she would become secretary of state? Did Michael Griffin, a Johns Hopkins scientist, dream of becoming head of NASA?

Third, about civility: Before I became a college president, I had clear and unwavering ideas about everything. I was always right and happy to instruct others as to how misguided they were. (You might say I was "opinionated.") As president, I had to learn to be more civil--to be a good listener, and open to other
ideas. This has made me a better person and a better citizen. Unfortunately, Americans are not civil with each other. We talk but don't listen. We live in a divided country where we are always right and others wrong. We are certain but not civil, yet civility is at the heart of our American traditions of respect for divergent views and the art of compromise.

My guess is that your graduate work here at USF has strengthened your commitment to civil discourse—to listening and to being open to other ideas. Now that you are finished with textbooks, term papers, and deadlines, and armed with a top-quality graduate education, your challenge is to promote a more civil society where people of unlike views and beliefs can find a way to make policy together. The issues around your professional lives are complex, critical, and contested. Health care, science research, science education, arts funding, economic disparities, environmental degradation, technological applications, international trade, globalism—the list is long, the issues pressing. You can encourage civil communication around challenges at the same time you are advancing your field and your career.

I want to leave you thinking about prioritizing family, seizing opportunity, and promoting civility. To commence means literally, to begin, and with your newly minted graduate degrees, you are on the threshold of a future full of new possibilities. I know you are grateful for the passion of your professors, the friendship of your fellow students, and the support of your families. As you enter this new phase of your lives, and every new phase, keep on learning and put your learning to good use—as family members, as professionals, as citizens. Leave the world a little better than you found it. Good luck!