Greetings and Acknowledgments. Good afternoon, School of Public Health parents, faculty, staff, and of course, graduating students. Let me do three things right off the bat: First let me say congratulations to everyone here on UMD SPH’s recently awarded, 7-year accreditation through 2022 by the Council on Education for Public Health! You’ve gone from a newly formed School of Public Health in 2007 to a first full CEPH 5-year accreditation in 2010 to a 7-year accreditation in 2015! That is AMAZING! You all should feel very proud.

Next, I want to offer my sincerest congratulations to the graduates on today’s stellar achievement. Well done getting here, to this moment, and be careful to appreciate every single bit of it—because it’s going to go by so quickly, and after all of your hard work, you don’t want to miss basking in this fleeting glory.

Now let me thank you, Dean Clark, for extending this invitation to me. I’m grateful for the opportunity to speak for few moments to this graduating class and the opportunity to catch up with two friends and former NIH colleagues, Drs. Dushanka Kleinman, and Barbara Alving. Thanks, too, for that lovely introduction. It leads very well into what I hope to convey to the graduates this afternoon. You see, in the spirit of Late Night TV hosts, I want to pass along a Top Six Countdown. I’m going to give you the Top Six Things I Wish I’d Known About Life After Grad School.

Now those of you familiar with David Letterman may wonder why I am not presenting a Top 10 list? Well, having presented or endured many graduation talks over the years I have noticed that their quality is inversely related to their length; rest assured I will aim for greatness this afternoon. So rather than blather on with the usual platitudes while everyone else daydreams or fidgets, I
decided to try to offer some practical advice in a concise way. That’s why my introduction by Dr. Clark set up so nicely for Number 6 in my Top Six Countdown: **Don’t Believe Everything People Say About You—Good or Bad.**

For some of you, perhaps earning these newly conferred letters behind your name represents an achievement beyond all expectations of your family and friends. *Wow, can you believe that guy’s getting his master’s? Never thought he had it in him.* For others of you, today’s graduation is merely a small stepping stone along your pre-ordained path to greatness, according to people who know you. *She’s been a scholar her whole life. We all know she’s going places.*

I offer this from benefit of my um, seniority of experience, shall we say. Critics will praise you and then pan you, not always in that order. You may not be able to ignore them, but you don’t have to indulge them either. Don’t take everything so personally, and don’t believe your own hype either. Regard everyone’s regard as what it is—an individual observation. Glean from it what might be helpful, and keep moving forward.

This follows into the Number Five thing that I wish I had realized sooner - **you do not have to be the smartest person in the room to succeed; just make sure you are always in a room with smart people.** You are all high achievers, and most of you are accustomed to being the smartest person in the room – and while this is a pathway to success, it is inefficient, and potentially dangerous. You come to rely only on what you know. It’s a bit like playing tennis with people who are worse players than you are – you always “win” but your game is not getting any better as a result of your effort. A far better approach is to try and connect with players “better” than you – people who are more knowledgeable and from whom you can learn something, if by no other route, simply by observation. Now from a practical
standpoint, this often requires some risk taking – by not being afraid to fail – you have to get out of your comfort zone to join people who you know are smarter, better skilled, and/or more sophisticated than you are. But the opportunity for return benefit is far too great not to take the chance. My entire career has been framed in this way – and at NIH I am fortunate to always in a room with really smart people!

Number Four is to Keep Your Promises—Especially the Ones You Make to Yourself. There is no substitute for integrity. I say this to you now in a very general context, although for the past few years we in the scientific research community have been working hard to deliver the same message in a very specific context. In truth, personal integrity and scientific integrity cannot and should not be separated.

The traditionally rigorous standards of scientific research—such tenets as the inherent value of peer review and the capability of others to reproduce the results of your work—are fundamental in our field. These concepts permit scientific research not only to police itself, but also to sustain itself and advance itself. Never forget that they are oaths we all make to our fellow researchers and more important, to ourselves. Don’t compromise. Don’t cut anyone short in that equation—especially yourself.

Number Three—Weigh Both Immediate Impact and Long-Term Legacy. This is a continuous lesson for everyone, I believe. For you who are just putting a new feather in your cap, so to speak, it’s crucial that you realize nobody’s expecting you to make a Ginormous World-Changing Contribution tomorrow. Well, except for the Student Loan folks. They alone are expecting a rather sizable check from you, no later than Friday. And, yes, they know where you live, complete with GPS coordinates. They will hunt you down. Sorry. <smile> But aside from those very understanding accountant-types, you can take your time Making Your Mark on
the World. Immediacy isn’t always what it’s cracked up to be, you know. Sure, a lightning strike right now might prove valuable in the short term, but consider crafting a long-term legacy you can be proud of for generations to come.

That brings us to Number Two in the Countdown: **Explore “the Dark Side.”** “Use the Force.” Insert your own favorite over-used *Star Wars* affirmation here. What I want you to do is open yourself to opportunities and options and possibilities that you haven’t even imagined yet. My own career path underscores this – I never would have fathomed being the Principal Deputy Director of the National Institutes of Health during those first days after accepting my first tenure track faculty appointment in the School of Dentistry at the SUNY at Buffalo. So, for those of you who’ll be pursuing scientific research, in particular, I hope this is not the first time you’re hearing this. So many advances and innovations—especially in biomedical science and health—have developed not from what we thought would happen, but from what we never expected to happen. That’s why we stress the importance, the absolutely essential value of basic research. Right now, we are in an age of extraordinary opportunity in so many different fields, and disciplines, and directions. For example, the power of Big Data, boosted by incredible technology, is only just being tapped. We do not know where the next breakthroughs will emerge. We don’t want to miss anything vital, so we’ve got to follow every single lead, consider a lot of alternative viewpoints. We must meander off-road often, and—frankly—get derailed some of the time. That’s how we find the hidden gems.

Of course, focus on goals is important, but don’t close your mind to potential and don’t forget to take the blinders off every now and again, and appreciate what might be right beside you.

Which leads me, finally, to the Number One **Thing I Wished I’d Known About Life After Grad School:** *There Is No App for*
Most of It. Of course when I emerged from graduate school (when the only Tablet that you wrote on was made of stone), there were no such things as “apps” of any kind. I thought at the time, perhaps as many of you are thinking at this very moment, that if I could only put my hands on the magic formula, uncover the premier program, grasp the one true Key to Happily Ever After, then I could easily unlock the ultimate door to success. And really, if you had asked me back then, I couldn’t even define what Ultimate Success would look like for myself. But I was certain that the ever-elusive concept was achievable, once I found the one application I was missing. And that’s the thing I want you to know as I take my seat.

There’s no One True Way to anything worth achieving. What there is is Your Individual Way. The path that is right for you. Discovering your individual approach, and most important, being unafraid to fail, enjoying the detours and diversions—even the roadblocks and roundabouts—that you encounter in the meantime will determine your success. Don’t go looking for One Direction—don’t try to find THE ONE ROAD. Plot your own graph—one sometimes-awkward, sometimes-brilliant move at a time. Trust me…one day you will look around and realize you’ve been succeeding at life all along.

Thank you.