

Ron Packard, K12 Founder & Author of "Education Transformation"
Commencement Address to Colorado Virtual Academy (COVA) 2013 Graduating Class

It is exciting to be here with so many of our students. It reminds me how lucky I am. My favorite part of my job is spending time with students and their families. I gave my first commencement 30 years ago when I delivered my high school valediction and remember wondering if I would ever speak at a graduation again. I wondered if I would be any wiser.

This seems silly today, but not so much when you are an 18 year old who thinks he knows everything. Are there any parents out there who know an 18 year old like that? Mark Twain once quipped, "As a teenager I couldn't believe how ignorant my old man was. Ten years later, I couldn't believe how much he learned."

As the Internet would not become commercially available for another decade or so, I certainly couldn't imagined the pathway I would take in life, and I certainly would not have imagined speaking to a class of students who went to school online. Also, an interesting thing happened at that graduation. The guest speaker at that graduation was our superintendent of schools and 20 years later I hired him. So please keep me in mind when you are looking for somebody in 20 years. I'm a good employee.

Times have changed dramatically but I think that the messages I would have liked to have heard on my graduation day are still true today, just as they would have been true 100 years ago and will likely be true 100 years from now.

- 1) **First, Embrace change rather than fear it-** I have watched so many people approach change in the wrong way which is a dangerous thing to do with a double edged sword. This is particularly dangerous for the students of today who will see a rate of change faster than I have seen, as it is the one thing that seems to continually accelerate despite the large number of people trying to slow it down. My grandfather lived to be 93 years of age and passed away almost a decade ago. He was the police chief in Bethlehem Pennsylvania. In his lifetime, he saw the popularization of the

automobile, the spread of telephony, cellphones , the Internet, penicillin, motion pictures , television, airplanes, space travel, etc., etc. In fact, one could argue he saw more changes in that century than one would have seen in the previous millennium. The changes will be even faster and more impressive in your lifetime.

Fortunately, you have all taken a big step toward preparing for this future by becoming self-learners, technology proficient and able to learn online. An education, an open mind and a strong work ethic are the tools one needs to capitalize on change. For those wondering how change creates opportunities, think about all of the successes enabled by change in your lifetimes: Mark Zuckerberg creating Facebook for one. Without the Internet, K12 couldn't have been created and none of us would be in this ceremony today. Some of you out there might not be graduating high school if you didn't have this option. There are thousands of other examples.

2) **Take a few risks**- I regret what I haven't done, not what I have done. This is perhaps the best lesson I have learned over a lifetime. This applies to both personal and professional situations. Or to put into the vernacular: Just, Go for it. You'll rarely regret it. I certainly haven't. By the way- this doesn't mean do something crazy, unlawful or just plain stupid. I don't want any of you telling your parents that graduation speaker told me to take some risks. Remember the last two words a fool says before he dies are "watch this"

3) **The road to mediocrity is paved with excuses** - It is easy, in fact far too easy, to make up excuses for not achieving something or worse yet- not even trying. There is no dishonor in failure, only in failing to try. To quote my favorite artist, Bob Dylan:

*"There's no success like failure
And that failure's no success at all"*

Now that's food for thought and I want you to chew on it. Now you know why we have taught you literary analysis- so you can understand Bob Dylan.

I had a litany of experts telling me that K12 would never succeed. Smart people can kill any business idea or any idea for that matter. Fortunately, I didn't listen to them and took a big risk and a large pay cut to pursue my dream, which I hope has helped many of you get here today. Even if I had failed, I would not have regretted trying. Every time you make an excuse for something, I want all of you to think about the road to mediocrity.

- 4) **Pursue your dreams with every ounce of your being**- When your dreams die, a part of you dies. Extraordinary things are accomplished by extraordinary people exerting extraordinary effort. Don't forget the extraordinary effort part of this. It is the most important part. The first part is easy but not all that useful without the effort. Many talented people never reach their potential because they don't exert extraordinary effort. Also, when love presents itself, go for it. The reward is worth the risk. The fear of being hurt and the fear of failure have condemned many to a lifetime of unhappiness. Don't be one of them. If you haven't loved, you haven't lived.

- 5) **Cherish the moments**- As you travel through life's path, it is a meandering one. Along that path, there will be spectacular moments. When those occur, enjoy them and appreciate them. Stop and say to yourself, this is amazing. Sometimes I think life is just a connection of these moments and everything in between is just a blur. Some of these moments might be professional, but I suspect most will likely be personal. They could be sitting on a balcony overlooking the ocean with someone you love, the birth of your child, or just watching a little league game. Cherish these moments and I hope you all have a lot of them. Life is not the number of breaths you take, but the number of moments that take your breath.

- 6) **Collect great friends**- These are far better than collecting coin, stamps, cars or money. They will give you far more joy. I envy all of you as this will be far easier for you than it was with me. Technology has made that far easier. When I graduated from high school, you lost almost all of your high school friends. When you graduated from college, you lost those friends. Now with email, free telephone calls and social networking, you will be able to keep far more friends than my generation could. Take advantage of it. I am so jealous.

- 7) **The next one is an important one-Thank your parents-** They have done so much for you. I am not sure I really appreciated what they do until I became a parent myself. In addition to all of the time and money they put into your childhood, they likely helped to shape your values and are a large part of who you are. My father used to tell me that I could do anything I wanted to do if I set my mind to it. I didn't appreciate it at the time, but am certain it helped give me the courage to be an entrepreneur. He died from a brain tumor far too young and I miss him immensely, but I am so thankful that I had said to him everything I wanted to say to him long before he became ill.
- 8) **Figure out what is important to you and go get it.** I had four things I wanted to accomplish in life and I am fortunate to have done all four. It brings a sense of peace that is quite powerful. For some of you it may be just one thing. For others, there may be 10 things. Just set your mind on it and go get it. Even if you don't achieve it, you will derive satisfaction from trying and I guarantee you will regret it for a lifetime if you don't give it your all.

This class is a very special class for k12 in that it marks the first time we have students graduating who started in Kindergarten and have done their entire education online. Interestingly, these students were born about the time the Internet became commercialized and were able to do their entire education using the Internet. It is awesome. I envisioned it 13 years ago, but am still amazed it happens. I am happy to say all of these students turned out great. I remember when I did the first presentation to prospective parents back in 2000 and the most common question was if I do this for K through 12, "Will my child be able to get into college?" I took some liberty like only an entrepreneur could and answered "of course." Now I can definitively answer "YES" with facts to support it. It wasn't quite a fact 13 years ago.

Ben Franklin once said, "the most important question a person can ask in this world is "What good can I do in the world?" I hope all of you at some point in your lives ask yourself that question. Great things can come from it. When I asked it, K12 was created. With apologies to Lou Gehrig, I often feel like the luckiest man alive as I get to wake up every morning and my purpose each day is

to continually deliver to a growing number of students an education that gets better every year.

You step out of here with one of the most powerful things a person can possess: an education. Equally important, you have the skills to be lifelong learners, which is even more important today than it was for me and my generation. You will be competing for jobs with students from around the world. It isn't a new idea, however just easier now. Goethe said in the 18th century

"We must always change, renew, rejuvenate ourselves; otherwise we harden"

You are prepared for the world, now go out there and seize it. Enjoy the gift of life and make the most of it. Manage your life through courage not fear. You are blessed to have the opportunities you have in front of you and you live in a country where you can be anything you want to be. Not everyone can say that. In fact, most cannot. I hope all of you find your pathway and make the most of it. Congratulations to the Class of 2013 and Good Luck!

Thank You.