Dear Next Steps at Vanderbilt Faculty, Staff, Students, Ambassadores, Mentors, Friends, and, most importantly, the Class of 2014 and their parents and families:

It was a very high honor to be asked to speak to you today because I have the highest regard for this program. I have been both a cheerleader and a participating faculty member in Next Steps at Vanderbilt for the past five years.

Mostly what this means is that I have been one of your biggest fans. I’ve seen the difference this program makes on our campus. I’ve seen the many ways that having a Next Steps at Vanderbilt student in my class can make the classroom experience better for all of us. I’ve seen the many smiling faces and animated conversations at the lunch table in Rand and around the fireplace in the Commons when Next Steps at Vanderbilt students are there. I’ve even noticed a broad smile coming to my own face when I’ve seen a Next Steps at Vanderbilt student walking towards me on campus and known that my day was just about to get a whole lot better as we would stop and chat for a few minutes.

But perhaps my own perspective is a bit too selfish: Clearly, having Next Steps at Vanderbilt has made my own time on this campus better, but this is a graduation speech, and my job this afternoon is not to talk about me, but instead to talk about
you and, really, to offer you some advice for the future. These are supposed to be “farewell remarks,” as it says in the program.

So I’m going to take the next minutes to pass along some of the best advice I’ve ever been given, offered to me by a former colleague many years ago and yet words I still think about almost every day. I don’t know where or who he heard if from originally, so I cannot provide the original source. This advice is very simply stated, as you’ll see, but there’s more to it than meets the eye, just as there is so much more to each of us.

So here you go. Ready? It is only three lines long:

1. Show up.
2. Pay attention.
3. Don’t get too attached to the results.

Got that? As you might have expected, now I’m going to go through each one again and offer a little commentary.

First, show up. This might seem like a fairly simple bit of advice, but it can be quite difficult. At least it seems that way to the students who tell me that they have some trouble waking up in time for my 10:10am class on MWF. By the way, I’ve never been told that by a Next Steps at Vanderbilt student. Never.
Showing up is harder than it sounds. Partly this is because of physics: specifically, Newton’s first law, which suggests that a body at rest will stay at rest until or unless acted upon by an external force. (I think this is actually what those students who cannot wake up for an 10:10 class are trying to tell me, although they don’t phrase it this way.) But to put it in more human terms, showing up is also hard because of fear. At some level, we are all afraid of showing up, especially when that means showing up for new things that we’ve never done before. New things that we might not get right the first time. New things that might be slightly uncomfortable. When we are faced with the prospect of these new things, it is SO much easier to stay home. Not to show up.

But that’s not what our graduates today chose to do, is it? Their participation in—and certainly their graduation from—Next Steps at Vanderbilt proves that they were, each of them, in fact fearless when faced with new things. They showed up here on campus on that first day, and then every first day after that, ready to learn, ready to talk, ready to listen, ready to try. I’m not saying that there weren’t some days that were scary or uncomfortable. I’m sure there were. I know there were those sorts of days for their parents, too. But this group of graduates showed up anyway. And if this fact suggests to us that they already know this first line of my friend’s advice, then perhaps the message is really just a reminder for the rest of us: Show up.
Second, **pay attention.** We hear so much about attention these days, don’t we? Or more specifically, we read about the lack of it: We read about car accidents caused by people not paying attention to their driving. We read about parents who pay more attention to their phones and computer screens than they do to their own children. We read about rising incidence of the attention deficit disorders among children diagnosed at younger and younger ages, sometimes even before they go to kindergarten. So this one seems like advice we could all use, too. Pay attention.

But is it really that simple? Even putting aside for the moment the reality of constant distractions in most of our daily lives—and that is no small thing to put aside—let’s take a moment to imagine what paying attention really means.

I don’t think it is a coincidence that the verb “pay” can also be thought of as an economic transaction. When we pay for something in cash, for example, it means getting something, sure, but also giving up something we might otherwise thing of as being valuable. Likewise, when we pay attention, we are giving up an interest in the value of those other distractions. When we *really* pay attention to another person, when we really focus on them, we are saying that nothing else matters as much to us in that moment as much as the other person does: what she has to say, how he is feeling, what she is thinking about right now.

Some call this deep focus “presence.” But we could also call it a “present” because it really is a gift. When you give another person your full attention, you are telling
them that you see them. Think about how rare this sort of acknowledgement-as-attention is for all of us. When was the last time that you felt like someone was really being present with you? Think about what a difference it would make in someone else’s life for you to be fully present for them, even just for a few minutes tomorrow. It would be huge, right? And again, if my experience is any guide, this is an area in which Next Steps students often excel, so perhaps we can all learn from our graduates today how important this one is. **Pay attention.**

And that gets us to the third line, equally challenging: **Don’t get too attached to the results.**

What about am about to say might sound counter-intuitive or even slightly scandalous, so listen closely. Academic environments, this one included, care about results. We at Vanderbilt constantly talk about them and how to measure them: rankings, scores, statistics, impact factors, and so on.

But there is a big difference between caring about results and being results. Caring about results means that we care about things like graduation, for example, whereas being results suggests that people only matter when they graduate. We can affirm that first thing, which is what we affirm together here today, without affirming the second one.
That is, we can be proud to call you a graduate of Next Steps at Vanderbilt, and we are, without saying that this is the only reason you matter to us. On this point, let me be perfectly clear: You matter to us because you are you. You matter to this community because you are part of it. You have already been an important part of the Vanderbilt community during your time on this campus. Your grades and coursework are important, and you worked hard to earn them, but they don’t constitute community. People make a community, the sum total of them, and not just their “results.”

The larger point is that when we get too attached to results, we can lose sight of the truth that it is far better to love, respect and cherish people simply because they are. On the other hand, getting too attached to results means that we only show people they matter to us when we can see and value what they have done. What you have done to get to this graduation stage is important, to be sure, but who you are, is even more important than that...and then some.

Who you are is a group of people who we’ve been proud to call our students and friends.
Who you are is a group of people who have taught us a great deal.
Who you are is a group of people who have been loved beyond what you can even imagine by your parents and families. And today, especially today, that love really shows.
So let’s get on with the celebration: the acknowledgement of what you’ve done and where you’re headed, sure, but also of who you are. Let’s celebrate all of that as well as the love and support of the people who are here to honor you today. And let’s all remember to show up and pay attention and cherish each other for the wondrous, wonderful creatures we all truly are.

Congratulations, Next Steps at Vanderbilt Class of 2014, and thank you.