Address at URCAD 2006
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When I transferred into the Meyerhoff Program at UMBC, it was for three main reasons: the research opportunities, academic challenges, and support networks offered by the university. At the inaugural URCAD in 1997, I presented a poster of my very first research project. As I stood at my poster nervously explaining the work I had done in the lab of Dr. Phyllis Robinson, I never imagined that 9 years later I would be standing here addressing the 10th anniversary UMBC URCAD participants. I might have been even more surprised to learn that my early research experiences at UMBC were the first steps on a path that would lead me here within two months of my own doctoral defense at The Rockefeller University. Back then, I’d never even hear of RU.

I am truly honored to have been invited to speak to you all. I am really inspired and encouraged by the quality and scope of the work being presented here today. Your efforts and achievements reflect the continual growth of UMBC as an academic, artistic, and intellectual powerhouse – the work of you and your mentors is what enables the university to shine.

In preparing for today, I reflected on the lessons I’ve learned that would be of value to you as you prepare yourselves for what I hope will be a rewarding process of life-long learning. Please listen closely because I’m going to share some advice that you might not hear everyday.

Today, I want to present you with a set of 8 challenges.

1. I challenge each and every one of you to **continually reach outside of your comfort zone** (geographically, intellectually, artistically, socially, and academically) to **explore all of the resources this world has to offer**. In elementary and high school, you were fed valuable information. At UMBC, you are continuing to gather information, but more importantly you are learning to synthesize it and to ask questions. The true challenge is for you to create new knowledge, new insight, new understanding, and new forms of communication…such is the nature of research and the nature of the creative endeavor. In doing so, I challenge you to always **question your assumptions and those of your peers and mentors**. In the wise words of Taco Bell®, “think outside the bun.” **Explore beyond the bounds of your area of expertise**. More than ever before we live in a world of uncertainty most people in our generations stay in a job for an average of 3 years…gone are the days of a life-long commitment and a guaranteed pension even in academia, funding and tenure are far from certain…so I encourage you to **build transferable skills**. Ultimately, anyone can do a job, but few have the knowledge, skills, passion, and confidence to create value. This value is what will make you irreplaceable and open doors for your career growth. **Take advantage of a liberal arts education available to you at UMBC**…dancer to doctor, painter to chemist, scientist to business consultant, mathematician to university president, & for better or for worse, we’ve all seen a terminator become a governor. **Use lessons from various disciplines to inform and enhance one another**; the unique insights you will be able to develop will be invaluable.

2. (Don’t worry…not as long as the first one) **Learn to communicate clearly and effectively** both verbally and in written form. Whether competing for grants, lobbying governmental officials, pitching a project to a venture capital firm, or explaining to your grandmother why you are still in school. Your success will depend on your ability to communicate your understanding and the value of your work.

3. **Learn from everyone.** UMBC has an abundance of brilliant faculty and graduate students who can offer both instruction and advice. Learn from their experiences. Your classmates and friends have insights, understanding, and constructive criticism which can assist you. Use the career office to find internships and outside mentors. Tutor & learn by teaching. Even pay attention to the people you don’t particularly like; they might have important perspectives and talents from which you can learn.

4. **Avoid being lured in by big names.** Seek out the individuals and institutions that will support, challenge, and encourage you. Seek mentors who are invested in your success. Find the places and
people who can best help you grow, don’t limit yourself to the names people know. Be willing to travel, to live and work in whatever environment will sustain you best.

5. Do what you love and love what you do. There are few successes more significant than being able to get up every day (or even most days!) looking forward to your work.

6. Learn to let go of outcomes...don’t take them personally. Love your process, because the process is all you control. Ultimately, no matter how hard you work, you can’t guarantee a given result. That said, I challenge you to seek unexpected blessings in unexpected results. That fungus contaminating your plates might be making penicillin.

7. Have faith in something. If you’re struggling for anything important, you will experience frustration and disappointments. You’ll need something solid to support you over the rough patches. Otherwise, you may never have the strength to pass through them…

8. Most importantly, value your integrity. Do good work, help others, and always behave ethically. At the end of the day, no outside compensation or recognition can compare to the reward of being able to look oneself in the eye and take pride in a job done honorably

Today you and your mentors are being recognized at URCAD for making great strides in research and creative endeavors. But in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The reward of a thing well done is to have done it.” Congratulations! Well done.