Just four years ago, I was faced with one of the hardest decisions of my life up to that point: where to go to college. Like many, I was being courted by several universities who were all offering scholarships, perks, and deals if I would just come to their school. Somehow, my late high school self made it through all of that and chose the University of Southern Indiana, a school that turned out to give me more than I ever thought possible out of my education.

But now, four years later, some of us are facing a decision so much bigger, more difficult, and with much more lasting impact. It makes the decision of picking a college to go to seem as insignificant as picking a shirt to wear.

Those of us who are preparing to graduate are standing on the brink of our whole lives, making decisions that will absolutely define who we are and what we do for the foreseeable future. We’re looking at graduate schools, scouting job offers, and considering taking a trip to find ourselves in Europe. At this point, I’m honestly not sure if I’ll be finding myself living in my parent’s basement a few months from now.

It’s a scary time of life, for sure, but certainly not a time without hope, excitement, and above all, opportunity. Even when we don’t know for certain what we will be doing at the end of our time at USI, there are some things that I do know to be true.

First, whatever it is that we do, I know that it will be done with excellence. One does not get to be a Presidential Scholar, a Dean’s Scholar, a BMD Scholar, or a USI graduate without an enduring commitment to excellence. For every scholar, donor, and professor: I’d like to renew a challenge to excellence in your life.

For scholars, it was a commitment to excellence that carried you into the seats you are sitting in today… literally and metaphorically. Your time in high school was obviously well spent, doing everything you did as well as it could be done. It’s very likely your time here at USI has been the same.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is not average ideas or mediocre performance that drives the world. The world needs people who are performing excellently, who are doing what they do better than anyone else. There is no doubt in my mind that the people in this room have the power to radically affect the face of the world that we live in, to enact positive change, to advance science, to help people, to create “the next big thing.” As we go out into the world, we will be the ones ushering in the next era of human history. That’s a bit lofty, I know, but I’m somewhat of a romantic; just bear with me.

I’m challenging each and every one of you to bring excellence into your daily life. Whether you’re flipping burgers or running the country, do it the best it has ever been done. A long time ago, my dad taught me that a job isn’t worth doing unless it’s worth doing right. I feel like a politician when I say things like that, but very rarely have truer words been spoken. Throughout my life, if I ever find myself in a situation where I don’t think what I’m doing is worth doing a good job at, I stop doing it. And I’m challenging you to do the same. Find something that captures your interest, something worth throwing yourself at, and go do that.

Which brings me to my second challenge: find passion in your life.

Howard Thurman is credited with saying “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

Excellence will naturally stem out of passion. If you find what you are passionate about, you will pursue it with everything you have.

So, scholars: as you look forward to the future, ask yourself: “what am I really passionate about?”

You might be very passionate about making a lot of money. And certainly everyone in this room is capable of doing that.

But I think chances are that most of us in here are passionate about something other than money. Some of us want to help people, some want to save lives, some want to have a family, some want to travel. Scholars, donors… whatever it is, I’m challenging you to take a look at what you are passionate about, and then go and do it.
Donors, on behalf of all the scholars of the USI Foundation, I want to extend profound thanks for your continued support. The gift of education that you have given us is worth more than we can express. You have given us opportunities and opened doors that will lead into the rest of our lives.

Scholars, as we look forward to the future, remember your time at USI, enjoy what’s left of it, and use it as the jumping off point for the rest of your life. Whatever you choose to do with your time, do it with excellence and do it with passion. Thank you.