

“Rule Zero: It’s Gotta Matter.”
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Virginia Tech Commencement Address
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President Steger, Provost McNamee, members of the Board of Visitors, faculty colleagues, stage party guests, families and friends of the graduates, and members of the Class of 2003:

A recent Tech graduate named Jason formulated a bald truth that he calls Rule Zero, which is just this: It’s Gotta Matter. Since bald truths are clearly the only ones I know about, my job is to tell you about Rule Zero, and your job is to listen. You may finish before I do. If so, when you hear the words “thank you very much”, that means that I’m finished, too, and President Steger will be ready to present you with your degree...and you really don’t want to miss that!

To you new graduates, members of the Class of 2003, and to your crew in attendance, congratulations—it’s a great day for you! It’s a day that matters.

You came into Virginia Tech with a great blessing and a great curse. The blessing was that you were the most highly qualified and highly recruited class to attend Virginia Tech up to that time. The curse was that you were the most highly qualified and highly recruited class to attend Virginia Tech up to that time! Along with your Great Promise came Great Expectations.

So, how did you do?

Not surprisingly, your family members and friends are wondering the same thing: did young Leslie and Helen learn anything useful or accomplish anything of note while acquiring a five-digit loan? Did you ever!

While you were here, you learned how to think, how to learn, and how to work. We know this because many, many employers tell us, “We like to hire Hokies.” You participated in many research and outreach projects, such as Rural Studio Outreach, FORSite, and the Pratt Senior Research Programs—because it mattered to all parties concerned. You took semesters off to study in foreign countries in numbers well above the national average; in the Pamplin College of Business, this figure approaches 25% of all students—because it mattered to someone to create study-abroad opportunities, and it mattered to you to join in. You put on plays, published poetry and short stories, created films, designed clothing and furniture and made recordings—because of Rule Zero: it mattered. You entered the Solar Decathlon, the American College Theatre Festival, the International Programming Contest, and a host of other competitions in every college at the local, regional, state, national, international, and intergalactic levels, and returned to Blacksburg covered with glory—because it mattered. You were active in all sorts of clubs: professional clubs, sports clubs, social clubs, nightclubs—because it mattered.

You were here when a group of young men played for a national championship in football. You were here—and I mean right here—when a group of young women played, and continue to play, NCAA tournament-caliber basketball. Some of you even helped put together the world’s third

largest supercomputer, known as X. (As a mathematician, I like that name!) You reached out into the community to help those in need, exemplifying the spirit of *ut prosim*. And you were here on one of the darkest days in recent history, the Day of Horror, the day the sky fell, the day God sat down and cried. We saw you reach out to comfort each other on that dreadful day. We saw you reach out to the international student community, saying, “Do not be afraid...this is Virginia Tech...you are among friends.” And all of that mattered.

So, did you do well? In the words of the Immortal Bard of Bridgeport, Walt Kelly, “Some says yes and some says absolutely!”

And so, my question to you is this: will you go on to do something significant with the rest of your life? “Significant”, of course, means many different things. It could mean that you want to make a difference...to live well...to find love...to do good work...to fly to the moon...to create something of lasting value...to be a smash-hit on Broadway...to design beautiful and useful things...to pass along the wonder and the beauty of your chosen field to fertile young minds...to make a zillion dollars.

If whatever you do is to be significant, then it has to matter to you. Indifference just doesn't cut it; Rule Zero applies: It's Gotta Matter.

A recent book called “The Math Gene” supports this point. I bought this book, thinking to learn about the intellectual qualities that ensure success in mathematics. Was I in for a surprise! The author, Keith Devlin, is a prolific, award-winning writer on Matters Mathematical, and the book is a good read. He makes the assertion that almost every human being has the capacity for mathematical thinking, the ability to cope with the basic mathematics required for every college graduate. He patiently puts his case together and finally, on page 271, after a great deal of build-up, reaches the punch line, and I quote: “The key to being able to do mathematics is wanting to.” People do mathematics because it matters to them. Rule Zero—plain and simple. (Who'd'a'think it?)

You may know people who have overcome tremendous barriers—financial, physical, emotional, family, cultural—to accomplish significant things. You may know others with every opportunity and advantage at their disposal and who accomplish little or nothing of significance. All of you now have the advantage of a degree from Virginia Tech. My challenge to you is to find something that matters to you, and go after it.

Now, such accomplishments don't just happen, and some of you have already figured this out. For those of you who haven't, here are a few simple words of advice:

1. Name That Tune. Decide What Matters and Name It, if only to yourself. Those who do not accomplish something significant often have not named it.
2. Do not be afraid to pursue that which matters. Those who do not achieve anything significant have often been unwilling (or afraid) to go after it.
3. Don't Get In Your Own Way. There'll be plenty of people out there who'll get in your way: don't join'em. Give it everything you've got. For those who accomplish little or nothing, something has held them back. Half-hearted, indifferent attempts just don't work.

Here are some examples that will, I hope, illustrate these points.

Lori came from a dysfunctional family background and had very little self-confidence when she arrived at Tech. Through sheer determination and through adherence to Rule Zero, she became, among other things, Executive Chair of the multi-million dollar student-run investment group SEED, graduated Summa Cum Laude as the Outstanding Senior in Business, and is now practicing law with an impressive career ahead of her.

Mike entered Tech full of hopes, dreams, and self-confidence...and then got an 18th-birthday present nobody should ever get: a diagnosis of bone cancer. He fought through chemotherapy, radiation, and a knee-replacement operation with incredible courage, firmly resolving to ski, to rollerblade, to skydive, and to finish his Engineering degree no more than one semester late. It turned out to be two semesters late, because he took a semester of study in Australia. He did all of this by keeping Rule Zero in mind, and his irrepressible good spirits showed in his frequent email postscripts: "Are We Having Fun Yet?" Mike is now a successful engineer, almost a ten-year survivor, and yes, he is having fun.

In my three-and-a-half decades at Tech, I could multiply these two by 750, by 7500, and by 75,000—because in those years over one hundred and fifty thousand people have graduated from Virginia Tech. Most of these have led lives of meaning and significance. Some of these have influenced the lives of others. A few have had the privilege of making a difference for all of us. And so, members of the Class of 2003, you now join this incredible group of people. Your significant accomplishment could be any number of things, but what counts is that it matters to you. I challenge you to Name It, Go For It, Stay Out Of Your Own Way, and remember Rule Zero: It's Gotta Matter. Be happy, have a good life, and y'all come back and see us—y'hear?

Thank you very much.