Dean Yannis C. Yortsos’ Commencement Address

Commencement is a wonderful time of the year… For all of us, it is the culmination of a year of relentless efforts in teaching and research… Students will graduate and carry with them all the rich experiences they accumulated over all these years, from their interactions with our faculty in teaching and in research … In the fall new students will join us, and this cycle will recommence… It is this renewal process—the farewell to the graduates and the welcome to the new ones - that we are celebrating…

Because of the 100-year celebration, however, this year this event is even more special… And for me personally, it also signals the end of one year at the helm of the Viterbi school…

So I will begin by saying what a privilege it has been to steer the past year the magnificent ship of the USC Viterbi School of Engineering.

And by telling our 2006 graduates what an honor it is to be standing before you and addressing you this morning…

You have accomplished so much, and we are all very proud of you.

But you should also be proud of your accomplishments.

Now is an exciting time to be graduating – or as the word “commencement” suggests – to be beginning. You have blossomed and now you are about to begin the next phase in your life, one that you anticipate with excitement, ambition and boundless optimism. And whether you will be continuing your formal education or entering into the work force, you will also begin to learn the considerable extent of your own value. And you will learn that society has a great need for what you offer – your technical skills, your problem solving ability, your creativity, your optimism, and your energy.

The world we live in has become enormously complex. Your profession is incredibly dynamic. But your background in engineering the best tool to understand it and make it better.

During the century we just passed, we learned how to transplant hearts, fly spaceships, and squeeze a library onto a single slender disk. Engineers catalyzed these amazing changes.

Theodore Von Karman put it this way, “Scientists study the world as it is, engineers create a world that never was.”
In the new century engineering will flourish in yet more exciting new areas: nanotechnology, quantum computing, and molecular electronics… which promise unprecedented new materials and devices; in biomedical, biochemical technologies and nanomedicine that will give us the knowledge required to cure diseases; in the development of energy and alternative energy sources, which in the words of President Shirley Jackson of RPI is likely to become the “arms race of the 21st century”; and in the management of natural resources and the environmental quality; all of immense importance in the global world we live. Engineering will also emerge as an enabling technology through the sciences and the arts. It will help solve up-to-now intractable problems in cognitive sciences, the science of learning… even social and political sciences.

Indeed, engineering is undergoing a fundamental transformation… This is a change fueled by the tremendous advances in information technology in recent years, a pace likely to accelerate even more in the future… We live in an infrastructure-enabled world. Open-source networks of collaboration and research have demolished geographic distances and discipline barriers… Problems have become global, and they increasingly demand multiple partnerships, new alliances and new collaborations… And Biology is becoming the new pillar in engineering …

The ever-increasing capacity of computers to perform up-to-now unimaginable tasks has led some to pronounce the ushering of a new conceptual era. In this new era value will be created by the seamless blending of “left-brain” and “right-brain” skills… This will require alliances of engineering with communications, the arts, public policy, other sciences, entrepreneurship and business. And conversely, professionals in other disciplines will need engineering to achieve a “left-brain” balance. These unprecedented changes engender great challenges but also precious opportunities, which you will be called to uncover and exploit—whether you practice engineering, go to academia, business, law school or medical school, or into public policy.

So, more than likely, you will evolve into a new breed of professional, one with ambidextrous analytical and creative skills, one of a higher prominence and social prestige. And I am confident that we have prepared you well for this transformation.

But your work will also increasingly require a new sense of moral imagination—the will and ability to carry out the ethical imperative.

Indeed, now more than ever before, society has a great need, for your integrity and compassion, in addition to your knowledge and ability to find solutions.

As graduates of the USC Viterbi School of Engineering, you will lead the way. Because the education you received has prepared you for this challenge. And your talents and abilities are immense.
Just yesterday, I learned that one of our graduates of a few years ago from Chemical Engineering, has been appointed as President of Lehigh University, from her current position as Vice-Provost at MIT. We are very proud of her. Just as we are proud of you. Because I am certain that similar distinctions await you as you grow into your professional lives, whether these will be in the corporate world, academia, business, or in other professions.

As you prepare to join the Trojan family, you will join thousands of other engineering alumni with whom you will share a common bond and an affection for the Viterbi school, this jewel of the USC campus, a place where you spent some of the most important formative years of your life. We will miss you but I know that we will always be with you.

Your journey at USC has become possible by the constant care and support from the most important people who are gathered here today—parents, families, and friends. So, on a day in which you are rightly the center of attention, I would ask you graduates to rise and join me in a round of applause, for those who have supported you each and every step in your academic journey, your family and friends:

APPLAUSE

Tom Friedman, the noted author of the *flat world* gave a well-received commencement speech at Williams College last year. His number one tip for graduates was: do what you love. The flatter the world gets, the more essential it is that you do what inspires you and what fulfills you. Indeed, the many successful Viterbi alumni, such as Andy Viterbi, himself, Mark Stevens of the USC Stevens, John Mork of the Mork Family Department of Chemical Engineering and Materials Science, Dan Epstein, of the Epstein Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering, Ken Klein of the Klein Institute of Undergraduate Engineering Life, and so many others, who have generously supported the Viterbi school in the last several years, have reached the pinnacle of their professions by doing what inspired and fulfilled them.

Many years before Friedman, the Chinese philosopher Confucius put it more simply. He said, “Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.”

And so as you leave today with our blessing, that of your parents and friends, and with the official Viterbi School seal of approval, this is my wish for you: Do what you love and you will reach for the stars! And when you reach there, take a moment to look back and you will see a caring and supporting institution that admires you, is proud of you and embraces you for all the wonders you are certain to accomplish!

Thank you!