

Fellow graduates, faculty, family, and friends; good afternoon.

It is with deep honor that I stand before you . On behalf of our student body I would like to thank everyone for being here and sharing this remarkable moment in which you have all supported.

To our family and friends, our gratitude is endless. Without your constant encouragement, support, and in many cases a tad bit of financial assistance, we would not sit in front of you today.

To our professors, academic professionals, administration, food service staff, and custodians, we thank you all for contributing to our academic achievements. Through your mentorship and cumulative efforts, we have successfully completed another stage in our academic careers and accomplished many personal goals. As we accept our diplomas and walk across this stage, we hope you smile. To whoever doubted the power of teamwork, we are its personification.

My fellow graduates. We did it! It seems as if we have been on this trek forever, but we made it. We have all traveled many different roads and although we have met many roadblocks along the way, we are here. We are from neighborhoods and countries all over the world. We are from Springfield, Chicago, Pontiac, , and Oak Park. We are from Bangladore, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nigera, Sudan, and Alaska. We live in cities with thousands of people and graduated high school with classes of 800. We grew up in small towns and graduated high school with 20 friends we attended kindergarten with. We lived on campus. We commuted from the community and we attended classes through the internet. But most importantly, we are all here together today. Together we have laughed at our fellow classmates being hypnotized during welcome week events. Together, we've rallied for student rights in times of despair. Together, we have endured financial crisis in Illinois and lobbied to restore MAP grants. Once again, we are sharing another unforgettable moment, together.

It's amazing to think four years ago, my mother submitted a non-refundable deposit to admissions without my knowledge. Yes it's true, I had no intentions of standing before you today. Well, my grandmother once told me that if I wanted to make God laugh, I just needed to tell him my plans. I'm sure they are both high fiving each other and getting a good laugh out of this one.

My experience at UIS has been unimaginable. I've served on over 20 different committees. Assisted in the search to hire our current President, Dean of Student Services, and Executive Director of Volunteer Service and Civic Engagement. I have served as the treasurer, vice-president, and current ex-officio member of our student government. I currently serve as the first African-American student trustee of UIS. From these accomplishments and experiences, the most important thing I take away from this isn't an award or a plaque and it isn't "Charles, you've done an amazing job" although I appreciate them. They don't mean much to me.

The most important things I take with me are relationships. Initially, I was not overly enthusiastic about graduation. In fact, I can admit that I was a bit scared. It was in this city, with the people in this room, that a majority of my intellectual development occurred in the past four years. How am I to leave all this

behind? Outside of the classroom, we have voluntarily chosen to engage in relationships. These relationships have even helped form my moral, intellectual, and professional character. I have formed trustful relationships that have allowed for the destruction of perceptions we develop as children and place upon ourselves and others. This destruction has afforded the opportunity to rebuild. Relationships have completely changed the way I view the world and people.

It was the relationship with Beth Hoag and Cynthia Thompson urging me to become involved my freshman year that allowed me to understand the power of self-perception. If we are to have others believe we're capable of great things, we must first believe this ourselves.

It was the relationships with Chris Kennedy, Mike Hogan, Karen Hasara, and Clarice Ford that helped me to understand if I refuse to limit my passion, drive, and ambition. I would never let anyone else place me in their boxes.

It was Daryl, a custodian in my residence hall freshman year that I walked alongside in the relay for life cancer benefit that allowed me to understand the things we take for granted are not guaranteed and we must cherish them while we can.

It was my parents that sacrificed as much as possible to help me understand the true meaning of advocacy.

It was my younger brother and sister, that helped me realize the necessity of becoming a first generation college student for my family and always remembering to walk the walk to back up the talk.

The friendships I've lost throughout this maturation process that allowed me to understand our relationship with others should reflect our goals, values, and aspirations.

It was Daramola, Ashley Price, Derek Rhoads, and many other friends that make it crystal clear that one must have a few good allies along the way to help make your weaknesses clear (so time more painstakingly than others) in order to build you back up.

Relationships tell a lot about who we are and we will each walk away with these treasures this afternoon. As I stand before you today, I don't fear losing these relationships but I am eager to nurture them. These classrooms and committee meetings did not make these relationships. We are responsible and must ensure we stamp them "HANDLE WITH CARE" as we make our travels across the world in our future endeavors. Henry Ford once said, "coming together is the beginning, keeping together is progress, and working together is success". We have all come together in deciding to attend UIS. We have kept together in our academic programs. We must now meet the challenge to work together to ensure that we accomplish great success.

Now, what's a commencement speech without a piece of great advice? I guess we are about to find out. I believe that the best advice comes from within. It is not someone else guiding one's thoughts that lead one to greatness, for we have known ourselves far longer than any other. In my experience, the most beneficial advice come from introspection and reflection. So, I simply challenge everyone to reflect as

much often as possible. In lieu of advice, I would like to offer a bit of encouragement as we enter a new phase in our lives.

Although I encourage everyone to succeed we must appreciate failure. I encourage you to become better at failing. We cannot truly succeed and comprehend our true capabilities if we do not exploit failure for the true gifts it provides. We have been programmed to fear failure of anything. I say we have been programmed, because as children we never feared failure. We would constantly ask our parents the same question, although we knew the answer would be No. Instead of fearing now, we would formulate another way to ask the same question and although our parents grew irritated, ever so often they would silently think "wow that was a good one". Most of us have shared our scars from falling off of our bicycles with our friends. We have all fallen off of our bikes. Instead of deciding not to try again, we believed in the possibility of accomplishing a seemingly impossible feat. By showing off our scars to friends, in a sense, we were proud of our failure because it proved that achieving our goals were possible regardless of how hard the fall we took along the way. It may be ten years from now when you opening your first business, or running for a political office. It may be in the next few hours when we walk out of the door and have no idea where we want to go next. Roll up your sleeves or lift up your pant leg and take a look at that scar and remember that failure and difficult times are necessary to propel to new heights.

I will not say farewell this afternoon. More appropriately, I'll see you soon.

Thank you and Godspeed!