

I've been told I'm one of the last road blocks standing between you and a big graduation party, so I will be as brief as possible.

To the 2013 graduating class of Topeka Collegiate, congratulations: you have finally put middle school behind you. At this time tomorrow, you'll be high schoolers. That's a pretty big milestone; give yourselves a round of applause. Let's also give a hand to your parents, grandparents, teachers, friends, and family who helped you along the way and are here to celebrate your success.

Before I dive in, I need to be up-front with all of you. To the graduates: I'm 29 years old, which means I'm out of touch with your lives. To the parents: I'm 29 years old, with no kids of my own, which makes me annoyingly presumptuous to opine on anything. Bear with me as I try to generationally thread the needle.

With that out of the way, I posit the following: **your future begins right now**. I aim to provide you with some practical insights that hopefully will make high school and the rest of your lives just a little bit easier.

In a few months, you're going to start high school. I don't know how you're feeling, but I was seriously stressed: excited, most assuredly, but scared out of my mind. And I'm sure some of you have nagging doubts in the backs of your minds: how will I know where my classrooms are? How hard are classes going to be? Will any of these strange new faces let me eat lunch with them? A change this big in your life can seem pretty overwhelming.

Let me tell you: the fear of the unknown never goes away. But it's a bit like a curtain in front of a doorway: you may not be able to see what's on the other side, but it's really easy to push through it.

I started a new job three weeks ago and my girlfriend can attest that on the day before I started, my big concerns were: Where will my office be? How hard is the work going to be? Will anybody go to lunch with me? But when I met with my boss on Monday morning to talk about my responsibilities, I felt my fears melt away: my skills are a great fit for this new role, the team is really friendly, and I'm proud to say that I have lunch dates with coworkers scheduled into mid-July.

Something similar will probably happen to you *really* quickly when you start high school: you're going to figure out the best route from Social Studies to English in, like, a week. And you'll quickly identify which classes are going to be harder than others. Your time here at Topeka Collegiate has taught you how to study and how to do high quality work. Don't worry about that.

You're also going to have friends. Many will probably be new faces you don't even know exist right now; some will be old friends and are probably sitting next to you right now. And you're going to stay in touch with some of them for the rest of your lives. I speak from experience: This weekend I'm having a sleepover at my Brooklyn apartment with James Frager, a fellow TCS Eagle from my graduating class.

But high school is about way more than classes and friends. I'll bet my own money that you learn more about yourself in the groups you join and the activities you pursue than you ever do in the classroom. When I think to my own time in school, I attribute nearly all of my personal development to the three extracurriculars I cared about the most: math contests while here at TCS, which taught me how to do math; debate and forensics at Topeka High, which taught me how to speak; and running the suicide hotline at MIT, which taught me how listen. When I said earlier that my new skills are a great fit for my new job, these are the attributes I was talking about: the skills I learned and honed when I was fourteen trained me on my job fifteen years later.

So while you're in high school, keep your eyes and ears open for new and interesting ways to spend your time. Maybe it's playwriting and stage directing; maybe it's joining the marching band; maybe it's founding a volunteerism club; maybe it's starting a business; maybe it's competing in the French Olympiad; or the soccer team, ROTC, newspaper, or taking up carpentry and building chairs.

If you don't know what you want to do, think for a little while about what gives you butterflies. When I think back to how I felt as a freshman walking into every speech contest, I remember feeling elation for just a second, then abject terror for a few more seconds, then curiosity about whether I could succeed. Your butterflies may manifest in different feelings, but pay attention to them: as a general rule, anything which makes you feel excited and just a little nervous is probably an area where you want to grow and improve.

I encourage you to dedicate yourself to a small number of activities where you can really shine. It's a great way to meet people, and you'll never do wrong by improving your repertoire of skills and experiences.

Here's the kicker: **dedication looks awesome on a college resume.**

You live in an age of hyper-competition with your peers. Especially as you start thinking about colleges, you'll probably see the newspaper articles about that one student who founded a bunch of clubs, traveled to Africa and Haiti to build houses for orphans, wrote academic journal articles at their two unpaid internships, and still managed to be valedictorian. I have two thoughts:

1. These students are very rare. That's why there are newspaper articles written about them
2. These stories resonate because those students demonstrated undeniable dedication to the activities they pursued.

You need to focus on that second point and figure out how *you* are going to show dedication, commitment, and growth in something you absolutely love. I tell you this with eleven years of experience reviewing thousands of resumes for MIT and my employers: all else being equal, the person who shows grit and determination; the person who has bled and cried for their cause; the person who has clearly put in long, hard hours even in those dark days where it wasn't fun at all... that person's getting the callback, the job offer, and the admissions spot every time when compared against someone who tries to pass themselves off as community-minded because they spent junior year's spring break as a hospital candy striper or someone who is clearly intelligent but flits from interest to interest without completing anything.

There are no cheat codes in life and hard work shines through like a beacon in the dark that can be seen from miles away. So don't ever stop challenging yourself: it reflects better on you if you get a B in an AP class than to get A's in joke classes. And never, ever take credit when somebody else did your work for you.

Here's one shortcut, though, that I wish I'd realized way earlier than I did: you can always ask for help. Teachers, advisors, and upperclassmen are almost always willing to help if you can get over yourself to ask for it. I probably made my high school and college careers three-times as

difficult as I needed to because I thought too highly of myself to ask a professor or teaching assistant for after-hours assistance.

I come to the final and probably most critical message I want to leave with you: **develop empathy**. Employing empathy simply means "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" and being able to feel with a person.

Improving your empathy, in the short term, will primarily help you manage your parents.

High school is a sensory-rich environment. Your hormones are raging. You're going to start driving in a few years, which will give you a degree of freedom you've never experienced before. Put all of this together and you present your parents a series of challenges they've not needed to face in your first 14 years.

You know that your parents care deeply about you, and all they want is for you to be safe, healthy, and happy. Don't forget this when you get in your first screaming fight about whether you can go to your friend's house party even though his parents are out of town. When you come home two hours after curfew, don't be surprised when your parents are upset: you've violated their priority #1, which is to keep you safe. You may have had a great evening with new friends, but they only see a group of strangers who have kept their precious child out much too late.

So *before* you've gone out with your new friends and *before* you've had your screaming fight, figure out how to make your and your parents' lives easier: what are your parents' biggest fears? How can you describe what you're up to in a way which will minimize those fears? My parents and I got along pretty well when I was in high school; a lot of my friends weren't so lucky. I think the difference is I focused on how to meet *my parents'* needs, as well as my own. There may be small concessions, like introducing your friends to your parents (however embarrassing your parents may be), that hopefully pre-empt tempers from flaring.

Parents: I share the following with you: your sons and daughters are going through massive changes which make them, under clinical definitions, insane. They're hungry to expand their horizons and they're relishing in a freedom they've never experienced before. They're going to make decisions that seem irrational to you but make perfect sense to them. Figure out what you need from them and how to communicate your needs so that you're comfortable giving them the room they need to grow.

There are infinitely more use cases for empathy than just pre-empting fights with your parents. This is painful and a little Machiavellian of me to even say, but it's the truth: we all walk around as the stars in our own personal movie. That means that to your friends, your teachers, and that lady who makes your sandwiches at Subway, you are nothing more than a supporting character in their personal narrative. Empathy – being able to understand why someone else feels and acts the way they do – allows you to better manage this reality: to give your best friend a little space when he suddenly won't speak to you and won't tell you why; to realize what it will take to make your girlfriend's birthday party a wild success; or to have the strength to let a bully's hurtful comments roll off your back and to give you the character to understand that her words reflect on something going on with her and has nothing to do with you.

I'm a big fan of constant self-improvement, so in closing I want to share with you two little tricks I've picked up along the way to help me combat shyness and improve my self-confidence.

1. People respond better to individuals who appear open and welcoming. You can "fake it 'till you make it" if you pinch your thumbs and middle fingers together like so and put them at your sides. This gives your hands something non-fidgety to do when you're just standing around
2. When sitting at a table or desk
 1. Place both feet flatly on the floor. It improves your posture and surprisingly makes you feel more in control
 2. Hold your pen or pencil like so. This also keeps you from fidgeting. It forces you to keep your hands above the table line, which subconsciously makes you appear more trustworthy than someone with their hands in their laps.

Thank you again for allowing me to join you in this celebration. I wish you nothing but the best in the many years to follow.

YOLO!