

Tvrtko Vrdoljak Valedictorian Speech Spring 2015



Good afternoon, Brooklyn! ... Oh, How sweet it is!
Before I begin, I want to be honest with all of you; there were two people I got a little concerned about while preparing this speech: myself and President Dugan, who was going to announce me and therefore pronounce my name.

My name is Tvrtko Vrdoljak. As you can see, my parents tried really hard not to put any vowels in my name to make sure I don't get any crazy ideas like leaving Croatia and studying abroad. Members of the Board of Trustees, President Dugan, dear Members of the Faculty & Administration, Fellow Graduates, Parents, Alumni and Friends. It is a true honor to present you with this farewell speech at the end of the wonderful four years we shared.

I would like to dedicate this speech to the unofficial patron saint of St. Francis College, Dr. Frank Macchiarola. As many of you will remember, "Dr. Mac", as he was popularly called among the students, came back to his alma mater, after a long and successful career in public service, business and academia, to become President of St. Francis College. This speech, in so many ways would not have been possible without him.

Dear graduates and alumni, many of us are here today because we had a family member, a relative, or a close friend who attended St. Francis before us. We learned from them about the transformative power of St. Francis College. We learned how this place made them want to be better people and how they will always call it their home. Those same people are here with us, rejoicing in this special day. Please, let us acknowledge just how crucial their role was in this incredible journey, from the very beginning and to this very moment. Let's give them a round of applause!

You may find it interesting that I am a third sibling in my family to graduate from St. Francis College... probably because it is only 4,295 miles from our family home in Croatia. I remember hearing stories from my two older brothers (Nikola and Andro) about this incredible place where everyone knows each other, where diversity matches that of the city where it is situated, where every professor genuinely cares, and where an 18 year old freshman can approach President of the College and ask him for advice. Ever since I was in the 5th grade, I had no doubt that I wanted to be a part of that story.

Exactly 8 years and 2 days ago I visited the US for the first time to see my brother Andro graduate and deliver his valedictory speech, just a mile away from here at the Brooklyn Marriott. I will never forget when Dr. Macchiarola, who was retiring that year, delivered his commencement speech, in which he invited me, then a 13 year old kid visiting from the other side of the world, to attend St. Francis College in this incredible city... (I mean Brooklyn, of course). I sure did take him up on that offer and 5 years later I packed my bags and moved here.

Anyone who knew Dr. Mac can tell you what it truly means to preach the gospel without using words. I will never forget my first job in the States as Dr. Mac's student assistant, while he was serving as the school's Chancellor. The warmth, attention and patience he had for each and every one of us, was something I had never experienced before.

I remember one time the former New York Mayor, Ed Koch, old friend and an associate of Dr. Mac's, called his office and I picked up the phone. Trust me; I did not know what nerve wracking meant until that moment. Here's me, an 18 year old kid, who just got off the boat a month ago, still very

scared to speak English over the phone, answering a call by Ed Koch! Wow... Talk about pressure. □ I reacted poorly and completely blanked. I failed to put Mr. Koch through to Dr. Mac's phone. I remember running into Dr. Mac's office apologizing, thinking that I would surely be fired. However, Dr. Mac found it incredibly funny and assured me that it is not the first time an Eastern European student assistant in his office failed to put someone through. He said: answering phones is an excellent practice for international students' English and their nerves. He made me feel so safe and protected. The best boss I've ever had. One of the many beauties of having attended a small liberal arts college is the gift of mentorship with which we were all endowed. Here at St. Francis, we have all found professors who went above and beyond teaching their classes, who helped us grow, not only academically, but in every possible sense of the word. I would like to take a moment to thank my guides and mentors. Dr. Paddy Quick, Dr. Edward Wesley, and Dr. Francis Green, thank you for everything you have done for me. Dr. Quick, thank you for teaching me to never stop re-examining entrenched dogmas and be a true critical theorist. Dr. Wesley, thank you for the countless hours we have spent in your office discussing books you have given me. We can all identify words, but you have truly taught me how to read. And Dr. Greene, an unyielding advocate of liberal arts education: thank you for helping me fall in love with the architecture and fine arts and, more so, to genuinely appreciate the gift of humanist education. Every one of us here has had their Dr. Quicks, Dr. Wesleys, and Dr. Greens. Please do take a moment and reflect on just how much impact these people had on your lives, and thank them. The inspiration we draw from them will stay with us forever. Please allow me to now to thank my family. None of this would have even been imaginable without them. They travelled here for this opportunity and I would like to address them in our native Croatian: "Najdrazi moji, hvala vam za sve! Volim vas."

As Dr. Greene had pointed out in his commencement speech at last year's graduating ceremony, the origin of the word education – *educere* – is to lead out, to be led out of oneself, to be broadened. And this is precisely what St. Francis College has done for us. It has introduced us with alternative areas of inquiry and helped us appreciate education through many lenses. True humanist education depends on this. We studied philosophy, immersed ourselves in arts, read history, debated politics, struggled with calculus and scrutinized the economy. It is this wealth of interdisciplinarity and well-roundedness that truly leads us out of ignorance and brings out the best in us.

But let's not be mistaken. Education goes far beyond the walls of the classroom. Academic education on campus is always embedded into the context of its surrounding. For some schools that may mean a thick forest somewhere deep in Pennsylvania or Massachusetts, while for others it is a small town. For St. Francis, however, it is the most glorious and inspiring of all cities. The unmatched diversity of people, interests, cultures and opinions that New York has exposed us to has imbued our diplomas with value that cannot be quantified. Lessons of life, friendship, love and hard-work that I have learned while living in this City, I would not change for 4 years anywhere else in the world.

I would like to leave you today with my favorite quote from St. Francis of Assisi, which Dr. Macchiarola often repeated: "Remember that when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received – only what you have given."

It is this message of selflessness and giving that I hope you will carry with you forever, from our small college of big dreams, into the big white world.
Thank you, Brooklyn, it has truly been a pleasure!