



Achieving the Dream™

Commencement Speech: Address to Graduates Odessa College, Odessa, TX May 11, 2019

It's All About the Threads Dr. Karen A. Stout

Good morning.

President Williams, Board of Trustees, faculty, staff, families, friends, and—most importantly—our soon-to-be graduates, I come to this podium honored and humbled, surrounded by so much success and accomplishment. I have long wanted to visit Odessa College. Thank you for inviting me to celebrate with you.

I've heard so much about the "The Wrangler Way." I experienced it yesterday, first-hand, on a student led tour. It's contagious! I proudly wear one of your Odessa College jackets, co-branded with our Achieving the Dream logo. It's a jacket celebrating your achievement in 2018 of ATD's highest recognition, the Leah Meyer Austin award, for the amazing trajectory of your student success outcomes results. And, I was there a few weeks ago when Odessa College was recognized as a Rising Star in the Aspen Prize competition, essentially placing you in the top five of America's community colleges. Your numbers speak for themselves. 620 graduates in 2010. Over 2,000 nine years later. You are among America's great community colleges, described by Aspen's CEO, Dan Porterfield, as "anchors in the communities they serve elevating their students into the economic mainstream of our country."

After the Aspen event, I jokingly mentioned to President Williams that I spoke at the commencement ceremonies in 2017 and 2018 respectively for this year's two Aspen Prize winners, also distinguished participants in our Achieving the Dream network. I told him my fingers are crossed, hoping that my being at today's ceremony adds some additional magic to your already powerful magic, cementing your move into the number one slot when the award is given again in 2021.

My remarks today are about threads. And I don't mean the threads that are in your clothes or today's academic regalia. I mean the threads that as life's continuous lines, often invisible unless you seek to name them, to discover them. These are the threads you follow and the threads you never let go of, threads that when woven together define who you are.

Some of these are the threads William Stafford writes about in his poem, *The Way It Is*.

The Way It Is

There's a thread you follow.
It goes among things that change.
But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen. People get hurt or die and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you can do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

There's a thread that brought you here to Odessa, a thread that might be hard for some to see. For some of you, it's a thread that helped you persevere, to withstand adversity. For others, it's a thread that pulls you toward accomplishing your lifelong dream. By holding onto that thread while here at Odessa, by not letting go, you will soon be crossing the stage.

Are you with me?

These threads come in various colors and materials. Typically, threads don't have much meaning when they are alone. Usually they are brought together through the craft of weaving which involves crossing two threads, the warp and the weft, one vertical and the other horizontal, one stretched taut and the other undulating and intertwined with the first. To produce a flexible material, it is necessary for these two threads to be bound, otherwise each will remain fragile.

We all—organizations and individuals—have warp and weft, vertical and horizontal, threads; threads we follow and threads we never let go of.

My mom was (and is) one of my threads. And, my father is one of my threads.

My mom is my weft or horizontal thread. I owe my community college career to her relentlessness. Early in my first job out of college working at a small chamber of commerce—I was an English major as an undergraduate—I can still hear her asking me “what kind of job can you get as an English major?” She sent me a classified ad for a job in my hometown at the local community college as an admissions advisor doing outreach in the high schools. She thought I was perfect for the job...it would bring me back home. So I applied and I was rejected. The ad appeared again a few weeks later. She sent it again. I applied again and was rejected. The ad appeared again. She sent it again. I applied and was rejected a third time. But a few months later I received a phone call from the hiring manager saying I did not have “higher education experience” but they were intrigued by my background and my persistence. I went for the interview, was offered the job that day, and have never left this important work. She left me this horizontal thread that launched my career, a thread that I follow.

My father is my warp or vertical thread. He has etched many moments in my mind. I remember my first commencement. I was in the fourth grade. I remember the pageantry, the pride, and the energy. I can still see my dad in his academic regalia. It was his graduation. That day, I watched my father earn his bachelor's degree after eight years of night school. He was a young father of three children. At the age of 26, he enrolled in college, in search of the American Dream, staying enrolled because his GI bill benefits paid for his tuition and books, and, maybe more importantly at that time, what dollars were left

over put food on our family's table. I now realize that my belief in the transformational power of education—one of my threads and a thread I will never let go of—was formed that day in the Lyric Theatre in Baltimore, Maryland.

I bet a few of your own threads—warp and wept—are in the audience today. You may not think of them as threads, I know. But I encourage you to. They are your believers. Your encouragers. Your mother. Your father. Your children. Your spouses. Your siblings. Your teachers. Your tutors. Your coaches. Your peers. Your vision supporters. As Stafford writes in his poem, they are the threads that “While you hold (them) you can't get lost.”

Odessa College, because of the sense of belonging you gathered here, may be one of your threads. I am reminded of an editorial written by a community college student that appeared in *The New York Times* in March with a group of letters from students who attended elite colleges (*How College Changed My Life*, March 23, 2019). Clearly her community college is one of her threads. She wrote: “My community college experience saved my life.” She continued: “I cannot emphasize enough the importance of community colleges. Their support systems, small and tight communities, and affordability are truly unrivaled. Today, I am working to destigmatize the college experience I owe everything to.”

These warp and wept threads are important to recognize and never let go of.

Yet, there are other threads, threads that are uniquely yours, threads called by Marcus Buckingham, coauthor of the recently released book *Nine Lies About Work* and founder of the strengths revolution, “red threads.”

On Sunday while shopping to take my mind off the stress I was starting to feel about writing and delivering these remarks, I found this old spindle of red thread, the only one with red, tucked away in a basket with hundreds of other colors. I feel like I was destined to find it. My red threads were calling me.

According to Buckingham, each one of us has a “red thread” within, a natural gift that if nurtured can be woven into something unique and beneficial. Our challenge is to identify these red threads and to recognize them as opportunities for personal and professional growth.

To help illustrate the red thread, let's look at this great college and what makes it unique.

Odessa College has found its red thread as an organization building a culture that thrives on data, a “we are all in” ethos, and common commitments around mastering paradox, knowing every student by name, taking the stigma away from learning support, intervening early, and a determination to try new things if those new things will yield improvements to student outcomes.

These are the “red thread” commitments Odessa's faculty and staff make to you:

- To make eye contact and say hello
- To recognize and celebrate you
- To establish personal connections with you, and
- To eliminate barriers for you to succeed

These seem simple and universal. It's that Odessa has woven these red threads and pulled these together that makes the “Wrangler Way” so powerful and unique, Odessa's magical red thread.

My red thread, something I did not think about until listening to Buckingham, is my deep desire and strength to build and move teams. I discovered this red thread as an athlete, once traveling the world as a competitive field hockey player and now understanding how this red thread is essential to leadership, teaching and mentorship—important pieces of building the capacity of today’s community colleges and their leaders.

Now let’s turn to you.

According to Buckingham: “You have unique red threads that you can weave into the fabric of your world and no one can do this but you. When you do that you are magnificent.” What is your red thread?

Your red thread is what grabs your soul. It’s what you do when no one tells you what to do. You find your red thread by pondering questions like:

What activities enthrall you?
What in life do you find irresistible?
What hope do you love to discuss and ponder?
What dream do you chase?

Once you find your red thread, you must follow it.

And commit to it.
And seek out encouragement for it.
And be ready to be uncomfortable in the pursuit of it.
And do your homework so you are prepared and can also be spontaneous in the pursuit of it.
And, perhaps most importantly, find and use your voice to contribute with it.

Now let’s turn to you.

Marcus Buckingham challenges us and you to “take seriously the uniqueness of your uniqueness and weave it into something from which we can all contribute.” And, he asks us not to wait too long in discovering that red thread and contributing based on what you find.

It’s important that you know these threads—warp, weft and red—are within you. It’s important that you find them. For they will sustain your life’s work and the journey that is now ahead of you. According to Buckingham, it is the red threads that need special attention, for if only 20 percent of what we do in our careers and in our life overall touches one of our red threads, we will find joy and purpose. Too many of us move through life not knowing our red threads.

I look out this morning and I see a beautiful tapestry of Wrangler strength, warp and weft threads bound together and accented by hundreds of unique red threads. Borrowing from Buckingham, I ask you to “take seriously the uniqueness of your uniqueness” and weave your red threads into something that has purpose and brings you joy.

Congratulations on this great accomplishment. And, may the threads be with you!