Thank you for that kind introduction, Provost Traverso. To all of you Emergent Scholars, let me add my congratulations to you for your academic accomplishments. You have used your intellect. You have added to it a determined will. You have, over months, and, in a sense, over the entire span of years during your education, made choices to concentrate on learning how to learn new things, on acquiring the ability to solve problems, and on creating new ideas, interpretations, and insights. These are your real accomplishments. Your faculty mentors certainly guided and encouraged you. In terms of your academic work, however, your teachers and advisors have only
recorded your achievements in grades of A. The real accomplishments are not your grades. Your real accomplishments have been the growth of your intellect, your mental discipline, and your imagination.

In other words, you have acquired intellectual virtues. Virtue may seem like an odd word to use as a term of praise. Some of you may not even know what it means. (I won’t ask for a show of hands from those of you who don’t know what virtue is.) For centuries, virtue meant a quality of mind and heart that inclined a person to do good things. Virtue was a general quality of character that made someone an admirable person. Virtues, in the plural, were those more specific qualities with which one demonstrated his or her virtue, the essential quality one possessed if one was a good person. Virtues might be honesty, loyalty, patience, integrity, and so forth. Nowadays, we don’t use the term “virtues” very often. It seems old-fashioned, perhaps a little embarrassing. It may seem moralistic, perhaps a little judgmental. We don’t want to say that anyone is better than anyone else. Instead,
we tend to say people develop their individual potential, and when they do so intellectually, it is a question of hard work, not moral qualities.

I think we miss something when we don’t speak about virtue and intellect together. When you succeed intellectually, that is, when you begin to become a better scientist, writer, researcher, scholar, artist, or performer, you do not simply develop your mind in the narrow sense of brain power. You do much more than fire up brain cells you didn’t know you had or add more mental muscle, so to speak. No, you add qualities of honesty, loyalty, patience, integrity, and much, much more to your intellect in the narrow sense. In fact, I would argue that we can understand more deeply what “emergent scholars,” scholars like you, have accomplished, if we understand the virtues you have developed in order to be successful learners and creators. And, if you understand what you have done more deeply, I believe you will be better able to go still farther in the future as mature scientists, scholars, and artists.
Let us think for a few minutes about just the virtues that I mentioned as examples—honesty, loyalty, patience, and integrity. I did not mention them by chance. They are some of the most important qualities you can develop in your education. Let’s take the first, honesty. The most important intellectual virtue you can ever develop is the sustained, unrelenting ability to say probably the toughest sentence an educated person can be forced to speak: “I don’t know.” But unless you or I admit that we don’t know something, we’ll never learn. You will never learn things unless you admit you don’t know them. Learn intellectual honesty now. The mark of a truly educated person is that he or she knows what they know and what they don’t know. If you acquire intellectual honesty when you’re still growing as a scientist or scholar or researcher, your life will be much easier. An educated fool is a terrible sight. Too often their foolishness comes from speaking about what they don’t know and what they won’t admit they don’t understand. Learn intellectual honesty.
Loyalty. Let’s admit something: a great deal of how we learn and of what we have to do as educated people involves working with others. Collaboration makes all of us smarter. Teams, however, only succeed if some bond holds them together. Every time I have been in charge of a project or an organization, the key to success was getting a disparate group of people with all kinds of diverse talents to work together.

When this succeeded, we could do great things, often with little money, hardly any support from the outside, or few resources. When we failed, it was often because someone in the group made no deep commitment to the team or displayed no loyalty to the larger cause. If the person developed a sense of loyalty to what the rest of us were doing, they contributed their intellect, their talents, their gifts, and we all learned more, created a better result, and performed at a higher level. But without loyalty, even brilliant, talented people contributed little and got little out of the group effort themselves. If you give with your mind, you can do great things, and you will get back much more.
Patience. Nothing comes easily, certainly nothing worth doing over the long term, comes easily. Failures, setbacks, dry holes, dead ends, refuted hypotheses, inadequate results, flawed performances—every brilliant scientist or writer or artist has met them time and again. The most important article I ever published was rejected twice, and had to be re-written each time. This was a piece of scholarship for which I had spent weeks of research in Europe, separated from my family, staying in cheap hotels that I hope none of you ever have to stay in, and stretching every last franc and deutschmark I had as far I as I could. Finally, the article was accepted by a prestigious journal in which many historians never succeed in publishing. The most important grant application I ever wrote was rejected four times by four different funding agencies—before being accepted by a foundation that was among the most prestigious I applied to. What if I had given up in either of these cases? Three steps forward, two and half steps back equals progress. Learn from your mistakes, learn from others, practice
the virtue of patience, and keep on trying to develop your intellect and your talents to their highest potential.

Integrity. It is amazing how partisan even the most brilliant minds can be. The position that they hold is completely correct. The alternative position is not only wrong, it’s crazy, and the people who hold it are at best benighted, and at worst, evil. There’s a scientist I know who could never figure out why he kept getting promoted to leadership positions in his laboratory. He was not the most brilliant, the most creative, and probably even not the most hardworking. The director of the laboratory knew why. The scientist was the one person whom he could trust to evaluate positions fairly, not just his own, but the positions he disagreed with. The scientist could say, “Here’s where the other side is absolutely correct, and here’s why I think they’re still wrong.” And, he could say, “One weakness on our side is that we still haven’t explained X, but nonetheless, here’s why I think we should still go in this direction.” And, he was one of the few scientists who would admit a
mistake, and announce that, based on the evidence, he had changed
his mind. Despite all you have heard about listening to the facts,
intellectual integrity is rarer than you might imagine. Acquire it now.
You will possess a prize of inestimable value.

Just as we too often think intellect has to be separated from virtue,
from moral qualities, so we too often believe we need to separate
morality—virtues, if you will—from intellect. Nothing could be further
from the best way to live—or to think. We all, if we try just a bit, can
think of brilliant people, successful in many ways—financially, in terms
of prestige or recognition—who disregarded developing virtues, a
moral compass, while developing their intellect and success. They paid
dearly for this. Think of the number of business and political leaders
who had huge success, in the normal sense of the term, and failed
miserably as ethical individuals. You should try to succeed and try to
do it in the right way. It is certainly far less risky in the long run, but
most important, it is far more satisfying and gratifying as a way to live.
You have achieved a great deal. You have much before you. In your remaining years here at the College, take advantage of every reasonable opportunity to stretch your talents and experience. Study Abroad, research with a faculty member, internships, service learning, leadership in organizations like clubs, teams, student senate, participation in Called to Lead—all of these will develop you as a person still more, and as an intellectual. The College has a particular interest in encouraging you to apply for prestigious external fellowships—Rotary, Fulbright, Truman, Gates, Marshall, Rhodes, etc. These awards can make an enormous difference in furthering your careers. Please talk to your faculty advisors or see Joel Janisewski for more information about applying for these awards.

Congratulations again. Practice your intellectual virtues, keep your moral growth in deep connection with your intellectual growth, and know you have our best wishes as you pursue your careers.