

Commencement Address  
Jeffrey A. Flaks

President Berger-Sweeney, members of the faculty, distinguished guests, proud parents and family members, and the Class of 2021. It is my great privilege to share this moment with you and to receive an honorary degree from one of the world's most renowned liberal arts institutions.

I accept this degree not just for myself but also on behalf of the people of Hartford HealthCare. I am very fortunate to work shoulder to shoulder with passionate, dedicated individuals who save lives and perform miracles every day. I see some of that same dedication and passion in the faces of the graduating class today, along with some of the nostalgia and uncertainty.

Today we gather for a ceremony that Trinity College has been celebrating for nearly 200 years. Despite this time-honored tradition, today's Commencement is unlike any before. For many of us, this is our first large event in over a year. We have masks. We are socially distanced, and, of course, the Purell.

And yet, here we are, gathered once again in the heart of this beautiful campus near the Long Walk and in view of the magnificent Chapel. This place is so rich with history. And these rituals link us to the past. Another class of graduates takes the traditional step across the Luther-Roosevelt stone, receives its degrees, and then takes the big step: onto the world stage.

Every generation takes this next big step in the face of the unique, critical challenges of the time. More than a half century ago, my grandfather graduated from City College of New York. He was a Turkish immigrant and one of seven children living in a single room on New York's Lower East Side in the early 20th century.

In the depths of the Great Depression, he worked first as a peddler and then in the garment industry to help support his family. He went to City College at night. It took him 10 years to finish. His generation was up against the greatest economic downturn in modern history and then a World War. We call them "the Greatest Generation," but they were not born great. Their greatness came in their response to a particular moment in history.

*This is your moment.*

Throughout your years at Trinity, you have achieved in the classroom, the studio, and the laboratory and on the athletic field. You've benefited from your professors, and you've been supported by the college's dedicated staff. You have performed brilliantly.

But your most demanding, non-credit class has been "Pandemic 101." Again, you did amazingly well. You kept each other safe. You found new ways to stay close and connected. You consoled those troubled by sadness and uncertainty. You did what you could to "protect the nest."

While the pandemic goes on in so much of the world, here in the United States, vaccination rates are up, and disease is down. We can imagine the end. We all want nothing more than to return to "normal." But we can't.

The pandemic has taught us that we can't go back to the way things were, nor should we want to. You are too good, too smart, and too wise to go back to normal. You will make a future that is *better* than normal.

*This is your moment.*

Let me give you an example of the “old normal” from my world—in health care. As the virus tore through our state—and our nation—it was clear that communities of color were getting hit the hardest. We were relearning an old lesson about intolerable racial disparities in health status and health care access. In response, we created new, extensive mobile teams to provide convenient testing and vaccines to our most vulnerable communities.

That outreach isn't going away with the end of the pandemic. For us, it's the new normal that, along with other programs and investments, is part of our commitment to stand against racism, inequality, and injustice.

There are so many ways that the old normal fell short. Climate change threatens life on our planet. There is economic uncertainty, and our political life seems far too polarized. We need a world that is better than normal.

*This is your moment.*

You have the intellect and energy to meet it.

I want to offer you four practices that have helped me tremendously. I hope they help you as you begin your next chapter. They are: to *dream big*, to *innovate*, to *lead*, and to *serve*.

Start creating the new normal by envisioning it. And when you do, dream big. Whatever your path in life, make it broad, open, and aspirational. Don't limit yourselves. Don't second-guess yourselves. Go all in. Not everything you dream will come true, but everything worth doing starts with a dream.

My grandfather had the courage, as an immigrant raised in poverty, to dream of a college education and a middle-class American life. He worked hard and achieved his goal. But without the dream, no amount of work would have helped him. He allowed himself to be ambitious.

Today, “ambition” has become an unflattering word. But I urge you to take a more wholesome view. I think of ambition as the relentless drive to better ourselves, our communities, and the planet. It's OK to be ambitious. Dream up a new normal, and then have the determination to make it real.

*This is your moment to dream big.*

Next, innovate. There can be no new normal without new ideas. You have the capacity to push your imaginations to the limit, and this kind of innovation is essential to our future.

Today we're at the beginning of the end of the pandemic because of vaccines that harness new technology. This is the equivalent of landing an astronaut on the moon. Think about it—this is human ingenuity.

Innovation is your sweet spot because you've been educated here at Trinity College. This school is unique among liberal arts schools. Its campus *is* the city—and the world.

As Trinity students, you have crossed traditional boundaries and made connections between different disciplines. You have not just learned; you have created and invented.

*This is your moment to dream big—and innovate.*

And, next, lead wisely. You have been leaders here, and you will be leaders after you leave. This place has been graduating movers and shakers for nearly 200 years, and you are no exception. Bantams are leaders.

The idea of leadership is often misunderstood. I have a different concept of it today than I did when I was your age. I thought leaders were solitary individuals pulling the levers and pushing the buttons and making it all happen. I now understand that leadership is never a solo act. Arrogance poisons leadership; humility strengthens it. You have to work together to inspire and empower teams to accomplish great things.

But you know this because you've been practicing this kind of leadership throughout the pandemic. Planning and prediction went out the window as you had to adapt to the ever-changing rules, conditions, and hurdles to stay on track. You wiped down, masked up, and Zoomed in. You did it together. And that's the key. I've come to see leadership as the art of thinking collaboratively and creatively about change, stepping up to take responsibility for making it happen, and then getting others to buy in.

Great leaders listen to all voices, especially those too often ignored or silenced. As leaders, be accountable to your teams and responsible to the people you serve. In whatever leadership role you find yourself, give more than you take. Create more leaders in order to tap into the power of your organizations and businesses.

And remember that you can't control all of life's variables. You will sometimes fail despite your best efforts. The road to a new normal will be littered with letdowns, misfires, and disappointments. Learn from the unexpected, and be resilient ... bounce back stronger and smarter.

*This is your moment to dream big, innovate—and lead.*

Finally, in everything you do, serve others. Today, we celebrate you. But the scope of your dreams, the power of your ideas, and the influence of your leadership are not just for you alone.

If you aspire to create a new normal that is fairer, more equitable, and more sustainable than the old one, you must see yourselves as people in service—in service to your families, your neighborhoods, your communities, your faith groups, your towns and cities, your countries and the world.

I have been fortunate to have a career in which I have been able to impact my community in so many ways and to make a difference. Whatever your journey, you will have opportunities to serve. Take those opportunities. Be generous. We will never have too much kindness or compassion.

*This is your moment to dream big, innovate, lead—and serve.*

Today, I speak to you from my heart and drawing from my life and professional experience. I don't pretend that I've given you every tool you will need. There are no simple solutions to complex problems. The world has a to-do list that is long and urgent. You inherit both the successes and shortcomings of previous generations.

Yes, the world is troubled, but its troubles can be healed. Yes, there are threats, but there is so much more promise. Yes, the tasks ahead may be hard, but when has that stopped you? Know that I believe in you. Know that everyone here today believes in you. And we are counting on you!

I began by saying that the pandemic is coming to an end. There is, as they say, a light at the end of this long tunnel. That light is you. This is your moment to shine.

*This is your moment.*

Seize it!

Thank you, and congratulations.