

Greetings chairperson Golden, distinguished faculty, alumni, parents, siblings and most importantly congratulations to this year's graduates, the SUNY Albany Class of 2015.

I am New York City Council Member Ben Kallos. I represent 168,000 people on the East Side of Manhattan and a City of 8.4 million -- in deciding how to spend \$78 billion a year, a budget larger than all but the largest states and many countries.

And now for something completely different.

For my remarks, I hereby suspend the standing rule against cell phones in class. Take out your phones. Hold them up. You can tweet, Facebook or Instagram to me at BenKallos. This is how we listen, how we share knowledge, and how we engage one another and the world at large.

You might be exhausted from entertaining loved ones with fine dining on Wolf Road or celebrating last night on Quail or Lark but if you listen, I promise to do my best to inspire, and failing that, I will at least give you a retweet.

Thank you for this invitation to join the Communication Department for a commencement ceremony for a third time. It was an honor to be the inaugural alumni speaker in 2007, though my speech could not hold a candle to that of fellow alum Susan Arbetter of WCNY's Capitol Pressroom. I am not sure anyone remembers my speech, but I still remember hers, and the moral of her speech, quoting the slogan from one of my favorite movies, "Galaxy Quest," with "Never Give Up, Never Surrender!"

In 2002, I was sitting in your seat, about to receive my degree in Communication and Rhetoric and still trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up.

So I ask you the same question. What do you want to be when you grow up?

Regardless of what the answer is, I hope it includes one word: "Happy."

John Lennon once said

"When I was 5 years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life.

When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up.

I wrote down 'happy'.

They told me I didn't understand the assignment, and I told them they didn't understand life."

Pharrell Williams may have sung it best in “Happy”:  
“Clap along if you know what happiness is to you  
Clap along if you feel like that's what you wanna do”

Let's break the chorus down:

What is happiness to you?

Do you want to do something that makes you happy?

Those questions seem simple, but are in fact hard to answer.

If what you do makes you happy, you will never have to work a day of your life.

Don't get me wrong, you will still have to work hard, and I can't promise that you will enjoy every moment.

But if you are driven by your dreams and what makes you happy, then it doesn't feel like work.

Finding the answer is easier than you may think.  
Find something you would do for free.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg worked as Mayor of New York City for 12 years, making just \$1 a year.

What would you do for \$1 a year, if you afford it?

You can find the answer through volunteerism or through your hobbies.

Once you start exploring your interests, see what jobs there are that you might like to do.

The good news is that everyone out there can benefit from having an expert in communication on their team—whether it is President Obama or the ALS Association, who earned millions with the ice bucket challenge.

You have chosen your degree well: in a changing world, the need for communications skills are one constant — along with the ability to adapt to ever-changing communications methods.

We used to send handwritten letters. Then, with the invention of telegraph in the 1800s we learned to communicate much in a few words. The telegraph became phased out with the onset of the invention of the telephone, and, later, email.

Though the more things change, the more you will find that they stay the same, as nearly 200 years later we're now only using 140 characters on Twitter or by text message.

As audiences become saturated with information, the ability to communicate an idea quickly through a text, tweet, meme, infographic or Vine has become increasingly important.

An understanding of communication is essential in any field you enter. You will need these skills, because the world needs you to take on its challenges.

I encourage you to find happiness not only by looking inward, but by looking outward. Find a problem in the world and solve it.

Gandhi said it best: “Be the change you wish to see in the world.”

SUNY Albany alumni have a long history of following their passions —finding a problem in the world and solving it.

Frances Allen graduated SUNY Albany in 1954. A computer scientist who laid the groundwork for program optimization in computers at the dawn of the digital age, she was the first woman to win the Turing Award – widely consider the Nobel Prize of computing - in 2006.

Thomas Clarke graduated SUNY Albany in 1973. His passion was to coach running. After attending this institution, he got his PhD in biomechanics. He used these tools to innovate athletic shoes that measured pressure on the runner's foot, laying the groundwork for inventions such as Nike Air. With these better shoes, he helped usher in the explosion of running and fitness as a hobby in this country, becoming the President of Nike.

Some will follow a less direct path. Perhaps following the dreams that your family and friends have set out for you -- before you follow your own.

Norm Snyder graduated in 1983. He went right into business, with an eight-year career at Price Waterhouse Cooper.

As with us all, your dreams eventually catch up with you.

Snyder wanted to take on bigger challenges, so he went on to South Beach Beverage Company, which many of you now know as SoBe. There, he helped pioneer the natural health beverage movement. With clever branding and a well-received product, the drink took off. Later, he was in a position to donate 5 million dollars back to SUNY Albany.

Harvey Milk graduated SUNY Albany in 1951. He has been an inspiration to many—including me. He saw injustice and discrimination in this world and wanted to fix it. Outspoken for his entire life, he lost three elections before winning a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors to become one of the first openly gay elected officials and a civil rights icon.

The path to success is through failure: fail early, fail often, until you succeed.

What an incredible legacy these SUNY Albany alumni have left.

They have followed their passions and fixed big problems in the world.

I ask again:

What do you want to be when you grow up?

What problem will you fix?

Before you look around to find what you should be doing, look inside to see where you've already chosen to place your focus.

For me, in addition to Communication, I majored in my extracurricular of Student Government.

I ran for Central Council, lost the first time, then won my second time and became chair of the Student Action Committee.

I was and continue to be focused on solving one particular problem: a lack of transparency in government.

I wanted to communicate what was happening in student government and on campus in order to empower students with a real voice in university governance.

But once I got into Student Government, I saw something unfortunately not too uncommon in Albany: our elected leaders were stealing from public dollars—in this case, the student activity fee.

We used transparency to shine a light on the problem and communicate what was going wrong.

The authorities would soon bring it to an end and we would make new changes in rules to prevent the same problems in the future.

That was my first experience with government reform. I thought it might be my last, and became a lawyer.

But my dreams caught up with me, too.

I got involved in local politics, working on campaigns to elect people who might take on corruption and make better laws.

Seeing my hard work on the campaign, a local Assembly Member asked me to serve as his Chief of Staff.

But when I went to the capitol, I saw more of the same.

Even good people — and I've met some great, dedicated public servants — were far less effective when much of the people's business happened behind closed doors with only lobbyists paid to keep track of what was going on for their powerful interests.

I left the Assembly and once again turned to transparency, using the Freedom of Information Law to put outside income, attendance and voting records online so that we could hold elected officials accountable.

I also thought that elected officials would behave differently if they knew that we could see who was paying them and how they were voting.

Well, that might have been true for some of them. Some, as you know from recent high-profile indictments, seemed to think we wouldn't catch on.

At the time these records were released, I didn't win any friends from the people in power.

However, as Justice Brandeis said, "sunlight is the best disinfectant." So, soon after, they decided that, since I was doing it anyway, they would open up the information themselves.

But I still felt government was broken.

So I ran for New York City Council to represent the community where I grew up.

I ran to fix government from within, using transparency in hopes of creating an open government that communicates with the people and empowers them to have a strong role in decision-making.

To be realistic, government was broken long before I got here and may likely be broken once I am gone. While I am here, however, I am working hard to fix it.

Change won't come on day one, but it requires people like you to care about what happens in Washington, in Albany, and yes, in your home town, whether or not it is New York City. We get the government we deserve, and I know that your generation deserves better.

Following my election, I helped write new rules for my legislative body that institutionalized transparency, placed our legislation online, and required an open technology plan that would promote using digital tools to improve communication and access to government.

I co-sponsored and passed a law to put our city's law online, so that you don't have to pay Lexis or Westlaw to know the laws that govern you.

And, I authored and passed a law that will require notifications from the city government to be put online in computer readable format so you can get alerts about decisions being made that will affect you.

In the status quo, if the government wants to take your single family home and rezone it into a luxury development, they only have to publish it in the government's newspaper, called the City Record, that conveniently only goes to government in order to notify you.

Or, for you "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" fans, if the government wants to raze your planet to build an intergalactic expressway, they can pretty much get away with it as long as the notice was available for inspection on Alpha Centauri.

All of that is about to change this summer when the law goes into effect. I hope this law can create a government that is more transparent and can communicate with you online or over your phone to tell you about the things government is doing -- that you actually care about.

But I have to take my own medicine and part of fixing government involves opening it up to everyone even if they aren't online. So every month I host a First Friday open house for anyone to come discuss whatever they want with me — person to person. We also have Policy Night, where constituents return from First Friday to mobilize around the issues that matter to them. Instead of top-down government, I try to lead from the grassroots.

Right now, I am a citizen in the legislature—a New Yorker trying to make a positive difference. But when I am done, I do not want to become a lobbyist, a part of the revolving door that undermines our government, but want to join you—finding a new problem in the world to solve.

Whether through the civic sphere or elsewhere, it is up to you to make change.

Whether you're launching the next big thing on Kickstarter, working at Google or becoming a public servant, you will always need to effectively communicate with your colleagues and the public. We are communicating to the world.

That is where your communication skills come in. As you pursue your dreams, you will have to bring people along with you. You will have to convince them to invest in you and your ideas, to believe in your solutions.

You only have to take on the example of Frances Allen, Tom Clarke, Norm Snyder, and Harvey Milk – find a problem in the world and fix it.

Indeed our country faces pressing problems. I look out over this crowd of new graduates and see a group of people with the foundation of knowledge to take on those challenges. I see a group who have studied communication and know that those skills are integrally tied to solving the problems of the future. I look forward to seeing what you, the Class of 2015, will accomplish.