By: Amberly Lerner
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“As you explore the array of classes, Registered Student Organizations and activities offered at UMass, I’d like for you to ask yourselves not ‘who do I want to be in life?’ but ‘what is it that I want to accomplish?’ Why are you here, and what do you want to gain from being here? What differences do you want to make?”

With this, Jonathan Maciel ’19, a CHC Student Ambassador and Economics and International Business and Leadership major, flips the common question many students are asked by their peers, and provides a thoughtful alternative.

The full text of Mr. Maciel's prepared remarks and advice are below:

“I once read that at any given moment in life, we are fluidly moving between three stages. We are either aspiring to do something, we have achieved success, or we have failed. This was written by Ryan Holiday, author of Ego is the Enemy.

Class of 2022, congratulations. Your presence here today signifies the successful completion of one chapter in your life and the start of a new one, where you will be aspiring to reach new heights. As you continue to write your own stories, succeed and fail throughout your journey here at UMass, I hope that you will all be able to reflect upon the message which I have prepared for you today.

As first-year students, there is still so much for you to learn from UMass. In this new environment, you will be required to adjust. Maybe you will be adjusting your study habits, maybe you have never shared a room with someone else before. If you’re smart, and I know you are, you will realize that this continual learning is life-long. It does not end. We will always have much to learn even when we think we know it all. While at UMass, I dare you to let go of your ego. Let go of what you think you know, and be prepared to learn with an open mind. Be ready to learn from your professors and classes but also from each other, your fellow peers, each of which have unique perspectives due to our different backgrounds, experiences and interests. Many of us may play a large role in shaping your perceptions and being present as you transition from one stage in life to another.

Commonwealth Honors College community has greatly enhanced my time at UMass. From faculty members I know I can rely on, who have helped me as I aspired, succeeded and failed, were there for me when I made the difficult decision to no longer partake in Army ROTC, yet encouraged me to apply for scholarships I thought were out of my reach, such as Fulbright, where if accepted, I would teach English in Taiwan for a year. To other research and study abroad opportunities which made it possible for me to obtain an understanding for a non-U.S. mode of thinking, and even a roommate networking event for new CHC students that I like to call “Roots’ Roommate Speeding Dating Search” where I had met my second-year roommates whom I still live with now, my experience at this institution would not have been what it is today without the Commonwealth Honors College.

Throughout my undergraduate experience thus far, I have constantly been asked “what do you want to be when you graduate?” I never really liked that question. Mostly because I never knew the answer, and standing here now, I’ve come to realize that’s okay. Many of you
might feel the same way. Do not let your ego convince you that this is wrong.

As a first-year student, I thought I might be interested in becoming a businessman or a lawyer. I was in my second year when I applied to become a Coordinator for Diversity Recruitment and Enrollment. In this position, I work closely with the Senior Assistant Director of Admissions and the Assistant Provost for Diversity in Enrollment Management to develop strategic initiatives to enhance efforts toward the recruitment and enrollment of underrepresented students. The following semester, I held a second job working for New Student Orientation as member of their outreach team. By the end of my sophomore year, I held three jobs which revolved around enhancing external student recruitment. However, I was still focused on getting a job in business or getting into the best law schools.

Today, I know that I don’t want to be a businessman or a lawyer. I want to be able to work in an institution of education and make a difference for other students. I had not yet realized what I was already working towards since my sophomore year and all because I was asking myself the wrong question. As you explore the array of classes, Registered Student Organizations and activities offered at UMass, I’d like for you to ask yourselves not “who do I want to be in life?” but “what is it that I want to accomplish?” Why are you here, and what do you want to gain from being here? What differences do you want to make?

As you ask yourself these questions, have fun and step out of your comfort zone. Some of your most enjoyable memories here will be made when you step into the unfamiliar. Whether it’d be taking a class at Amherst College or Smith, or even attending a football game for the first time, these new experiences and challenges will be the ones which will allow you to learn the most about yourself. And most importantly, do not be afraid to fail. After all, failure is just one out of the three stages in life and it is temporary. Some of the most successful realizations are a product of failure.

Thank you and best of luck as you begin your journey at UMass Amherst and the Commonwealth Honors College.”

Photography by Kim Mazejka.