

**Maxwell School of Citizenship & Public Affairs  
Convocation Address by  
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June 29, 2007**

**I Am What I Am**

- What a great day to celebrate with all of you! I'm deeply honored to be with you today at your graduation from the finest Public Administration program in the country.
- I have very fond memories of the Maxwell School – of taking Public Budgeting and Quantitative Methods with Professor Duncombe, of learning all about the tension between the administration of government and the politics of government with Professor O'Leary, and flubbing an interview with Donna Shalala, then Secretary of Health and Human Services, as part of Executive Leadership. An interview that in my opinion was going to change the course of my career until I completely botched it.
- Botched opportunities missed opportunities unexpected opportunities .I realized as I was writing this speech that I am where I am today because of life not working out quite the way I had planned. More about that in a minute.
- First let me say something about this speech. My mom and dad were nice enough to insist on being here today. As the father of a 4 year old, I now truly understand the pride and joy all parents out there feel for their children. It's something I didn't understand when I graduated from Maxwell.
- While I know my parents would love to hear me talk for the next 25 minutes – the maximum time Professor Bretschneider gave me for this speech - I also remember what it was like sitting where you are today, on the edge of your seats, ready to bolt up here and celebrate your moment in the sun and hoping that the convocation speaker would wrap it up in about 3 minutes.

- So here's the deal. I'm going out on a limb and let you know right now, Mom & Dad, that I'm not going to keep the celebrants hostage for 25 minutes.
- And in return for giving all of you some minutes of your life back, graduates, I hope you'll let me take 15 minutes to share 2 stories. That's it. Two stories, some concluding remarks, and I'll no longer stand between you and your career.
- What are the stories about? Truthfully, rejection. But I'll tell you now, they have happy endings. Endings I certainly didn't anticipate. But endings that make sense. Endings that I believe came about because I was faithful in staying true to that part of myself that brought me to Maxwell in the first place – that sense that there was no other work as deserving of my professional talents and commitment as public sector work.
- Why share them with you? Because as a fellow Maxwell grad, I think I know how you feel today. And I want you to know that because you are a Maxwell grad, as long as you stay true to yourself and the values that brought you here in the first place, you're going to do great.
- The education from Maxwell that you and your families have sacrificed to achieve, combined with your belief that you can improve the world, will serve as an invaluable foundation.
- Use it to bounce back from disappointment to keep moving towards and seeking opportunities. Even when you're not quite sure where you'll end up. Especially during challenging times. Use it to keep yourself grounded in your own sense of integrity and worth.

### **So on to Story #1. I call it “The Rejection File”**

- Two months before I graduated I wondered if I'd ever get a job. I must have applied to 50 public sector jobs I was qualified for and promptly received 50 rejections.
- What's wrong with me I thought? Why does it seem everyone has a job except for me?

- I'm smart, ambitious, and hard working. I have a Maxwell degree. I know I'll make a great public servant.
- Still, 50 rejections. That's a lot. Enough for me to take an introspective view of myself.
- Desperation breeds creativity so I met with Mike Cahill, now the Director of Career Services at the University. I told him I thought I needed to "re-tool" my resume - that clearly was my impediment to getting a job. So, I got creative. On the cover page of my 4 page resume – because I had a lot of experience, right – I spelled my name with adjectives. You know – "H" is for honest, "A" is for articulate, "G" is for good natured, and my favorite, "Y" is for youthful – because that's what employers want?
- That didn't seem to work either, at least at first. So I resorted to other tactics.
- Executive Leadership brought the perfect opportunity. Donna Shalala, then Secretary of HHS, was coming to campus to speak to health care professionals about the Clinton Administration's health care reform plan. I was part of the media for Executive Leadership and Shalala's visit presented the perfect forum for not only an exclusive interview but a chance to impress the Secretary herself. Maybe she would offer me a job?
- After her speech my cameraman and I moved in. Shalala quickly agreed to an exclusive interview and asked us to set up outside.
- What would I ask? I soon settled on asking her advice for the graduating class – after all this interview would be shown the next day in class.
- The interview went great. All I had to do was close it. After she answered the last question, I said, "Secretary Shalala, thank you very much for taking time to give advice to the graduating MPA class. Best of luck with the health care . And I couldn't remember the word "reform" so out came THING.
- Donna Shalala looked at me like I had 3 eyes in my head!

- “Good luck with the health care thing?” What was I thinking? How could my brain fail me at such a critical point in my career? Unfortunately, it was just beginning.
- Since I wasn’t getting a job after graduation I decided to take tennis lessons.
- In mid-August I responded to a 2 line management consulting job posting in the SU Career Center newsletter. The job was for Price Waterhouse. I didn’t know what management consulting was but I liked the idea that it was for the public sector. I quickly fired off my “re-tooled” resume and waited.
- In 2 weeks I heard back and was flown to DC for a series of interviews. I thought I was clearly laying out the case for my intellectual fire power and how they’d be missing out if they didn’t hire such a well educated Maxwell guy.
- The interviews went well until lunch. Sitting down, eating my first Indian meal ever (“of course, I like Indian”), I’m being interrogated about my Quantitative Methods course. My interviewer wants to know all about it. He’s particularly interested in my class project and what problems I encountered with my regression model.
- In response - yet out of the blue - I tell him that I had a heteroskedasticity problem. Word of advice – never mention heteroskedasticity in an interview.
- The interviewer says to me, “What’s heteroskedasticity?” Now I’m not sure if he’s just “testing” me or really doesn’t know the definition of heteroskedasticity. As if people don’t know the definition of heteroskedasticity!
- Professor Duncombe would have been proud of me because without missing a beat I said, “it’s when there’s an unknown relationship between two variables and it’s skewing your model.”
- With that quick, definitive answer we moved on to other topics.
- Five minutes later, I thought to myself, “Oh my god, I’ve just given him the definition of multicollinearity.” This led to a huge internal struggle.

Do I tell him what I think has occurred or do I just let it go? What do I do? I need this job. It's the only prospect I have.

- Wisely, I let it go.
- After lunch I had my final interview with a Director at PW, the most senior person I'd meet. And during the interview he says to me, "So I see you graduated from Maxwell in June. It's now August, what have you been doing?"
- Now, there's something important you need to know about me. In addition to having a particular passion for public sector work, I've also always had an entrepreneurial streak. It may have seemed like an oxymoron, but I retained that streak, even as I was searching for public sector jobs in some of the most traditional of venues.
- I tell him that I'm taking tennis lessons, working on my tennis game. I also mention that my brother and I are gearing up our loft business. "Loft business, what's that," he says.
- I explain to him that the dorm rooms are tiny – apparently this guy forgot what it's like to live in the dorms.
- To maximize space, I explain, we build lofts for students in order to raise their beds to create more floor space. We ran ads in the Daily Orange. We had a cheesy tag line – "Don't be loft out, call now." We had a model loft on M Street because I knew an owner of one of the retail shops and she thought it would be a great way to attract people to the store. We had a booming business.
- The only problem – the business lasted about 10 days at the beginning of the school year. Still, it earned us spending money for the year. And part of who I was at the time, and am today, said we needed to go about trying to make our own opportunities, since they were obviously not walking up to us directly.
- Mind you, the loft part of the conversation was a small part of the overall interview process.

- But something must have gone right with all the interviews, because I was offered a job 24 hours after the first interview. A clear sign you should ask for more money (Unless, of course, it's my company).
- Needless to say, I accepted the job and the salary immediately.
- The next thing I did – which I'm surprised more people don't do – is I wrote a letter to the Managing Partner of Price Waterhouse's Government Practice. In it I thanked him for taking a chance on me when no one else would. He probably thought, "My god, who are my people hiring." I assured him, however, that "I wouldn't let him down."
- I remember the day I started – September 20, 1993 – almost 3 months after I graduated from Maxwell – because there was a firm reception and dinner that evening.
- At the reception, the Senior Director I interviewed with introduced me to a partner at the firm who, upon hearing my name, said - and I'll never forget this .
- "Steve Hagerty? You're the loft man I heard about. It wasn't your good grades that got you hired. Or your extracurricular activities. Or your leadership. It was your entrepreneurial spirit."
- So despite making a bad impression on Donna Shalala, experiencing significant self-doubt on the definition of heteroskadasticity, and failing to highlight in my resume that I had the makings of an entrepreneur, I still got a job, albeit 3 months after graduation.
- And you know what? Although I didn't realize it at the time, it was a valuable life experience.
- It required me to be creative, entrepreneurial - if for no other reason than to make some money - tested my commitment to the public sector, and reminded me once again that rejection and disappointment don't end when you graduate.
- Still, all you need is the opportunity to prove yourself – and you will all get that opportunity.

## **The second story I call my “Jerry Maguire Moment.”**

- Before you can have a Jerry Maguire moment you need to understand what you do well, what you love, and what you believe in.
- For me, it was quickly clear that I loved public sector consulting and, in particular, helping governments recover after disasters
- I spent months on the road responding to various disasters, including Hurricane Andrew, the 1994 Georgia Floods, and the Northridge Earthquake.
- In less than 2 years, I had established a good reputation for myself. The client was calling me directly. Asking me to work on new projects. I'd bring these to my manager, he'd pat me on the back, say 'good job Hagerty', and send me on my way with a small team to lead.
- It was fun. We were doing terrific work for our clients and making a difference. But I knew we could do more.
- Then the opportunity came. My senior manager left for another major firm, leaving a critical vacancy. So what if it was 4 levels above me in the organization, I knew I could do that job. Plus, I had a vision.
- So, I stayed up all night and I laid out that vision – by the way, this was a year before the Jerry Maguire movie came out – and I sent my plan to three partners. It laid out everything we could do to help FEMA and local governments.
- Clearly the partners would recognize the brilliance of my plan and hand the reigns of the client over to me.
- I waited. And I waited. And finally, a week after I sent my plan, one of the partners called me. I knew it was bad when he started off by praising me.
- “Steve, first off, I want you to know that we think you're doing a terrific job. The client clearly thinks highly of you, you're establishing our firm's reputation.”

- “HOWEVER, we really need someone to run the practice who has some gray hair.” ‘Gray hair, I thought?’ “I’m losing my hair”, I told him. Doesn’t that count for anything in this organization?” He laughed and the inevitable occurred.
- It was handed off to another ‘gray haired’ senior manager.
- I was deeply disappointed. My Jerry Maguire moment didn’t end the way it was supposed to. Once again, I felt rejected, despite knowing I had the skills and experience to do the job.
- Still, I loved the work, and in-charge or not, it was about serving the client and their constituents and not, at the end of the day, about whether I was in-charge of the FEMA practice.
- Then a funny thing happened. The new senior manager didn’t seem too interested in the client or traveling. He lacked passion – or at least at the level I had it.
- And 3 months later, it just evolved. And that opportunity led to other opportunities that that led to other opportunities that ultimately resulted in my ability to make a meaningful contribution after 9/11 and, most recently, Katrina.
- I’m very proud and grateful for how things have turned out. But I promise you, 13 years ago, sitting where some of you are today, with no clear path in front of me, I was worried.
- What always kept me optimistic was my foundation – The work ethos and independence I’m grateful to have learned from my parents, and the confidence and knowledge I gained from having a Maxwell education.
- Back when I was sitting where you are today, if I had been asked to project what I thought I’d be doing when I was 38 years old, I would have said serving in some more traditional public sector role, such as a City Manager or working in higher education administration.
- Well I’m proud that my life IS focused on the public sector, just not in the way that I would have envisioned 13 years ago.



- Today I own and manage a company that encourages an entrepreneurial and innovative spirit on public sector projects. We create a dynamic among professionals and the public to solve problems collaboratively and become more inventive about improving outcomes for service users. I consider Hagerty consultants to be Public Innovators. And I'm confident that our governmental clients and the large professional services firms that we partner with would agree.
- Based on my experience, I encourage you to have goals, but leave room for the serendipitous. Have targets, but welcome the unexpected opportunity. Don't be too rigid in setting your direction for the future because you might miss the opportunities along the way that really shape the journey and are truly hidden blessings.
- One final message - Be true to your values. The world we live in desperately needs people who ground their decisions in values that make a difference, that say that community is as important as self.
- By choosing Maxwell, you have already demonstrated your commitment to the larger world. You have internalized your own values. Be true to them. The world needs you to be grounded in your own integrity. You can't be truly happy in life without a sense of who you are.
- Thank you.