

Opening

- Thank the IMSA Community
- Address the students
 - Applaud them for surviving 2020
 - Online learning, college applications, clubs and a social life
 - Especially for the seniors who haven't seen campus since Spring 2020 as sophomores!
 - Juniors & sophomores are experiencing on campus life all for the first time
 - You are all successful and great because you survived what's arguably been the most intense social and academic experiment of your lives

One of the joys of getting to speak to you today is that it offers a moment of reflection on my IMSA experience. Thankfully, I was able to draw from my roommates and friends for memories and being here today gives me a unique opportunity to see how much we've all grown since 2008.

When I was an IMSA student, like many of you, I was overwhelmed, burned out, stressed and generally tired. I was doing my best to pad my resume with all of the clubs, leadership positions and special projects I could to make myself seem unique to college admissions teams. I had a very clear plan in place, and wanted to do everything I could to see it to fruition. My plan was to become a pediatrician or a pediatric cardiologist, so that meant taking the hardest science courses *cough* MCB *cough* Ad Chem and doing anything and everything in preparation to be a doctor. At the time, I thought that IMSA graduates were one of two things: a doctor or a computer science engineer.

Like most IMSA students, excellence was tied to academic performance and achievement.

We're all used to being at the tops of our classes and being the best. Coming to IMSA was the pot of gold at the end of our academic rainbows, for some of us. However, for me, coming to IMSA was the first time I ever failed ANYTHING. I not only failed geometry, but also one semester of Ad Chem. I was nearly out the door twice because my grades weren't measuring up to what they needed to be. Thankfully, I had many advocates to help me stay and eventually graduate, but it forced me to reassess my perfect plan.

Could I still be great even if I wasn't great in school? What does that mean or even look like?
Am I really the typical IMSA student if I'm not doing well in school?

Those thoughts clouded me for a long time after experiencing failure and questioning myself. But, I'm here to remind you that failure is part of the process and helps you to learn and improve so you can eventually become excellent. Furthermore, your academic achievements are only part of the total package that is you, so make sure to hone those other parts too.

It wasn't until I took my senior English course, Portraits of Creativity, that I realized my true gift was with food. At the time, I was a recreational home baker, and would ask my RCs to use their kitchens to make cookies or cupcakes, or my infamous caramel cake. I loved watching the Food Network, most especially Unwrapped and watching Alton Brown make cooking seem like the coolest science experiment I've ever seen. So, on days when IMSA felt like it was too much, I would zone out and bake until I felt better.

For this English class, we had to create something that expresses our creativity. Being the baker I am, I made a fruit lasagna! Honestly, I applaud my classmates for willingly trying the concoction, but it was sweet, colorful and most of all, creative AND fun.

After successfully not giving my classmates or teacher food poisoning, I completed my senior year thinking that, like many of my other classmates, I was going to be the doctor of my IMSA dreams. But, I realized that while I was good at science and had an interest in medicine, it wasn't my thing. Plus, changing my plan wasn't an option, so I had to find an alternative.

I landed at Clemson, changing my major during orientation to science teaching, figuring I could follow in the footsteps of my grandparents who were teachers themselves. Yet, that still didn't fit. After spending Christmas break at home, I returned still unsure about what I wanted to do. I was still cooking and baking and watching the Food Network, but never made the correlation of pursuing anything in the food industry. Plus, in my mind, no one from my high school had done it, so why should I?

Well, as you can obviously tell, I'm a food scientist now, so I obviously made the right decision!

But, as I looked back on that experience, it made me think about what I thought an IMSA graduate was supposed to be, and how I pushed for that version of myself, instead of finding my own path.

Being that I like to bake and work with food, I created a recipe for what I thought was the perfect IMSA student, and it looks a little something like this.

- 4 letters of recommendation

- 1 set of SAT scores
- 2 7:30 am courses (NOTE: can substitute with ending at 4:15 everyday)
- One year of Ad Chem
- 12 college acceptances
- One SIR project
- 3 leadership roles
- A dash of wing dinners

Let marinate for 3 years and then its ready!! Yields one IMSA doctor.

The problem with that recipe is that it didn't fit me, let alone many of my friends. We all were following the obvious path in front of us, instead of chartering a new one. The best thing about IMSA it that is allows you the freedom to try and explore anything within STEM or the humanities, and yet we were trying to be what we felt IMSA students are supposed to be, versus doing what felt good to us.

For all the nights we spent stressing over problem sets, summatives or lab practicals, we could have spent some of the time finding the things that felt good and excited us. As I mentioned, baking was always a stress relief for me and something that I enjoyed, but I didn't think I could pursue it because it didn't seem possible. Yet, I realized that in the process of trying to fit into one thing, that I actually fit better in something else.

Since then, I've developed countless products, collaborated with celebrity chefs and still found time to bake. Thankfully my baking has gotten better over the years ;)

As you embark on this new school year, none of us know what the future holds in terms of in-person, virtual or even hybrid learning. I implore you to take the opportunities to assess what drives you and what you're passionate about. You've already made it through the hardest part of being accepted here, so know that you're supposed to be here, and that because you're here, you are excellence personified. Allow yourself the ability to be open to the experience and whatever it comes with.

To guide you into the school year, I'd like to offer a new recipe for the IMSA student. Let's call it the perfectly imperfect IMSA student:

- 2 parts ambition
- 2 parts passion
- 1 part resourcefulness
- 1 part academic aptitude
- 1 part maturity
- A dash of community

Feel free to add other ingredients to make it your own! Age until ready. Yields a great IMSA student.

While you may not always get it right or know the exact thing to do, trust yourself to know what's best for you and what feels right to you. You will never fail if you trust and believe in yourself and your capabilities. Just because you're an IMSA student doesn't mean you have to

follow the obvious path in front of you; create your own path. The best part of the journey is knowing that it's yours and designed uniquely for you.

Excellence isn't solely tied to academic performance. You are excellent by being the best you you can be. Sometimes to be excellent, it requires you to step outside of the obvious path in front of you. Along the way, it can be challenging or discouraging, and you may fail, but because you did it, you achieved.

To offer some words of encouragement for the upcoming school year, I like to draw from my math teacher in EXCEL, Dr. Porzio. On every test, quiz or assignment he always wrote "You will do well" at the top of the page. So, I would like to remind you, that on the path to becoming an excellent IMSA student, remember that in spite of the challenges and hurdles that come, "you will do well."

Congratulations on surviving a challenging school year! I know you all will do great things this year!

Thank you!