

Keynote Address by the Guest of Honor
Prof. Mwenda Ntarangwi
(Chief Executive Officer, Commission for University Education)

39th Commencement Ceremony
United States International University - Africa
Saturday, September 9, 2017

The vice chancellor Prof. Paul Zeleza,

Distinguished guests,

Fellow academics,

Graduating students,

Family members,

Friends,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Almost three decades ago I was the one sitting where you are today eager to receive the powers of having completed a Bachelors' degree at Kenyatta University. It was a moment of joy for me because I not only had finished my task of studying and getting a degree but also had a job with the Teachers Service Commission immediately after graduation. I don't remember who gave the graduation speech or what it contained but I do remember that my family members who attended the ceremony were very proud of my achievements and had great expectations for me. You see even though I was the one who did the actual studying and completed all requirements for the degree, the degree was now ours. They were expecting good things to happen to me and to them because of my degree. I am sure this is something some of you are experiencing today. Many people are

counting on you to make a positive difference in this country; many are hoping your degree will translate into economic progress; that in that process they too will benefit. As you consider these and other expectations that many have on you because of your academic status let me add my own three to the list:

First, consider this degree a door into the world of inquiry and through it problem solving. That you accept the fact that in our rapidly changing world, we need individuals who not only care deeply about those places they inhabit but also think deeply about the human condition and apply their academic skills to making a difference in this country and the world at large. So your degree is not a paper to enable you to get a promotion or a job but an opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills you have gained to making this world a better place. Inquiry calls for deep thinking that also engages experiences not just of the thinker but those of others. This kind of thinking is best developed through research—having a question, assumptions, and information collection to answer those questions through a systematic process. It entails listening and asking questions. Since we are in a university context where part of your academic work has entailed engaging in studies from texts and papers developed out of the research of others or even yourselves, let me implore you to take that as a call to generate your own knowledge to add to what is already there. Why do I say this? It is because research forces us to ask questions, to consider multiple perspectives, and to be subjected to peer review. And as a result, research does help us change our minds, helps us grow. You are joining a very small percentage of Kenyans with university education and therefore this expectation should not be taken lightly. I am pleased to learn that one of the goals that Prof. Zeleza has for this institution is promoting a culture of research. In my opinion a university ceases to be

a serious institution of higher learning the minute it loses its focus and ability to undertake research. You can play your part in building that culture even when you leave this place because you now have a connection to the institution and to the world you will inhabit after graduation. Let those two worlds be brought together.

Second, consider your graduation today as the mark of a new page into challenging what I would call an “at least” culture. On November 15, 2016 Nation Media’s Larry Madowo asked in his Front Row column in the Daily Nation, “Why do Kenyans accept such low standards in everything?” In the column, Madowo went on to note that Kenyans have an “at least” mindset that is nothing but an apology for low standards which breeds the mediocrity that defines almost every aspect of Kenyan life. On July 28, 2017 Madowo commented on Twitter about two delayed flights he had taken in West African cities and someone shot a rebuttal asking him to be grateful that the flights were delayed not cancelled and added that Madowo should be patriotic. Does patriotism mean accepting low standards? Should it not be the other way round, that patriotism means we love this nation so much that we expect nothing but the best from it and that we also give it the best? As you leave here today let me ask you to please change this culture of “at least” and model excellence and expect excellence.

Third, consider prioritizing those things that are most valuable to advancing the welfare of this nation and your respective places of fulltime engagement. One of the areas I would like to highlight here is investing in others. You are, as I have mentioned, a very small minority of people with a university degree. And in our culture where we have a high-power distance and where hierarchy is carefully monitored and upheld, sometimes we use our academic achievements or credentials to belittle or even demean others. I ask

you to resist that temptation or practice and instead see your degree as a license to serve. Use your degree to serve others and if you are already in a position of authority use your degree to advance others. Let them too see you as valuable support for their own advancement. Don't always look for accolades; let others identify you with their success. Let me share with you a poem I have found very useful in my own life especially when I am tempted to enter into our high-power distance cultural mode. This is a poem attributed to Lao Tzu and it goes like this:

Go to the people

Live with them

Love them

Learn from them

Start with what they know

Build with what they have

But of the best leaders

When the task is accomplished

The work completed

The people will remark

We have done it ourselves

When you go to your respective places of fulltime engagement and you are given the opportunity to lead others, I hope that when the people are successful in whatever you assist them accomplish, they will consider it their own work and not yours.

Ladies and gentlemen as I step away from this podium I ask you to cultivate an inquiring mind, a mind that asks questions and seeks to expand knowledge of the everyday; I ask you not to settle for low standards but instead demand and give the best; and invest in others so that when you assist in their success they can say they did it themselves.

Thank you!