University of Hartford

Commencement Speech 5/19/2013

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Hashtags and Hooks

Welcome parents, family, faculty, and friends.
To those of you who are graduating, this probably feels a bit strange, being welcomed to death just before you leave, but I too want to welcome you. And now I must begin, but how should I begin? How about with a hook?

Most of you probably have been told that:

A hook is something interesting that will grab the audience’s attention…

these days, we call them hashtags, and you only get 140 characters.

As far as Twitter is concerned, my last sentence barely fits the bill for a Tweet; even though it was exactly 140 characters. Unfortunately, that was interesting enough to hold the attention of this soon-to-be-graduating class for at best 140 seconds.

So how did that hook succeed in capturing the attention of thousands of people?
Pop culture reference? Check.
Hashtag? Check.
Cheesy reference to academic life? Check.
Maximize output using 140 characters? Double check.
Link to cute animal video on YouTube? Missing.

I thought about it, and I have one. However, I think it would be better to skip it this time. Besides, I want to keep your attention, and I am already way over the maximum character limit.

Characters. Fortunately, the University of Hartford does not set a limit on “Characters.” Look around. You are in the midst of countless talented musicians, skillful artists, creative writers, amazing athletes, architects, and engineers. You are surrounded by some of the most trustworthy, loyal, helpful, and friendly people you will ever meet. Some of them already are experts in chemistry or psychology. Others will go on to be fantastic teachers, or playwrights, or composers. Right now, you are sitting next to experts in music theory, experts in business, experts in programing,
and experts in mechanical systems. Many of them also happen to be experts at pulling everything together at the last possible second before class.

Here at the University of Hartford, we are not served success on a pretty plate - we eat at The Commons. We do not have our own parking spots - we park in D-Lot. And until this year, we would have to move our cars when campus decided to flood.

So what is the catch? Where is the hook?
What has made our relationship with this school and each other so memorable and valuable?

Despite our vast diversity, every single one of us has something in common, and it is something that will stick with us years after we forget the material discussed in our All University Curriculum courses: The University of Hartford has heightened our sense of responsibility to the communities in which we participate beyond the point of simply being “concerned” from the sidelines when things start to go wrong. We have been instilled with a sense of responsibility that demands commitment. We find ourselves not only more aware and more involved, but also more able to carry out that responsibility.

Over the last four years, we have learned to be the aforementioned teachers, artists, and so much more. We have been given the tools to succeed, and we will continue to succeed.

For example, I can honestly say that as a member of the University of Hartford’s graduating Class of 2013, I have never been taught how to write a commencement speech or a Twitter post, and yet I stand here doing both. Now I am no Social Networking Major, and I am by no means a social butterfly. In fact, I majored in Mechanical Engineering, so I am probably closer to a hermit by most students’ standards.
However, it was more than mundane homework assignments, tedious lab reports, random essays, and impossible tests that gave us the knowledge we have today, or should I say, “technical” knowledge? because we also have learned “practical” knowledge from interacting with our friends.

Someone told me a joke a few weeks ago; they said that they respect their parents because they graduated from college without Google.

Well put.

I might also add that they did it without Wikipedia, WolframAlpha, before Youtube, and Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook to name a few. Yet that does not mean we already know more than they do—it only means that we can get information differently: faster and together. We are not only sharing information together; we also are learning together. Learning that Obama will be here to speak on gun control, that classes have been canceled again due to another snowstorm, that the Shaw Center is complete, or that the new bridge is finally open.

Some of you may remember reading about the Wikipedia Blackout in the news feed. Not the paper, the NEWS FEED. And that is such a fitting title, because reading Facebook in the morning is kind of like sitting down and eating information for breakfast—with all of your friends.

So here is the hook:

UHart supports these interactions. President Harrison encourages students to email him and call him “Walt”. Professors post notes and recordings of lectures online. We have class online. They cancel class—so that we can go to public events. They set up blogs where we can discuss fascinating ideas.

A "hook" is something interesting that will grab the audience’s attention figuratively speaking. Physically, a hook is something that grabs and sustains a firm
connection. So while some of us will remain here, either for graduate school, or perhaps we have found a job in the area, the rest of us will go our own ways, across the country and the globe; and in a few years, all of us will be communicating our success back to a favorite professor, a dedicated dean, and our friends like we do in Tweets: with hashtags and hooks.