

## Shooting Your Shot (And How to Miss)

PBK Student Oration – 2024

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First and foremost, congratulations to you all. Joining the ranks of the top university graduates in the country, many of whom go on to serve in the United States's federal government, found world-changing companies, or inspire millions with their words, is certainly an honor. My name is Blake Gebhardt, I'm a senior from beautiful Valencia, California, and I study Computer Science, Data Science, and International Studies. I have the honor of giving your senior oration and imparting wisdom that I have gained through the trials and tribulations during my time here at SMU. It is indeed a great honor to be inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, but it doesn't mean this is the end of going out and finding new things to learn from.

As you all know, the motto of Phi Beta Kappa is *Philosophia Biou Kybernētēs*, literally meaning "love of knowledge is the helmsman of life". Whether consciously or not, you all embody the act of living life with a passion for knowledge. I'm sure many of you started at a very young age devouring Mary Pope Osborne's *The Magic Tree House* series, graduated to the accelerated math path in junior high, and then took as many AP courses as possible in high school. As we matriculated to SMU, I can guarantee that most of us took random courses outside of our major, solely because it was interesting to learn about things like how the blockchain works or why Spain's gardens bear a resemblance to those of Tunisia. Many of us are double-, triple-, or somehow quadruple-majors, and your being here at this ceremony is testament to your abilities to adequately handle academics.

Now, you all know this. You've spent likely hundreds of hours writing assignments, practicing presentations, striving for that "top of the class" designation. You've been told that getting an "A" in a class or a 4.0 GPA for that semester or being the valedictorian is and will be the end-all-be-all. I'm here to tell you that in the grand scheme of knowledge, it isn't. In today's age, the quest for knowledge is conflated with the need to spend all night in the library and miss out on the non-traditional "knowledge". I'm here to warn you of the dangers of being too caught up with "prestige" and actively seeking recognition, when your guiding light should be the promise of new knowledge, experiences, and just things to do. The youthful, almost childlike spirit of going out into the world, doing everything that you can, just because you can, needs a revival in us old upperclassmen. The world has so much more to offer, and I firmly believe that SMU has been integral in opening my eyes to this fact.

Although ΦBK's motto is officially "Love of learning is the guide of life", I'd like to provide an unofficial one: "Why Not?" As I look back on my time at SMU and look ahead to the limitless possibilities of the future, it becomes clear that embracing the spirit of "Why Not?" is transformative. This unofficial motto encapsulates a mindset that transcends boundaries and defies limitations, urging us to seize every opportunity with boldness and enthusiasm. I have learned so much from the small strange opportunities on campus, and I didn't say "yes" to them because they helped me get my degrees, brought up my GPA, or got me a shiny medal (although medals and the occasional fancy dinner is always a plus). I said "yes" simply because I wanted to. During my sophomore year, I took an Oceanography course to fulfill part of the Exploring Science requirement. As a Southern California swim kiddo, I was fairly certain that I knew everything in the intro class, having spent hours bobbing on a surfboard, generally understanding that the Moon influences what waves are coming, the water gets colder as you go deeper, and so

on. I came in with the naïve mindset of “easy A”, and had I kept that thought, I would have essentially wasted a whole semester. But I didn’t know that SMU has partnered with the Smithsonian and the government of the Republic of Angola to prepare fossilized aquatic dinosaurs for display. When Dr. Vineyard, seemingly as an afterthought at the end of a lecture, called for students to work for the Shuler Museum of Paleontology, I could have kept packing up. But in the spirit of learning, and essentially doing things because I could, I spent a semester working with dinosaur bones. I point to this singular event during my sophomore year as the moment where I was reinvigorated with learning for the sake of learning. I bombarded Dr. Doyle and Dr. Herring with emails to make sure my application to take the Art History course on Inka Peru was complete, because when else would I learn about Macchu Pichu? I got my job as an Equipment Manager for the football team because they were tabling outside of Hughes-Trigg, because when else would I experience a behind-the-scenes look at my D1 team? I spent this past weekend at a drone competition for my Senior Design project that was sponsored by Raytheon, because how else am I going to appreciate the fact I’m not a mechanical engineer? All of these opportunities involved putting myself out there for the sake of doing. In the wise words of Michael Scott, ““You miss 100% of the shots you don’t take.’ - Wayne Gretzky”. Once you learn to shoot your shot beyond the classroom, the world opens up.

Now, I would love to leave you all here with that admittedly cliché quote. However, I also believe it’s important to recognize that you won’t always get what you shoot for. My freshman year, I thought the world was going to collapse because I wasn’t accepted to the Tower Scholars Program. I tried out to be a Peruna Handler for 4 years before I earned a spot running with our beloved pony. More recently, I didn’t even make it past the very first round of a Fulbright Fellowship to Bulgaria. I thought that I was a shoe-in for most of these, and it

massively stung. I'm sure the graduating seniors feel something similar when the dreaded email with "An Update to Your Application to Company XYZ" pops up. As we move forward in life, you're going to miss the goal, more often than not. Wayne Gretzky, the undisputed GOAT of hockey, shot 5,088 times during his NHL career, and he missed nearly 83 per cent of the time. As part of ΦBK's "Love of learning is the guide of life", it's imperative that these "misses" only continue to drive learning. Pivoting to find other opportunities and continuing to put your name in the hat will bring about other amazing things. A Tower Scholars rejection pushed me to find Computer Science and Data Science as second and third majors. Missing Peruna Handling pushed me to join the equipment staff, and eventually I got to do both. Although Fulbright is still a sore subject, I think I will find something to replace a year's worth of eating pickled everything. As students, we have nothing to lose from a miss but everything to gain from a goal. Getting out of the comfort zone leads to amazing bits of knowledge and experiences, so why not shoot the shot?

SMU students are blessed because there's so much that happens on campus. Once you leave the Hilltop, the puck isn't teed up for you. Going forward, make sure you represent the university, your family, and mostly yourself by continuing to take shots. Support the Mustangs in the ACC, wear your red and blue proudly, and stay to the end of football games for the Varsity. We all need to go to work, but don't stay in a job or career that you hate because you got a degree in it. Seek fulfillment in your career and future studies. Try a new sport or a hobby. Sometimes it's difficult to put yourself out there because success has come to you these last three or four years, but growth only happens when you are open to growing.

And as you take shot after shot, remember to take a breath. Take in the beauty of the world, value your friendships and relationships, still say “hi” to the shots that you miss when you see them in the hallway. And then go out and shoot another shot.