



**Greg Case**  
**President and Chief Executive Officer**  
**Aon Corporation**  
**Baker University Commencement Speech**  
**Baldwin City, Kansas**  
**May 14, 2011**

President Long, trustees, administration and faculty, students and friends of Baker University, and most important, those whose day this is, the 2011 graduating class of the School of Professional and Graduate Studies. Thank you very much for the distinguished honor you have bestowed upon me, and more important, for allowing me to share this special day with all of you.

I must say, my pleasure has been more than doubled by the fact that many members of my family, including my sister Michelle, are here with us. I am very proud of the role she plays in helping to lead the great institution of Baker University. However, for some reason she thought that I might make for an interesting commencement speaker.

At first I was not sure that I could meet her standards and that of President Long and Baker University. But the more I thought about it the more excited I became. In fact, the other night at home I was going over my remarks when my wife Mamie walked in, and so I asked her, "How many great commencement speakers do you think there are in the world today?"

She looked at me, paused for a moment, and in a way only she could and said, "Greg, there's probably one less than you may think."

So, I will try to follow the words of former Kansas Senator Bob Dole, who when asked for advice about a commencement speech said, "Be brief, be sincere, be seated."

To those graduating today, I stand here before you to say that as the years pass, if you allow yourselves to fully absorb the spirit and the tradition of Baker, I believe that the memories of the time you spent here will always be a rich and important part of your life.



I urge all of you to take pride in this day. Thank your parents and your families for their love and support. Thank those who have been of help to you during your time at Baker. Make sure you celebrate this tremendous achievement; you are entitled. This is your day.

Graduation day is properly called “commencement,” because it is both a completion of one phase of your life and the beginning of another.

And while I hope you will look back with pleasure on your time at Baker, I know many of you are also looking at the future; a future that perhaps seems a bit risky and uncertain. Let me assure you, it also offers you great expectations and great opportunities.

For my part I want to offer for your consideration five perspectives or observations. Don’t view these as gospel or truth, rather observations of others who have had great success and impact across multiple countries and around many parts of the world. Interestingly the lessons I will summarize are remarkably similar irrespective of culture, country or industry, whether you are in Singapore, London, Sao Paulo, Spain or Kansas City, all places I have been recently. Hopefully they provide some insight as you shape your personal game plan for the next phase of your life.

**First Observation: Do your best to make sure you understand the big picture.**

From my point of view, it is perfectly right to first take as broad a perspective as you shape your life and what you hope to achieve. You should always think big! In the last five years I have had the privilege of working personally in over 30 countries in a firm that serves over 120 countries and virtually every size and type of company, large and small. And as far as I am concerned, based on what I have seen, all of you have the opportunity to compete in every market in the world. I am quite confident that President Long and the faculty have prepared you to move beyond the walls of Baker University, beyond the borders of Kansas or Missouri, and beyond the boundaries of our great nation. Take the big picture approach to your life. You just might like what you see.



Don't misunderstand, living in Kansas City, Topeka or Wichita would be a great privilege and great calling, but approach any of these destinations with full understanding of the broader context and the big picture.

**Second Observation: Keep investing in yourself.**

Every one of us spends part of our life going to school and then going to work. In essence we invest in ourselves for part of our life (school) and then reap the rewards for the rest of our life (profession + earn a living). I encourage you to reject completely this common temptation. Have a clear plan of how you will keep investing in yourself. The longer you continue to build on your capabilities as a person, whether it is in business or your personal life or both, the greater the person you will become. Regardless of your age and position; the more you invest in yourself and in your ability to grow, the stronger will be your ability to look at the big picture and pursue your dreams.

**Third Observation: There is no substitute for excellence.**

Whatever you decide to do in life, understand what 'being the best' means and work to build your skills to be the best. For the lawyer, it might mean burning the midnight oil to better understand the law for the case you are working on. For the teacher, it might mean working late to make sure that your lessons for the next day will really make the difference for your students. No matter what you choose to do in life, it all boils down to commitment. Life is challenging, but if you are willing to put in the time and effort to be the best at whatever it is you want to do in life, trust me, you will like the results.

**Fourth Observation: Don't be afraid to fail.**

Some failure in life is inevitable. Everyone here today has experienced it in some way, shape or form. It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all. In that case, you fail by default.



Failure will teach each of you something different. Some of you might find out you had a stronger will to succeed than you knew you had. Others may find a hidden sense of discipline that pulled you through tough times. Many of our heroes; many of the people who have made this country and this world a better place, have failed numerous times along their path to success.

The beauty of failure is knowing that you will emerge stronger and wiser than you ever thought possible. You will become even more secure in your ability to survive and prosper.

This will fuel the fire of persistence and provide you with perspective as you face life's challenges.

Remember, the world is full of smart, frustrated people who for some reason or another simply cannot solve the success equation. Those who are persistent know better.

**Fifth Observation: Invest as much in others as you invest in yourself.**

The best advice I ever received was simple and direct: don't obsess about your own agenda; help others succeed.

No matter what line of work you decide to pursue, you will learn that great leaders help people succeed. It is all about understanding the opportunity before you and how you can help your colleagues meet those opportunities and succeed in a way they never knew they could. To do this you have to be passionate about what you are doing. You have to be a good listener as opposed to being a good talker. And you have to care about others. This trait is universal in every good leader I have ever encountered.

In closing, as you prepare to leave Baker, I can assure you that there is opportunity awaiting you beyond the boundaries of this wonderful campus.

Don't let people persuade you that the best is behind you. On the contrary, you will have opportunities before you that reach far beyond anything we have ever known.

It is how you respond to them that will tell the tale of your future.



Will you look at the big picture?

Will you keep investing in yourself?

Will you remember that there is no substitute for excellence?

Will you not be afraid to fail?

And, will you invest as much in others as you do in yourself?

Only you and you alone can answer these questions. For some of you, you may have already answered them here today or during your time at Baker. For the rest of you, the answers may not be there today, or tomorrow, or perhaps even a year or five years from now. That's ok.

No matter when you answer them, you are about to start another part of your exciting journey called "life."

Now many of you may not remember what was said here today. However, I hope that you will keep in mind these words that were uttered many years ago by a gentleman who was an historic coach of the world's most famous soccer team of all time: Manchester United. The coach was a man named Sir Matt Busby. His famous saying was, "At United, we strive for perfection. And if we fail, then we might just have to settle for excellence."

I wish all of you the best of luck as you seek to define your level of perfection for you and your families. I wish you safe travels on your journey and I thank you very much for allowing me to be a very small part of it here today.