



119th Commencement Address

Delivered by Drexel University President John Fry
Gratz College, May 19, 2019



President Finkelman, chairperson Portnoff, distinguished members of the Board of Governors, honored guests ... Good afternoon.

Graduates ... congratulations!

This is your day, and you've earned this celebration through determination, hard work, and academic success. We are incredibly proud of you, and what you have achieved.

To Gratz College, I want to say, thank you. For many reasons, this honorary degree means a great deal to me. I'll mention two of the most important.

First, I feel a strong kinship between our institutions.

Gratz College and Drexel University may stand a dozen miles apart, according to Google maps ... But they are practically neighbors, ideologically speaking ... True kindred spirits ... I'll say more about that in a moment.

Secondly, this is a wonderful occasion for me on a deeply personal level.

This honor renews the memory of a cherished mentor. D. Walter Cohen was Chancellor Emeritus of the Drexel University College of Medicine, who encouraged me to accept this honorary degree. Here, his name will be familiar to many. When he was just a teenager, Walter studied Hebrew at Gratz.

And those afternoons spent in study helped him to grow into the man he became — a man who also came to believe in, and support wholeheartedly, the mission of Gratz ... which, in part, is to teach Jewish values. Among those values: the search for growth and knowledge... compassion ... justice ... and giving back. In fact, his distinguished career in dentistry and academia included a 7-year stint on the Gratz Board of Governors, ending in 2009.

At his memorial last summer, I mentioned his many achievements ... His devotion to Judaism, which led to his work with Hebrew University ... Work that inspired significant research collaborations Drexel established there. I mentioned that he cared deeply about the Jewish students at our University, and that he was a staunch advocate and generous donor to our Judaic Studies Program.

And he was one of the first major donors to our Raymond G. Perelman Center for Jewish Life ... now the beautiful home of Drexel Hillel. It opened in 2016 — just as we were celebrating Walter's 90th birthday. But what was most meaningful for me about Walter was this:

When I first came to Drexel in 2010, Walter immediately embraced me, and during his last eight years he bestowed upon me a series of gifts which I will forever hold dear:

The gift of his presence ... and the gifts of his empathy, compassion and appreciation. He was someone who had walked in my shoes. Still, he found the time to give me the strength and encouragement to find my way as the new leader of Drexel. I miss his advice on more days than I can say.

So, in his honor ... May Walter's memory always be a blessing.

As I mentioned, I feel a kinship between our two institutions, and those connections are instructive for what they say about higher education, community and progress in Philadelphia.

As graduates, you now have a lifelong connection with, and — I hope — affection for Gratz College. We certainly see that connection among Drexel alumni, who number more than 150,000.

For a theme that underpins our missions, both of our institutions could well point to the thinking of the 18th century teacher and philosopher Rebbe Nachman. The revered rabbi reminded us, and I quote, "If you are not a better person tomorrow than you are today, what need have you for a tomorrow?"

As the only college offering an online doctorate in Holocaust and genocide studies, Gratz has a solid claim to the idea that we can all become better versions of ourselves.

And at Drexel, for nearly a decade, we have been striving to improve our surrounding community by working to become our country's most civically engaged university.

These are grand ambitions. And I think they stem from an ethos that reaches all the way back to the 19th century founders of Gratz and Drexel. The businessman Hyman Gratz created a college to serve the Jewish community, educating teachers and others. His desire was to build talent for the new world that was emerging.

His vision was egalitarian, shared by his sister, Rebecca Gratz, whose far-ahead-of-its-time Hebrew Education Society of Philadelphia joined to form Gratz. No wonder this College was one of only two in the region that put women on a par with men.

The other was Drexel. Founded only a few years earlier than Gratz by the Wall Street pioneer Anthony J. Drexel, the Drexel Institute of Art, Science and Industry was like Gratz — dedicated to raising educational opportunities for men and women, people of all races and creeds, who hadn't before had access to higher learning.

Today, these are evolved institutions. The majority of Gratz students are not Jewish. The majority of Drexel students are not studying engineering, which was for decades a core discipline for us.

And both institutions are training citizens as much as they are training advanced-degree holders. With its emphasis on distance learning, Gratz has used technology to innovate and pivot to the times, in order to expand access to graduate-level training.

Your graduate students are working adults, many of whom are making careers in social-justice professions, as teachers, with nonprofits, and doing research.

For us at Drexel, the corollary to this is our effort to foster inclusive growth: With jobs, of course ... Everyone wants to do that ... But our work to grow opportunity is about reaching deep into the communities of great need that surround us in a federal Promise Zone, and beyond. How do we do that?

It happens just across from 30th Street Station ... on 14 Drexel-owned acres. It's there that we are working with our partners to build an innovation district known as Schuylkill Yards. This will be a years-long project that eventually — in the tall buildings built — will bring jobs in the life-sciences, information technology, financial services and many other growth-oriented fields.

But we didn't just start with Schuylkill Yards. Because the art of this idea is how do you link a poverty-challenged Promise Zone to an innovation district in authentic ways. We are trying to do that by readying people in our community to take many of those jobs ... By working now with 5,000 children in seven Philadelphia public schools to improve achievement.

And we're enhancing lifelong learning opportunities in the community through an urban extension center that we created. This is all part of what I view as the anchor institution role that colleges and universities increasingly are called upon to serve — especially in urban areas. In part, it's about trying to fill the vacuum left by cuts in government funding. But we — institutions like Drexel and Gratz — have a moral obligation, too.

In the Judaic tradition, this is known as *Tikkun Olam*— the belief that we need to repair the world.

I hope that for our graduates — either those who are setting out in their careers, or those taking new steps along a well-established route — I hope that the idea that we need to create a better world is appealing.

Throughout this Commencement season, graduates just like you will hear all manner of advice from speakers like me given this honor. Many of them will advise you to look after yourselves, and there's nothing wrong with that. But I have every confidence that this group of graduates already has taken such standard advice to heart.

I'm sure you will ...
Strive to live life to the fullest ...
Let your reach exceed your grasp ...
Follow your dreams ...
'Know thyself' ...
Never let the perfect be the enemy of the good ...
And on and on ...

But, to the extent that you can focus outside of yourself ...and subscribe to the goal of actually 'repairing the world' ... then, I know that you cannot go wrong. At our institutions, and in our one-to-one interactions, I truly believe we *can* build that better world:

It will be a world crafted out of one that is in need of honest brokers of information ...
A world in need of renewed respect for facts ...
A world in need of loyalty to the power of memory ...
In need of an end to all forms of hate ...
And in need of growing opportunity made possible by communities rooted in compassion and fairness.

Graduates, you are a part a proud legacy.

Gratz College has rightly been described as a hidden gem. It is so much more. As graduates, you are the beneficiaries. We are given gifts in life. It is up to us to appreciate them — as I did, the gift of friendship that Walter Cohen presented to me.

Your Gratz experience is one such gift.

I hope you will cherish it, and pay it forward.

Once again, congratulations!