

## Boomberg Commencement 2007 Address

*The following is the text of Mayor Bloomberg's Commencement Address at the University of Oklahoma as prepared:*

"I've always wanted to do this...Boomer! Boomer! Please note: I'm not going to say the word 'Texas!'

"I was practicing that chant all week back in the Big Apple – and, not surprisingly, the response wasn't nearly as big. Good evening to you all, and thank you, President Boren, for that very eloquent introduction. You are a true leader, an inspiring teacher, and a great American. (Have you ever considered a career in politics?) President Boren and I actually have a lot in common: We are both heads of large organizations, we are both devastatingly handsome and we were both students of distinction. While David was at the top of his class, I was the kind of student who made the top half of the class possible.

"Let me just begin by saying, it's great to be in Oklahoma, especially during the state's centennial. The people are incredible here. After visiting the memorial in Oklahoma City this afternoon and watching the reports of the tornados and floods that hit the state over the past week – I'm always reminded of the special strength and resilience of Oklahomans. And scenically, I've always found this part of the country so beautiful. (In New York City, a lot of people think "the great outdoors" is the area between your front door and a taxi cab.)

"What's more – I've been so impressed during my first trip to O.U.– the colorful gardens and the thousands of trees are just stunning. And you can't beat this scene tonight.

"Standing right here – center stage – at the public university with one of the highest numbers of Rhodes Scholars in the nation, the highest number of National Merit Scholars per capita in the nation, and the longest-named sports facility in the nation: Owen Field at the Gaylord Family Oklahoma Memorial Stadium. Just saying it has taken up a third of my allotted time. What an amazing and diverse group here tonight.

“From this position, I can see thousands of people – representing fifty states, hundreds of towns and many countries. Undergrads, Master’s candidates, Doctoral and Professional students and yet, every one of you has the same exact question on your minds: ‘Why is Mike Bloomberg our commencement speaker?’

“Well, the truth is: I wasn’t your first choice. I know that. I was third. Right after Adrian Peterson and Sanjaya. But the real reason I got the job? I begged for it. Where else could I see O’Connell’s before it moves? Where else could I stand inside a giant spoon holder? Where else could I find a college president who is willing to walk around the campus in his pajamas? So you see, I had to be here! I even promise not to quote Will Rogers just to get on your good side. But before I impart some indispensable words of wisdom to you graduates, I want to say a little something about another important group here today. I’m talking about your parents and relatives – who are sitting out there this evening, beaming proudly, and not even thinking about what it cost to get to this day. Apparently, some think it should be called YOU OWE – not O.U. So let’s give them a big hand. They deserve it!

“In organizing my remarks for today, I was inspired by a legendary text that has changed the lives of millions. I’m talking about Robert Fulghum’s classic self-help book: All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.

“Has anyone here read it? It was written about the time most of you graduates were born – and its thesis is that people master all the basic principles for living a good life by the time they leave kindergarten. Well, I don’t think it happens that fast. And from what I’ve heard about O.U., I think many of your most essential lessons took place right here. So I’ve decided to write my own book: All You Really Need to Know You Learned By Commencement. Mine’s going to be much shorter. Fulghum’s book had 50 principles. I’ve trimmed it down to five. You don’t have to take notes – this isn’t going to be on the test.

“Principle number one in my new book is: ‘You Gotta Take Risks.’ You’ve certainly learned that from your time here. Whether it was enrolling in a course you knew would be tough, getting up the nerve to ask someone out on a ‘Coke date’ at Classic Fifties or calling your folks to ask them to send you more money. You took a lot of risks to reach this day – and you’ll need to keep doing that for the rest of your life. It’s a competitive world out there. Everyone thinks they have the next great idea – but you’ll find that the ones who succeed are those who don’t just stand around talking about it.

“Will Rogers said – and this is the only quote I’ll use – ‘Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.’ My first job out of school was on Wall Street and I stayed there for 15 years. Being a working-class kid from a small town, it was a terrific ride. Fun times, and lots of encouragement and praise from my bosses. They loved me – right up until the day they fired me! But I remained optimistic. The next day, I started a new company that would make financial information available to computers. We began with 4 employees, a one-room office, one coffeepot, and zero customers. Today, that business is pretty successful, I’m glad to say and one that allows me to work for a dollar a year. And it all began with taking a risk – a risk that my friends and family subtly, but persistently – and with only good intentions – tried to talk me out of.

“The second lesson, ‘You Can’t Do It Alone.’ By this point in your life, how many times have you heard that? Every little league coach, Sunday school teacher, and Scout leader has told you about the importance of teamwork. But here’s a tip: It doesn’t change. This is a complicated world, no single person has all the skills to solve all the problems. Working collaboratively and cooperatively is the difference between mediocrity by yourself or success with a team. You must share the pain and the responsibility. And then you’ll also share in the rewards. In New York, I’ve tried to encourage teamwork at City Hall by literally tearing down the walls that keep us from interacting with each other. My senior staff now all works in one big room, called ‘The Bullpen.’ Everyone sits in a cubicle with no walls – including me.

“At the same time, I’ve made sure that the people I work with can be trusted to get the job done and do the right thing. Because you are judged by the company you keep. So get rid of the words ‘I’ and ‘me’ – and replace them with ‘we’ and ‘us.’ Believe me, if you give credit to others, you’ll get more help – and people will respect you even more.

“The third lesson is effectively that: ‘R-E-S-P-E-C-T.’ This is another principle you’ve not only heard Aretha Franklin sing about but seen in action here at O.U. This University gives a lot of respect to a diverse group of speakers who visit the campus each year. From Gore to Bush 41 to Liberia’s first democratically-elected president – they have really covered the breadth of the political spectrum – and they were all given a chance to be heard. Let me tell you, it’s not like that on all college campuses – and it’s not always the case at other settings in our country. But having a respect for others, especially if you don’t agree with them, is vital. I often wonder if people who shout each other down or block each other from expressing their opinions do so because they have so little confidence in their own. To me, encountering an opposing view is an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the issues at stake and a chance to develop your own point of view.

“But first, you’ve got to listen. I think it was Will Rogers who said and this is the last quote: ‘Never miss a good chance to shut up.’ Showing more respect is why I’ve gone all over New York to do town hall meetings – to hear citizens tell the mayor exactly how they feel. And it’s the reason I took up Spanish at age 60. I now have at least an hour-long lesson nearly every day. I have a lot to learn, but now, at least, if Shakira comes to City Hall, I won’t be at a loss for words.

“The fourth principle in *All You Really Need to Know You Learned By Commencement* is: ‘Invest in the future.’ Again, you’ve already done that: You went to school – a tremendous school, I might add. There’s no better investment in the future. But like the most successful investments, it’s not about the quick return – it’s about being in it for the long haul. Many of you are heading into the job market starting tomorrow morning. That can be scary. And some of you may take a little longer. That can be scary, too. But my advice to you: don’t worry about your salary or title right away. Your first job should be something that will teach, humble, and exhilarate. Think of an activity or project you’ve been involved with – The Campus Activities Council, The Pride, O.U. Cousins, the kind of thing you just loved doing. Loved the people around you. And loved being there at all hours. Until the work got done.

“That’s how you want to feel at your job. That way, whatever you choose to do, you’ll want to go in before dawn, stay until after it’s dark, give it your all. And it won’t even seem like a sacrifice. You’ll notice that while luck plays a part in success – the harder you work, the luckier you’ll get – and then you’ll do better and better. But it’s not just individuals who need to invest in themselves. Great cities, states, and nations need to make long-term investments, too. And that’s what we are trying to do in New York.

“When I took office, the city was reeling from a fiscal crisis and a national recession. But by putting the city’s financial house in order, we’ve been able to put New York back on solid ground. Unfortunately, such long-term planning is nonexistent at the national level. We’re just not making the investments in primary health care, into rebuilding our infrastructure, and into homeland security. Will Rogers said – have I mentioned Will Rogers before? – well, he said a lot about those Washington types – but here’s one: ‘When Congress is in session, it feels the same as when a baby gets hold of a hammer.’

“Fifth and finally in the Bloomberg book: ‘Give It To Them Straight.’ You’ve probably heard some professors tell you over and over again during your time here – stick to the facts – and they’re right: there’s no better way to get your point across and win the argument. And even those who disagree with your conclusion will respect you for being honest and having the guts to tell it like it is. We’ve pursued a number of controversial things in New York – but by sticking to

the facts, we've won a lot of people over. Our initiative to ban smoking in bars and restaurants is a great example. You can probably imagine that at the start, I wasn't the most popular person in certain parts of the city. I was even less popular – if you can believe it – than the referees after the O.U./Oregon football game. But now, nothing gives me more pride than when waitresses come up to me in a diner or restaurant, kiss me, and tell me they were originally against the ban but now give me credit for saving their lives.

“Give it to them straight. Again – in my line of work, I think a lot of people need a refresher course. There's simply too much partisanship in government – something I know President Boren agrees with. Today, it's standard operating procedure when Republicans propose an idea, for Democrats to oppose it – and vice versa just because it's not their idea. We watch these leaders repeatedly look to polls rather than to principles. You don't need Will Rogers to tell you that that's not really leadership – and it's not playing it straight.

“So there it is: take risks, don't go it alone, respect others, invest in the future, and give it to them straight. The only five things you need to remember to have a successful life. OK, maybe there's a sixth – don't forget to call your mother. Especially this Sunday – Mother's Day! It's a tough world out there – but I have no doubt that your amazing spirit and the education you received at this incredible institution are going to help you achieve great things. Don't despair if your career path doesn't follow a straight line. There will be ups and downs and sideways. I've been hired and fired, lauded and vilified. I've said brilliant things that just appeared on my tongue and some of the dumbest things you could imagine.

“But each day – even the day that I knew I was going to be fired – was a day I looked forward to because I've always felt that tomorrow will be even better. Anything can happen in life, and probably will. Look around you – that party animal who lived across from you in Walker could be the next Governor Brad Henry. That quiet math major down the hall in Adams, the next Miss America. That bookish grad student, the next James Garner. It's going to be challenging at times – but the world, more than ever, needs your talent, your ideas, your energy, your great enthusiasm. ‘All you really need to know’ is... every one here is proud of you and knows you've got what it takes to find success and live out your dreams.

“Congratulations to you all on this wonderfully joyous day.”