

President Richard Guarasci

*On being awarded an honorary doctorate of humane letters at
Wagner College Commencement, May 10, 2019*

Thank you, Dr. Procci, and thank you to the Board of Trustees. I am deeply honored to receive this recognition. For the past twenty-two years, Wagner College has had my heart. Wagner is so very special to me and it means the world to me to become a permanent part of the wonderful alumni of this College.

As importantly, it means so much to me to be included with all you, the graduates of the Class of 2019. I know so many of you personally and I am quite confident that you are going to achieve many milestones in your careers, and many of you will receive honors similar to this one that I am so humbled to be awarded today. I have great faith in your generation to produce a substantial number of outstanding leaders, which are so badly needed in meeting today's serious social and environmental challenges. Congratulations to each and all of you and to your families that have supported you in your journey to this Commencement.

Today you are graduating from a fine college, and you are well prepared for your next steps in pursuit of a successful career. You have had the benefit of working with a dedicated and accomplished faculty as well as many equally committed administrators, coaches and campus supporters. Some of you may be uneasy about the next steps that await you, whether in graduate or professional education, in your first postgraduate job or as a graduate student looking to increase your professional standing. Some are just looking for that great break to launch a career in performance or athletics. Just like when you began college or graduate education at Wagner, this can be a moment of new beginnings filled with some anxieties.

I want to assure you that you will succeed in your career paths precisely because at Wagner College you have developed certain habits of the mind and of the heart that are the same qualities that correlate with career and professional success. What made you successful here is what will become your intellectual and social foundation in the workplace. Here is what so many of you have learned on this campus and what employers and graduate schools seek in their best colleagues and students.

First, you had to learn to manage your time efficiently, and in doing so you developed a strong work ethic. Your resumes are stuffed with academic, campus and civic obligations. You learned how to manage those efficiently without becoming completely neurotic. For all my time at Wagner, I have watched Wagner students and alumni out-work and out-hustle the competition. You will too.

Secondly, your liberal arts courses taught you to be open to learning new ideas, to be engaged with different cultures from your own, different historical periods, competing value systems, to understand more about the scientific method and the dynamics of the natural world. You learned to not just acquire knowledge as a jumble of facts and theories to be recited, but you have begun to develop the skill of evaluating ideas and arguments and assess the quality and quantity of evidence supporting them. Most importantly, you have developed effective communication skills in writing, speaking and listening. The Wagner Plan and its learning communities put you in cohort groups and you began developing teamwork and collaborative learning skills, which are

so central to almost every profession from healthcare, the performing arts, business, education and social services.

Thirdly, the emphasis on experiential and civic learning at Wagner helped you develop field-based skills in solving real-time problems and an openness to linking theory and practice. This sharpened your problem solving skills. The emphasis on diversity education at Wagner helped so many of you begin to explore your own identities, walk in the shoes of those different from yourself and begin to learn how to work, develop and succeed in inclusive environments. Your civic experiences have taught you how to learn from communities in which you served and how to help them build civic prosperity and personal opportunity in their lives and in yours.

These are essential leadership skills, where leadership is not defined as power or authority over others, but rather as the ability and confidence to bring diverse individuals together across their differences and their unique qualities in achieving extraordinary success.

All of these experiences at Wagner have made you successful here. They form the foundation for success in your eventual profession and in your personal lives. They are your bedrock for success.

You are well prepared, but I believe planning and preparation are engaged in a dynamic dance with luck and serendipity. Chance plays a role in destiny. That one unique opportunity that springs itself on you, and maybe you see it and seize it, or maybe you miss it. I tend to believe that preparation and luck are more entangled with each other than some others believe. One of my favorite quotes, which I firmly believe in, comes from an obscure baseball executive for the old Brooklyn Dodgers, a man named Branch Rickey. The Brooklyn Dodgers were my passion as a young boy growing up in Flatbush. Their star and my hero was the great Jackie Robinson, the man who broke the apartheid system of Major League Baseball that prevented men of color from playing in the big leagues. Branch Rickey was the executive who fought to break the color line, and he recruited Jackie to be that man. When asked if he got “lucky” in finding the exact perfect man and leader to integrate baseball, who possessed the courage to stand up to all of the bile thrown at him and at the same time go on to be the most valuable player in the league, Rickey shot back the quote that I find so helpful and that I want to share with you today. He said, “Lucky? Lucky? Luck is the Residue of Design.” “Luck is the Residue of Design.”

What this means is that you get to take advantage of luck, chance, the big opportunity, if you have prepared yourself first to recognize it, and, secondly, if you have built the habits, knowledge and skills to succeed when it arrives.

This has been part of my life and career, and I suspect the interplay of luck and planning will be part of yours. Here is a story from my career that you may find instructive. I know that some of you may believe that presidents are crowned at birth, and that somehow, when I was born and when the attending physician handed me to my Mom, I became a college president. It doesn't quite work that way. In fact, luck and serendipity plus solid preparation played a big factor in my becoming an academic, and eventually having the good fortune to become Wagner's president and the blessing of being here with you today.

In 1969, when I was pursuing a master's degree in economics at Indiana University, I was accomplished in my field, but largely disillusioned with the emerging direction of economics as strictly a quantitative and mathematical field with very little interest in public policy. I wanted to discuss social change and big issues. I decided that I would complete the master's degree, not

pursue the Ph.D., and then look for employment in a policy area. I had only one more semester and I had completed all the required courses, so I was free to take electives in economics or a related subject. I decide to enroll in three political science courses since I never had the opportunity to take any political science as an undergraduate at Fordham University. I went to the big registration that fall in an old non-air-conditioned field house where over three days 32,000 students would register for their courses. After thirty minutes of administrative details, I found my way to the political science table where I waited on line with about a hundred students queuing up to receive approval and the appropriate registration. When I worked my way to the front, I asked for a course on the U.S. Presidency, another on Congress and the Legislative Process, and a third on International Relations. What I heard was, "Closed, Closed, Closed!" I was outraged, and I insisted that as a graduate student I should have registration priority. After some back and forth with the staff, a middle-aged woman sitting behind them interjected that I should not take those courses. She was knitting calmly, her eyeglasses leaning on the bridge of her nose and a wooden stick ornamentally arranged to hold her hair in a bun. In 1969, my feminist self had not yet emerged and so I was quite skeptical of her advice. She heard that I was about to complete the master's in economics, and she insisted that I take the political science methods and theory course required of all first year Ph.D. students. I responded, somewhat flabbergasted, that this was impossible since those students were star students in political science and I had never ever taken a political science course. She insisted that this was my only choice or I could choose a different discipline from my elective courses.

I took the risk and I registered for the advanced course. I was intimidated at first by the ease and confidence of my seminar classmates. I knew I had to outwork, out think and out perform every last one of them. I aced that course. It turned out that the woman with the knitting was Dr. Elinor Ostrom, Department Chair in Political Science at Indiana University. Her equally famous husband, Dr. Vincent Ostrom, was the instructor of the graduate seminar. I did so well that they offered me a full scholarship and stipend for the Ph.D. in Political Science.

Forty years later, Dr. Elinor Ostrom was the first and only woman to ever receive the Nobel Prize in economics and political economy. We lost touch with each other after graduate school, but I met her soon after her Nobel award when by chance we were both on the same flight back to the States. We reconnected and I told her how all of this turned out for me and the significance of that chance meeting in the Indiana U registration marathon in 1969. I thanked her for taking a chance on me and she said, "you had the right stuff, you just didn't know it yet."

All of this set me on a course to become a College professor, and then after many years of equally enjoyable but hard work as a successful faculty member and later a College Dean, I was fortunate and smart enough to arrive at Wagner and ultimately I was chosen as Wagner's 18th President. So, the point is that if not for that moment of so called "luck" in the hot and humid massive I.U. Old Field House in August 1969, meeting by pure happenstance Dr. Elinor Ostrom, I never would have completed a Ph.D. program; I never would have chosen to be an academic instead of a banker, policy maker or something else; I never would be here today with you.

Here is the point. Luck is the residue of design. I was prepared as a good student with all the skills that you possess today. I wanted a challenge. I wanted to be involved with social change and big policy issues. A moment came, and although I didn't fully recognize all of its possibilities or implications, I took it. My academic preparation and strong work ethic led me to take the risk, ultimately succeed, and here we are together today.

My message is that you are prepared. You have the right stuff. You have acquired more skills and good work habits than you realize. There will be many moments for you in your careers and in your personal lives when “luck will be the residue of design” and you will jump in and who knows where it will take you. I want you to rely on your fundamental assets acquired at Wagner, take confidence from them and be ready for what may appear to others as “luck,” but really boils down to your training and your courage to find your true self.

Just before I end, I have just one small caveat that may be another missing element in all of this. I must account for the importance of those who believe in you. Those people in your lives who will fight for you. For me it was my dearest and best friend, the love of my life since high school, Carin Guarasci. She always believed in me. Those who give you that uncritical commitment, be it your parents, your friends, your siblings, your partner or whomever, they are invaluable, and keep them close. I once said to her, “Carin what if you hadn’t met me and you married one of those fellas who seemed to be taken with you?” As working class kids from Brooklyn, we came from modest beginnings. I said, “You may have married a police officer or a sanitation worker.” She looked at me with those eyes that always get my full attention and said, “Oh Richard, if I married one of them, they would have become college presidents as well.”

So maybe it is luck and planning, but you also may need your soulmate as well.

Congratulations to all of you. You have made my time with you so special. I will think of you often and in some way we will be together, rooting each other on.