

CHARGE TO THE CLASS OF 2016
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BUILDING STRONG COMMUNITIES

My job now is to “charge” the class of 2016, to give the graduating students one last message before we send them on their way.

Before I do, though, let me repeat what I said at the start of this joyous event: To the family and friends who made our graduates who they are, thank you for sharing them, and thank you for supporting them. It has been our privilege to teach them, we are proud to call them our own, and we cannot wait to see what they will do with their lives.

To the class of 2016. This is the fourth time I have had the opportunity to charge a graduating class. As graduation approaches, I try to settle on a theme that is not a Hallmark tagline. You know these: Be yourself! It’s not the destination; it’s the journey! Be humble, be audacious, be grateful! And, of course, here, in the heart of Silicon Valley, we have distinct Hallmark-like phrases: Fail fast! Be entrepreneurial! Change the world . . . by becoming a venture capitalist!

In an effort not to be a Hallmark Card, I’ve gone each year for somewhat *darker* themes. I talked to the class of 2013 about the promise of law and legal training, but also (more importantly) their limits. To the class of 2014, I argued in favor of selfishness. Well, not quite. I argued that, like a professional athlete or concert musician, you must attend to your self if you are to achieve what you hope. To the class of 2015, I talked about what to do if your faith is shaken—your faith in your profession, your community, your country, or your world.

So I have been thinking over these last couple months about today’s charge, and one powerful thought has repeatedly risen to the front of my mind. It is what Polonius says in Act II of Hamlet, and it’s this: “*brevity is the soul of wit.*” **Point taken.**

At the risk of going slightly in the Hallmark direction, the theme that came to me this year is about creating and sustaining strong communities. My question is this: What makes a community where people thrive? This question seems right because your time at Stanford provides some answers to it. To get technical about it, my charge is this: Wherever you land, help create a community where all can thrive.

My hunch that community was a good theme for this class was re-affirmed in the last month. In the last several weeks, I have asked several dozen members of the class of 2016 three questions about your experiences at Stanford:

- What are your best memories of your time here?
- How have you changed since you got here?
- What words would you use to describe this place?

The answers to that third question reaffirmed my thought that “community” was a good theme for this year’s charge. When asked what word you would use to describe Stanford, these are the four most common words you used: community, supportive, tight-knit, and cooperative. The other common words were these: kind, decent, familial, generous, warm, optimistic, freeing, empowering, inspiring.

Supportive, tight-knit, and cooperative? That *really* doesn’t sound like a law school. The *proper* law school words are competitive, challenging, and inhumane. Your words sound like the description of a summer camp, a band trip to Hawaii, or an ideal family.

But law school? Not really. It is not an easy ride, and all of you know it. Alongside these words, you told me much more about your Stanford experience. You said it pushed you to the point of breaking; you said it made you more aware of problems in the world; it made you more open-minded; it made you a better listener; it made you a more rigorous thinker; it made you more humble; it made you more ambitious; it transformed you; it gave you a calling.

Many of those a great things—who doesn’t want a calling?—but none of them are easy rides. No, this has not been a summer camp.

So, how is it possible to combine “pushed to the point of breaking” with words like supportive and cooperative—or more amazingly, optimistic, empowering, inspiring? If we can figure that out, we will know a lot about how to create and sustain a community where all can thrive.

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My theories about this come from our experiences together at Stanford. There are three features that have made for a strong community here, that have connected us to one another and you all to each other, that I think can serve as a model for you as you leave us.

The first one is illustrated by the memory that many of our JD students in the class of 2016 have said will long stay with them.

Here’s the scene. You have just finished your last final during the fall of your 1L year. You pack up your books. You try not to make eye contact with your neighbor because you do not want to have a conversation with her about her answer to question 2—you are certain that you said something wrong. You are exhausted. Yes, you are happy that you’ve made it through, but you cannot fully shake flashbacks of the difficult fall. But, then you hear a low rumble outside. You leave the classroom building to find the pathway lined with hundreds of shouting, cheering, whooping students who you really don’t know.

Why did so many of you identify this memory as important and telling about Stanford? To me, what's key is that the upperclassmen are doing something that they are not required to do, for a group of people they really don't know well. For nearly all of the people who line the exit from the classroom building and cheer you on, they are doing something that is just not in their job description.

Going beyond the job description in this way is something that's pretty common here. You gave me many, many examples in your responses to me.

Of course there are other events like that fall 1L celebration—most obviously, the musical. (Definitely *not* in the job description. In so many ways.) But there are less high-profile examples as well. There are the 20 students who went to see a friend argue an appeal in San Jose. There is the time students spent to make a video to thank their clinical professor. There are the nationally-themed dinners and parties hosted by advanced degree students from Brazil, from Spain, from Korea, and from other countries. There is the large crowd of people who went to see a play brought to campus by a passionate classmate. There is the Rite of Spring last May, organized by Barbara Fried and Tommy Berry—the masters of unceremoniousness, as they put it—featuring performances by students, faculty, staff. And there's laser tag with Mark Lemley. (I mention that mostly so I can hear more about it later.)

And then . . . there is Marcus Bourassa. I know that he was SLA co-president and part of his actual job description during his term was to build community. But this week's talent show? The scavenger hunt? The somewhat unusual commitment to the Jury Box? The reading groups he organized? I don't actually think these things were in the job description. I have focused mostly on students, but I could spend several paragraphs talking about faculty and staff who go beyond what they are expected to do in order to make this place what it is. (Aside, that is, from what I already mentioned about Mark Lemley and laser tag. I *really* do want to hear about that.)

Going beyond the job description is good in itself, but there is something else important about it. It also self-perpetuates a certain kind of culture. When you arrived here, and I arrived here, we looked around. And what did we see? We saw lots of people pitching in in ways they did not have to in order to create something that felt warm, generous, and supportive. And we figured that was normal. So we did it too.

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A community where all can thrive, though, isn't only celebrations, Rites of Spring, and the Jury Box. Communities built only around these things have problems, not the least of which is that they can leave people out; that culture can become an oppressive, not joyful, feature of the community. Separately, the community must feel **open to all**. That means several things—it means welcoming difference, and a capacity for critical self-reflection and change.

When I asked how Stanford has changed you, several of you said the same thing. Before Stanford, you said, there was little space between your own views and that of your friends. Your time at Stanford, you said, has made you more open to and respectful of views that are contrary to your own.

One hopes this happens as a natural part of the law school experience. Law and legal systems do mean, fundamentally, a commitment to reason over force as a way of resolving disputes. Legal training is naturally, then, intended to force you to see and appreciate questions from all sides, and to grapple with arguments you might have previously dismissed.

But there has been something more specific, I think, that has triggered this for members of the class of 2016. Your time in law school has been a difficult time to study law. You all came to law school with optimism about the promise of law and the legal system. But for some of you, that faith has been shaken in these last few years—especially by the role that racial prejudice and collective indifference play in the lives of so many people of color and in the criminal justice system.

And what have you done? You have stepped up. Members of this class helped lead the die in last December, the My Life Matters vigil last February, and your questions and concerns led to the addition of reading groups, classes, practicums, panel discussions—all places where you learned and dug deep on issues of inequality. These events have led to many more conversations about issues of race and justice, and the many challenges we face as a society that relate to inequality.

That is to say, **you** have helped us engage in critical self-reflection, you have changed us, and you have changed each other. The work of your class is a living example of what it means to work toward the aspiration of a truly open community, one that critically reflects on what it does, and is open to change. It's a lesson worth taking with you.

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There is one last lesson about building strong community that I take from your own reflections on your experience. It is something that came through loud and clear in my exchanges with you, and it's what, I think, makes people reach for words like inspiring and decent and empowering when they describe this place. That feature is having many members of the community engaging in **service to others who need it most**.

Service to others was a dominant theme in your responses to questions about your memories, and the way Stanford changed you.

You wrote of winning your first motion for a client and seeing the elated expression on her face; you wrote of getting a picture of your 3-strikes client as he sat in a fast food restaurant just after his release; you wrote of the moment when it was obvious that your mentally-ill client trusted you when he turned to you for advice; you wrote how powerful it was when your client in your refugee pro bono conveyed that you

had restored his hope for the future; you wrote of your joy in knowing that you could be in the corner for your clients; you wrote of your clinic classmate getting a call from the prosecutor, after the first day of trial, and the prosecutor explaining that he was dropping charges against the clinic's client, your classmate putting down the phone, and the entire team sharing in that victory; several of you wrote that you had found your calling and when you realized that you now had the tools to represent people in need.

The thing is, even those of you who did not have that experience directly commented on the joy and pleasure you took in your classmates' service to others, and in their victories. Nearly everyone mentioned the inspiration you found in your classmates and the work that they did.

So I think that is the third leg in the stool of a strong community—it is one where many members engage in this service, and all celebrate it and are inspired by it.

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I told all of you when you arrived that one of the most important things we do is admit and recruit students to Stanford. We spend a lot of time thinking about how to do that right. We don't do that because we care about how you make us look on paper. (Although you do make us look good on paper.) We do that because we are certain you—as people, not as a collection of scores and activities—will change us while you are here, you will teach us something. What you have taught us is how to build a strong community. You've given us a formula that creates community that allows its members to thrive—members of the community go beyond the job description in creating a warm and supportive community; the members of the community feel free to engage in critical self-reflection and prompt change; and many are devoted to service to others and all celebrate and are proud of that service.

Let me get back to my job here. My charge to you is to take lessons from this place, and translate them wherever you land. In some places, you will find thriving schools, communities and workplaces and you will need to help sustain them. In other places, you will find something much more challenging—broken communities. It is a **big** lift to make changes to such a community because so little of what I've talked about is embodied in rules or the structure that could be changed. Instead, it's rooted in norms, attitudes, and the way people interact with each other 1:1 even when they are challenged or under stress. So much of it is about modeling action that others will learn from.

Class of 2016, we know you can do it. And we, the faculty and staff at Stanford Law, cannot wait to see how it goes.