

Commencement Address
By Kathleen Pavelko, President & CEO, witf Public Media
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Chancellor Kulkarni, members of the faculty and staff, friends and family, graduates... Good Morning.

I am proud to be twice a Penn State alumna, and it is my distinct honor to speak to you on the day you achieve the enviable status of Penn State graduate. Perhaps, like me, you are the first in your family to graduate from college. Perhaps you are the latest in a long Penn State tradition. But I can tell you from experience that your Penn State degree will be an asset of lifelong value and meaning...and, as I will discuss later, a reminder that, to whom much is given, much is expected.

I'd like to start by sharing greetings from my friends in public radio and television. Sesame Street would like you to know that your Commencement is brought to you by the letter "C" and by the numbers "20" and "12."

The Car Talk guys—that's Click and Clack the Tappit Brothers--are using your diplomas to shame several of their nieces and nephews who haven't yet completed their degrees. They also told me to tell you that they have an answer to your question about the transmission on your '98 Corolla. // *You need a new car.*

I have one more greeting, but I'll save that for later.

Franklin Roosevelt had three excellent rules for speeches: Be sincere, Be brief, Be seated. I would add a fourth: *Be personal.* I will do my best to follow all four rules today.

My subject today is time...something I call "time horizon."

Human Resources professionals will tell you that the differences between jobs are best described by such things as experience, skills and responsibilities. And these characteristics certainly do matter. As the CEO of a public media organization, my Penn State undergraduate and graduate degrees are

relevant credentials, as are my years of experience as a journalist, producer, production executive and chief operating officer.

But I've come to understand another very important way to differentiate career responsibilities: it's the time horizon that's associated with the position. And the difference between **witf's** receptionist and its CEO isn't just education or experience. It's time horizon.

Let me explain. A receptionist's time horizon is about 30 seconds, because that's when the next call will be coming in. Our radio reporters have a 1-hour time horizon before their next newscast. Our television producers have a weekly time horizon, because that's when the next television program will be broadcast. Middle managers typically have a 1-year time horizon, because they manage fiscal-year budgets. Senior managers think in 5-year, strategic plan-sized increments. And I define my time horizon, as CEO, to be as long as the organization's life-span.

A change in time horizon results in a profoundly different way of thinking. I arrived at WITF when the organization was already 36 years old...It is now just 2 years away from its 50th Anniversary. My job is to lead the organization in such a way as to make it thrive when it's 150 years old. I think of myself as the steward of WITF for a particular stretch of time—an eventful and important one, I would submit, but just one phase of its existence.

This means making decisions with long-term viability in mind, and putting both opportunities and challenges into a historical context. When I proposed to the board shortly after my arrival that we should raise \$20 million to build a public media center, and to serve our community and technical needs, board members pointed out that the most the organization had raised in the past was just \$650,000. Sobering thought.

But I reminded them that the organization had been founded with a \$5,000 grant from the Ford Foundation. Back in 1963, the founders could not have imagined digital television, mobile apps or the internet. But they did envision using media for lifelong education—to enrich lives from the

earliest years to elder maturity. And our founders were right about that mission, even if they couldn't possibly predict the delivery methods for it.

Taking the long view is essential in times of challenge. When the state of Pennsylvania cut all funding to public media back in 2010, it was a huge financial blow to **witf** and required a significant layoff of staff. It was, without question, the worst time in my professional life. But I knew that **witf** had been through hard times before, and I had confidence that the organization would rebound.

It turned out that the real leadership challenge was to restore the staff's belief in the future. I came to understand that my job was to walk around the building with a metaphorical "bucket full of hope." I poured the contents of my bucket into the buckets of the staff—because their buckets were empty and they had forgotten how to fill them up again. To do that, I talked about the future—a lot. We worked on a new strategic plan. We focused on the stories we cover and the programs we produce. And after a while, the staff began to remember how to fill their own buckets with hope, and that's when we began to look forward instead of back.

How has it worked out? Last year, we won the most regional and national awards in our history. And just this week we learned that **witf** had been awarded the equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize for broadcast journalism...the duPont-Columbia Silver Baton for our reporting on the current energy boom here in Pennsylvania.

Part of what motivated me to lead after the loss of state funding was my understanding of **witf's** history and importance in this region. **witf** was founded because of the passion and commitment of educators to use media for education and inspiration, as well as entertainment. **witf** has been sustained over decades by the wise counsel of its board members and the generosity of its donors. It is a touchstone of growing up around here—from generations of Sesame Street viewers to news listeners to the fans of *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me*. I saw my job as protecting this unique resource for the future—not to let the extraordinary effort that created **witf** to go to waste.

Choosing a time horizon has personal as well as professional applicability. You probably thinking a lot about employment right now...the job you've gotten or the job you are seeking. Many times, the first job in your field is a matter of serendipity than strategy...you take the job that's offered. And that's just fine.

But there are also moments when you need to plan with a longer time horizon in mind. And here's the story of my moment: I was 28 years old. I had been hosting public television news programs for four years—daily shows, weekly shows, live shows, taped shows in small markets and on a statewide network. I was getting better at it and I faced a choice: should I try for a national gig as an anchor, in either public or commercial television? That would have meant moving from market to market, putting myself in the hands of producers and executive producers, and competing in a very tough world in which ambition, looks and luck mattered in almost equal amounts.

So I asked myself these questions: Did I want to be reading someone else's copy for the rest of my career? Keep in mind that broadcast anchors aren't in charge of their programs and don't shape the flow of news—and I very much wanted to be in charge. Anyone who knows me says that's a distinguishing characteristic!

But I also asked about the time horizon: what were the chances that I'd still be on the air at 50...and beyond? At the time, in the early 80s, I could think of only one woman of that age on the national scene—Barbara Walters. Not exactly a long list of trailblazers to follow. And I wanted to stay in journalism for the rest of my career.

I asked just one other question: did I have what it took to be an "A" level anchor—would I be nationally competitive in talent and looks and ambition? And I had to admit that, in good Lake Wobegon fashion, that while I was above average, I probably wasn't an A-level anchor.

And so I decided to plan my career on a 35 or 40 year horizon, seeking positions in production and in management. /// I'm now over 50 and I'm still in journalism, working with great stories and great staff. And I'm pleased to say that it is now more likely that a woman over 50 will still

be on the air—there’s Margaret Warner hosting the PBS Newshour, this region’s own Kim Lemon at WGAL and Diane Sawyer on ABC World News. Still few enough to count on one hand, but a better representation than when I first surveyed the field.

Based on this story, it may sound as if I had it all worked out, with a straight line from there to here. Not even close. I didn’t expect to work in North Dakota, or to fight the Red River flood there. The year or so I spent organizing on-air pledge drives wasn’t a high point. But I had a long term goal in mind, and most of the phases fit into that plan.

So my question for you is, what’s your time horizon? If you tell me that it’s the next 30 minutes until you cross this stage, that’s OK! It’s a great accomplishment. But your personal time horizon is a longer one...so I encourage you to get beyond the conventional question of “what do you want to be doing in 5 years” and think about 30 years, or 50 years, in both your personal and professional life.

Looking at your future through that lens can yield intriguing insights. What does a less-than-ideal short term job matter if it supports a long term goal? If you put off travel abroad now, how will you manage it later, when you might be married and have kids? Will your profession be around in 30 years, and if it isn’t, will you be able to transition to another? I think one of the great benefits of your Penn State education is that you will be prepared for that possibility.

Whatever you will be doing in your 10 or 20 or 50 year future, you will owe a great deal to the large number of individuals--from your family to this University to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania—who have invested a great deal in you. Penn State Harrisburg is a jewel in this region’s educational crown, and each of you is about to venture forth armed with an excellent education and a widely respected credential to position you for success in your chosen fields.

How will you repay that investment? You can start giving back by giving thanks. ...and the place to start that is in this room. All around you are the people who have devoted themselves to you and your future—teachers, parents, friends and family. They should hear from you, both today and in the future.

Saying thank you is a funny thing. It means a great deal when it is offered immediately. But it also means a great deal when it comes many years later. Every teacher in this room can tell you what it feels like when a student, long ago graduated, reaches out to say: you probably don't remember me, but you changed my life. And sometimes you don't remember the student but you never forget that phone call.

I had a student thank me twenty years later for making him work on a group project with someone he really detested. He said he never learned to like the person but the assignment did prepare him for a world in which collaboration is the default operating system.

Repaying the investment in you means making an investment in others. Young professionals like yourself are in big demand—truly!—as mentors, as board members for non-profit organizations, and as volunteers. You have some of the qualities most in demand: youth, energy, social media savvy, and a different way of looking at problems. Age diversity is one the least appreciated kinds of diversity, and would make a difference to everything from the Salvation Army board to the Chamber of Commerce.

If you think that non-profit board members consist entirely of deep-pocketed community leaders, think again. Every member should expect to make a financial contribution, but the real gifts are your time and effort. If you will show up, take responsibility, ask others to help—that's how we build community and solve problems.

That great Prairie philosopher Garrison Keillor said he went to college to “get a life.” I think he meant that he wasn't likely to find a life in Anoka, Minnesota. I went to college from Allentown, Pennsylvania for pretty much the same reason. And now here you are, about to receive a Penn State degree that marks you as a person of achievement and worth. If you add in the support of your families, the inspiration of your teachers, and your personal passions, you have everything you need to succeed.

I'd like to end with one more greeting from an icon of public television, the late Mr. Fred Rogers. I had the honor to meet him and hear him speak several times. I have never met a person, before or since, who was so able to connect—directly, personally—with another human being, whether it was the child in front of him or an audience of public media professionals.

One of the occasions I saw Fred Rogers was when he received the Pennsylvania Founders Award at an event in his honor in the Rotunda of our Capitol in Harrisburg. Governor Ridge was there, and a huge turnout of legislators, and lots of legislators' children and grandchildren. And after the presentation was made, Fred came right off the podium and made a beeline for the children. There was no one else in the room for him than each child, and each of those children basked in his undivided attention and love.

At this time of national sadness, when our hearts are broken by the events in Newtown, Connecticut, it's appropriate to remember something Fred Rogers said.

Fred said: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of "disaster," I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world." End quote.

Be a helper. Be one of those people who are always helping. Mr. Rogers' greeting is this: he wants to you to be his neighbor--in the Neighborhood of caring people.

Thank you for inviting me to be a part of this landmark occasion.