Thank you, President Eisgruber, for that gracious introduction. And thank you for your visionary leadership of this beloved institution. I used to think that my old job of managing the President’s Cabinet was difficult, but that’s nothing compared to managing 80,000 alumni who all think they know how to run a university.

Before I begin, let me apologize for being a bit out of sorts today. Just now, I was held down by your classmate Caraun Reid, so a nurse from McCosh could give me a meningitis shot. And boy, is my arm killing me.

I’m also out of sorts today because I was told that if I wanted to fit in with the Class of 2014, I should wear a monocle. But I have to tell you that I can’t see a darn thing with it.

Graduates, parents, faculty, and trustees, it is a thrill for me to be part of this historic occasion. Previous Baccalaureate speakers have included Queen Noor, Bill Bradley, Michael Bloomberg, and Ben Bernanke. When you look at this list of distinguished world leaders, the name Chris Lu doesn’t exactly jump out at you.

Go ahead. Admit it. When most of you heard I was going to be the speaker, I’m guessing you were a bit disappointed.

But it could be worse. Two years ago, the graduation ceremony at the University of Vermont culminated with a song performed by SpongeBob SquarePants. Imagine spending four long years earning a college degree only to be serenaded by a cartoon character. Now, that’s a speaker worth protesting.

Twenty-six years ago, my Princeton classmates and I were sitting where you are, feeling the same sense of queasiness that you’re probably feeling. It wasn’t just from three days of revelry. It was also the swirl of emotions that surrounds graduation: sadness about saying goodbye; anxiety about starting a new chapter; and excitement about the many possibilities that lie ahead.

In two days, you will walk out FitzRandolph Gate, and you will confront the same hard choices that my classmates and I faced – what careers should you pursue, what personal sacrifices should you make, and most importantly, how should you balance the desire to do well – and do good. Throughout my career, I’ve wrestled often with this conundrum of how to do well and how to do good. And each time I’ve reflected upon it, I’ve thought back to my parents.

My mom and dad were born in China, and they immigrated to this country as teenagers. My dad was an orphan, and he was able to come to the United States only because a small Methodist college in Tennessee gave him a scholarship.

My dad traveled by boat to this country and landed on the West Coast, with little money in his
pocket and even fewer words of English in his vocabulary. He boarded a Greyhound bus in Washington state, headed for Tennessee. When the bus stopped in small towns along the way so passengers could buy food, the only thing my dad knew how to order in English was a hamburger and a glass of milk.

So that’s what he ate, three meals a day, for the entire week-long bus trip – hamburgers and milk. Fifty years later, the son of that immigrant went to work each morning at the White House. That is quite a journey for one generation. But it’s no different than the journey that many of you have traveled to this day.

One of your classmates, Farrah Bui, grew up in a small town in South Carolina, the daughter of Vietnamese immigrants who fled their war-torn country. Farrah is the first person in her family to graduate from college, and her parents taught her that “education is the great equalizer.”

Jenesis Fonseca has a similar story. Her parents came to the U.S. from Mexico as teenagers, and she is the first person in her family to earn a college degree. Jenesis told me about the people who helped her get to this day. She said: “I can never repay them for their advice and encouragement, but I can try to give generously to others in the same way.”

When Farrah and Jenesis told me their stories, I heard echoes of my own parents’ values.

During my sophomore year at Princeton, a magazine interviewed my father for a story about how middle-class families were struggling with the cost of higher education. My dad told the reporter about the vacations he and my mother hadn’t taken and the new cars they hadn’t bought – all so they could pay for my tuition.

When the reporter asked my dad why he was making these sacrifices for my brother and me, my dad answered simply yet powerfully: “I’ve told my sons that your education is your inheritance.”

That is a line worth repeating. “Your education is your inheritance.”

Notice my father used the word “inheritance.” He didn’t say “gift,” and there’s a big difference between these two words.

An inheritance is something that your parents spend a lifetime accumulating. It is not something to be squandered. Unlike a gift, there are strings attached to an inheritance. There are responsibilities implied. An inheritance is something you grow and pass on to the next generation.

Recently, there has been a lot of talk around here about what it means to “check your privilege.” But, consider this point: regardless of your family background when you first arrived on campus, each of you is now privileged. Each of you is inheriting a Princeton education that was made possible by the enormous sacrifices of your parents, grandparents, teachers, and everyone who has supported you along the way.
So, the question I ask all of you today is this: how will you make the most of this inheritance of a Princeton education?

Let me suggest one possible answer: devoting part of your life to public service.

In 1914, almost a century ago to the day, President Woodrow Wilson spoke at a Memorial Day event, and he said this: “We never call a man ‘noble’ who serves only himself. . . .[W]e elevate those who are the noble men of our race, who, forgetful of themselves, study and serve the public interest.”

Now, I realize that a career in public service might seem daunting. The problems that our society faces today are significant, varied, and complex, and the solutions are nuanced and do not fit neatly on a bumper sticker. And, given all of the negativity and cynicism about our political system, you would be right to question whether government service is really the best way to address the great challenges of our time. Well, let me tell you about a few people who might change your opinion.

Every fall, there is a glitzy awards ceremony in Washington, D.C. It’s a little like the Academy Awards – there’s a red carpet and people dressed in formal wear. But the honorees are not celebrities. They are everyday government employees who are doing extraordinary work.

Last year, the honorees included two researchers at the National Institutes of Health who figured out how to detect and contain infections that kill 100,000 hospital patients each year.

There was a doctor at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who helped eradicate polio in India by providing vaccines to 172 million children.

Then, there was the team at NASA that built and landed the Curiosity rover on the surface of Mars.

And there was Tony Mendez, who spent 25 years in the CIA creating disguises and cover stories for spies. Tony’s greatest success was portrayed in the movie “Argo,” when he rescued six Americans during the Iranian Hostage Crisis.

So, for anyone who tells you that public service is not a worthwhile way to spend your life, think about these government employees who harnessed their passion to better their country and their world.

As for me, I have not landed any objects on other planets. I have not eliminated any diseases – at least not yet. But, I have been blessed with a career that has taken me through all three branches of the federal government, three Presidential campaigns, a Presidential transition, the White House, and my current role as the Deputy Secretary of Labor. And, in each of these positions, I have seen first-hand how young people, like you, can alter the course of history by being the driving force behind policies and programs that promote greater innovation, opportunity, and inclusion.
But public service is more than just government service.

You can work for a non-profit organization that promotes affordable housing or protects the environment. You can be a high school teacher. You can work as a medical researcher to develop life-saving drugs. You can serve your country in the military, as all three of my freshman year roommates did through ROTC.

All of that is also public service.

But here’s the thing: you can work on Wall Street or in Silicon Valley – and earn a lot of money – and still be engaged in public service.

At the dawn of the 20th century, the great industrialists of the day amassed fortunes that they used for the public good. They created universities like Stanford and Vanderbilt. They funded organizations like the Ford Foundation to tackle global problems. In towns all across the country, philanthropists like Carnegie and Rockefeller built libraries and museums and, as all of you know, even lakes.

In the 21st Century, the modern-day Rockefeller is a Harvard dropout who founded the world’s largest software company and is now using his wealth to fight AIDS, malaria, and polio around the world.

So, public service does not take one form. It does not depend on where you work, how much you earn, or what you wear to work. It can be a full-time profession, or it can be something you do on weekends. You can work for a high-tech start-up and spend your weekends volunteering at your church or local food bank.

To make a difference, all it takes is a few hours each week. You could easily spend as much time binge-watching House of Cards or Scandal.

At its core, public service is a mindset. It is a commitment to address the problems of our time – and not simply pass those problems on to the next generation. It is a desire to reach beyond your circle of friends to help people who you’ve never met.

It is the recognition, as Barack Obama once said, that “we are all connected as one people” and “[i]f there is a child on the south side of Chicago who can’t read, that matters to me, even if it’s not my child.”

And public service is asking – as young people asked a half century ago – what you can do for your country – and not simply waiting to be asked.

It is this same passion for helping others and solving great challenges that has motivated the leaders who have graced this stage in the past. The economics professor who as the chairman of the Federal Reserve helped prevent another Great Depression. The billionaire who as the mayor of the nation’s largest city advocated for broad social change. The Hall of Fame basketball star
who as a U.S. Senator fought for a more fair tax system. The architecture major who as a queen worked to bridge the divide among people of different cultures and religions.

Ben Bernanke, Michael Bloomberg, Bill Bradley, Queen Noor – not all of them are Princeton alumni. Yet each has lived a life that exemplifies what it means to be in the nation’s service—and in the service of all nations. As Queen Noor said in her Baccalaureate address in 2000: “There is no life more well-lived than that spent in service to others.”

My father was no Bloomberg; he was no Bill Gates. So for him and my mother, saving money for an Ivy League education was their life’s mission. But, like those great benefactors, my father understood that the best investments often are not flashy. The best investments often do not produce quick returns.

When my father passed away a few years after I graduated, he had seen only a tiny glimpse of how I would use the inheritance he had provided me. Yet, he understood that my Princeton education would pay dividends for years to come, in ways that still surprise me to this day.

In this same way, if you decide to use your education to address the broader challenges facing our world, the impact of your actions might not be apparent to you for many years—if ever.

But by looking beyond yourself, by understanding how we are all connected as one people, by fighting for greater opportunity for all, and by continuing the legacy of progress that defines our nation, you choose the better history of this proud university and its graduates.

It is at that moment when you begin to realize the full value of your inheritance.

Class of 2014, we’re expecting great things from all of you. Congratulations and good luck.