



Senior Convocation Address by Dr. Katie Daniel, Class of 2012

Good morning, everyone. My name is Katie Daniel, and I'm a licensed clinical psychologist and an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences at the University of Virginia. I graduated from Charlotte Country Day School back in 2012, which means it has been fifteen years since I sat where you are sitting, absolutely freaking out about what my future held and how college admissions was going to go for me.

Now, the Country Day administration asked a clinical psychologist who specializes in anxiety to give this address. So, I'm afraid I'm contractually obligated to touch on themes related to mental health. But stick with me. There's a soccer story later.

I'll start by stating the obvious. College admissions is anxiety-provoking. It's inherently evaluative, a huge amount of it is not in your control, and you don't know how it is going to play out. Those are the perfect conditions for anxiety to take over.

Now most people—myself included—don't like feeling anxious. It's uncomfortable. So, it's natural that you are going to try to do things to help yourself feel less anxious during this year...to restore a sense of control, to regain a sense of certainty that things will go your way.

One way you can do this is to focus on setting and accomplishing goals. Hit this SAT or ACT score. Join the *perfect* extracurricular. Write an *amazing* personal statement. THEN you'll get into the *right* school. Phew, a sense of control is restored, and anxiety might get a little bit quieter.

But what happens if one of those goals doesn't go your way? What happens if you accomplished all of your goals and you still don't get into the school you wanted?

Being goal-driven is not a bad thing. Goals are helpful. They focus us and they motivate us. But a goal is and either/or: you either hit it or you don't. And even if you hit one, that doesn't guarantee that you'll hit the next one.

And when your whole sense of control is built on a very narrow path marked by very specific goals, it creates this sense of urgency where it's like you HAVE to keep achieving each goal, one after the other. One bad test day, one rejection letter and now anxiety tells you that the path you planned is blocked and your whole future is in jeopardy. And woooooshh, the very anxiety you were trying to push down by setting all those goals comes rushing back. That rush of anxiety is inevitable when the only thing you're standing on is outcomes.

So, I want to offer you a second thing to stand on during this year. Not *instead* of goals, but alongside them. It's the idea of values.

A value is not something you achieve. It's a direction you move in. It's the answer to a different question... not "what do I want to get?" but "what kind of person do I want to *be* while I go after it?" Values are qualities like curiosity. Kindness. Courage. Loyalty. Creativity. Health. Honesty. Craftsmanship. Showing up for the people you love. Being someone who keeps learning even when it's hard.

Here's the way I hold it in my head. Goals are destinations. Values are the compass. A destination is a place you arrive at and cross off the list. You can either get there, or you can't. But *west* is not a place that you ever arrive. You never finish going west. You just keep choosing it, mile after mile, wherever you happen to be.

So what does that mean? It means that while **you can fail to reach a goal, you cannot fail a value**. There is no world in which you “complete” kindness, or “run out of” curiosity, or get waitlisted from generosity. A value is not something a committee grants you or takes away. No test score can give it to you, and no rejection letter can revoke it. It is yours, on your best day and your worst one.

Which brings me to the soccer story.

When I sat in your seats, I had A Plan. I was a soccer player, recruited and headed towards a Division I program. And I had built basically my entire identity out of a single goal. *College Athlete*. That was the narrow path that I was standing on, and it seemed like it was going to happen.

And then, between my junior and senior year, I got a concussion. And then another. And then five of them. And at some point, a doctor sat me down and told me that the thing I had organized my whole life around was over. No more soccer. Not in college. Not really ever again.

Now, that absolutely sucked. Because here's the thing, I had done everything *right*. I worked as hard as I possibly could, gave it everything, and it still didn't go the way I wanted.

Losing soccer knocked me off the path of becoming a college athlete. But it also forced me to get to know myself better by asking a question I'd never considered before. Underneath the *goal* of playing D1 soccer, what did I *value*? Looking back on that question, the answer wasn't “soccer” specifically. What mattered to me was being part of a team. Pushing myself toward something hard. Discipline. Being the person my teammates came to for support and encouragement.

Soccer was one path that I had been taking to live out those values. But thankfully, it wasn't the only path for me. Those values pointed in a lot of directions that didn't involve soccer. One of the directions they pointed to is *here*... to a career where I get to push

myself, be part of a team in my research center, and offer support to people when their lives are at their most challenging.

Now, I don't subscribe to the belief that everything happens for a reason. Sometimes things happen for no reason and then you just have to deal with it. But, I am standing in front of you as a clinical psychologist and assistant professor of psychiatry *because* I found a new path to take that lets me authentically live out some of the things that mattered to me most when I was 17 and still matter to me today.

Through this story I mentioned some of my values, like discipline and supportiveness. But, those may or may not resonate with you.

Everyone holds different values. Some values might stay the same throughout your whole life and others might change. All of that is okay because there are no *wrong* values. They aren't good or bad, they just are. So, you should find your own. And there's no better time to find them than right now.

Time for a thought exercise. I want everyone to do this with me: seniors, parents, teachers. No one is going to make you share, and you can close your eyes or keep them open, whatever's more comfortable for you.

I want you to bring to mind one specific moment when you felt completely like yourself. Not just a moment you won something or got a good grade. A moment when you lost track of time, or walked away thinking, *that mattered, that felt like me, I want to be remembered as a person who is like that.*

Maybe you were helping a friend who was having a tough time. Maybe you were making something...a drawing, a song, a really good plate of food. Maybe you were fixing something that at first seemed helpless, like a bug in some code you were working with or a leak in your shower. Maybe you were summitting a mountain after a long hike or singing happy birthday to a friend.

Go back as far in your life as you need.

Have you got it? Good. Now here's the important question. Don't ask *what* you were doing. Ask *who were you being*? What quality were you bringing into that moment? Were you being curious? Loyal? Brave? Focused? Generous? Playful? Creative? Were you connecting with someone or standing up for something?

That quality, that's a value. And notice: it is *not* the thing you did or accomplished. The friend, the song, the practice, the plate of food...those are destinations that come and go. That path may or may not stay open to you. But the quality you brought to it? The value itself that underlies the thing that you were doing? *That* is always with you, no matter what path you're on.

You can carry loyalty into a dorm room, a job, a friendship that you haven't made yet. You can carry curiosity into any college major or into any trade. That doesn't mean you are always going to be living out your values perfectly in every moment of life—that's an incredibly high bar that no one meets. But it does mean that you can always come back to your values no matter what else is going on in your life.

So, here's what I want for you this year. Keep your goals. Chase them, work for them; it is good to want things. But know what's *underneath* them, too. Because if one specific school says no, and for some of you, one will, the *value* doesn't say no. It is still available at the next school and through a hundred different paths that you can't see from where you're sitting today and that has nothing to do with college.

A goal-focused life asks: "Did I get what I wanted?" A values-aligned life asks: "Am I moving in a direction I'm proud of?" The first question, you can fail. The second one, you can answer *yes* to no matter what, even if the pathway towards it changes. A values-aligned life isn't an anxiety-free life, but it sure makes you a lot less vulnerable to life's setbacks.

Seniors, this year is going to be hard, and confusing, and at moments it is going to feel like everything is riding on the next thing. Some of that pressure is real. And some of it is just a story that anxiety is very good at telling. But this year is also going to be **fun** and a great opportunity to get to know yourself a little bit better as you figure out why the heck you're pushing for all of these goals in the first place. And as you decide which directions you want to move in.

Parents and teachers, these seniors are going to need you this year, not just for your opinions on where to apply and how to get in, but also to remind them who they are and who they are becoming if an envelope tries to tell them otherwise. As the people who help them find other paths to take that feel right if the one that they had been focused on closes.

I'll leave you with this: Go be who you want to be. The schools will sort themselves out along the way.

Thank you, and congratulations on making it to senior year.