Well, thanks, President Nikias, Dean Ellis, ladies and gentlemen, award winners, honored award recipients, and most importantly graduates of the Class of 2011.

I was particularly fired up to get the opportunity to speak today at President Nikias' first commencement. I'm not quite sure what the USC traditions are to schedule a man's first commencement on Friday the 13th. And I'm kind of a little nervous. I'm a little superstitious. I was working on a big project early this week. I was afraid I might not be able to be here. I thought I might have to Skype in. I'm glad to be here today. By the way, to all the families and graduates, post-graduation please Skype on.

I want to start with congratulations to all of the graduates of the Class of 2011. It's really quite amazing, it's a journey, people will describe it, but at the end of the day I want you to just take one minute and celebrate it, because you deserve it, baby, to the Class of 2011. And to all the parents and family who are here, I know you deserve it.

Until about two years ago, I didn't know much about USC. I had never even been on the campus. So, you can call me, if you will, a newbie. I first visited two years ago. I have a son who just finished his freshman year here at USC. I have to tell you, it's an infectious place. It is really an infectious place. I feel like I really drank the USC Kool-Aid. I show up here for my first Parents Weekend, run into this sort of primitive ritual called the Tailgate. I proceed to a game against the University of Washington in my backyard where I've lived for 31 years, and I'm sitting there with Dean Ellis going, "come on Trojans." We won't discuss the outcome.

I also have to tell you, a guy I know in Seattle has a son who goes to the school down the street here, UCLA. And I saw him the other day, yes, that's right. I saw him the other day, and he starts chirping at me, chirp, chirp, chirp. I said, "I'm going down to USC to speak." Chirp, chirp, chirp, UCLA better, chirp, chirp, chirp. I had it. I whip out my Windows Phone, I Bing the university rankings, and I just show it to him right there in black and white, USC 23 - UCLA 25. So, I've had the Kool-Aid.

I come here today imbued with a lot of optimism. I'm naturally, it's kind of my personality, a very optimistic personality. And yet, I'm also optimistic because of the opportunity I've had to work in the field of information technology. Information technology has shaped the world. Information technology has been able to advance the world in a way that's like none other, frankly, in human history. We're sitting here 60 years, essentially, after the introduction of the first computer. And yet the amount of invention and creation that is continuing to go on to make society smaller, to lead to advances in science, and medicine and education, in communications, in media, is really quite remarkable.

I would ask the parents who are here to think back to about the time you would have been college age. Try writing a term paper without a word processor and without the Internet. That was the world we grew up in. And, of course, it's inconceivable today.
When I decided to go to Microsoft, I was actually in the middle of an academic program. I was going for an MBA. And a friend of mine, Bill Gates, who I had gone to college with, he says, "Hey, Steve, why don't you drop out and come join me?" Drop out? My father didn't go to college. Dropping out, bad idea.

So, I went home and I told my mom and dad, I think I'm going to drop out, join a tiny little company, friend of mine. But, boom, my parents jump in. They said, "What do they do?" Software. Software for personal computers." My father comes up out of his chair. "What's software?" Pretty inconceivable today. My other asked an even more interesting question for the year 1980: "Why would a person ever need a computer?" The opportunities that are proceeding are really quite amazing. And I don't think there would be any better time to really come out of school, and have a chance to make a difference across a broad variety of fields.

Our industry, boom, we're driving forward. We're going to be creating new things. And certainly I had a chance to talk to about 30 Trojans last night who will all be joining Microsoft after graduation. The kind of optimism with which we can talk about the opportunities is incredible. And that same technology base is going to help, as I said, in so many other fields.

I would like you to think about here things, three things that I've had a chance to decide are really important based upon the time I've spent at Microsoft, and I've spent in the information technology industry. Number one, great ideas matter. Number two, find passion. And, number three, be tenacious, be irrepressible. Those three things are just, boom, bake them in, that's what I encourage at least my poor freshman son to do, bake them in. They'll really take you a long way.

Microsoft was really founded on a single good idea, an insight, a direction that Bill Gates and Paul Allen had that nobody had had. The microprocessor is a form of free intelligence, and with the right software there will be a computer on every desk, and in every home. And now we can say every pocket and every television set, and every everything.

And even today that same fundamental idea and where it can take us remains infinitely powerful. Another way to sort of grab this idea about ideas and direction, I like a quote from Wayne Gretzky. He says, good hockey players skate to where the puck is; great hockey players will skate to where the puck is going to be. Ideas and direction really matter, and you had an opportunity here at USC to be educated, to be exposed, to pick up so much that will give you the insights and the ideas that will matter to you and to the world as we move forward.

Second, find passion. This is not an easy one. People think passion is something you either have or you don't. People think passion is something that has to manifest itself in some kind of explosive and emotional format. It's not. It's the thing that you find in your life that you can care about, that you can cling to, that you can invest yourself in, heart, body, and soul. Finding passion is kind of your job now.

It's been your job the last four years at USC, or shorter, or longer, depending on which program you're in. And it's your job as you go forward into the world. You won't necessarily find it the minute you get out.

I think about my own personal sort of discovery of passion. I didn't come to the technology industry naturally. I wrote my first computer program in ninth grade, and I hated it. I was shy as a kid. I don't think that I qualify on that anymore. I got to college and I was going to be a physicist or a mathematician. I decided I had way too little patience after about the end of my freshman year, and I groped for other things to do.

The thing that switched me on, actually, I was the football manager for our college football team. And I discovered through that that I like to organize things, that that was kind of my passion. I got out of college, as many of you are and I went to work for a great company, and I found I didn't
have the patience to work marketing brownie mixes and cake mixes. I had to give it up after a year or two.

Then by luck, as I was thinking about a career in the movie business, another business that I thought might match my patience and attention span, my buddy called and I was introduced to this fast paced, wonderful industry, where I could be a little organizer of a 30-person company from day one. And I found my passion. It takes a lot of trial and error. It takes a lot of experimentation. Find your passion, so that every day you can get up, even on the bad days you can get up and say, I really do love what I'm doing. This really does fire me up.

And last but not least, be tenacious. I actually prefer the word irrepressible, but everybody I ran the speech by says it's too hard for people to get. But, irrepressible is kind of tenacious, but with optimism. You just have it in you. You keep going and going. You could say, isn't that the same as passion. It's not. Passion is the ability to get excited about something. Irrepressibility and tenacity is about the ability to stay with it. If you take a look at all of the companies that have been started in our business, most of them fail. If you take even a look at the companies that have succeeded, Microsoft, Apple, Google, Facebook, you name it, all of these companies went through times of hardship. You get some success. You run into some walls. You try a formula for a new idea, a new innovation, it doesn't work. And it's how tenacious you are, how irrepressible, how ultimately optimistic and tenacious you are about it that will determine your success.

I happen to think that's a good lesson. It's not just a lesson in our business. It's not just a lesson that we learned with our Xbox product, or our this, or our that. It's a lesson that implies whether you're going into science, or medicine, or business, or any other walk of life. Ideas matter, find your passion, and be tenacious.

One question I think you've got to ask sitting here today is, how did USC do in preparing you for that, by my kind of short period of time to analyze I'd say awfully darned well. You've had a chance to explore academically. You've had a chance to explore through extracurricular activities, through athletics, through social things. You've had a chance to develop ideas and opinions that might matter, that you can take forward into the world.

But, I actually think it's on this notion of passion, tenacity that perhaps USC is most special. To me USC seems to have a culture that promotes passion, that promotes tenacity, that promotes irrepressibility. I've had a chance over the last couple of years to meet a number of teachers, men and women, who have a chance to work with students here at USC, including a new neighbor of mine lives a few houses down the street, Pete Carroll. I have never met a more passionate, irrepressible human being. He happens to work for one of the founders of Microsoft, Paul Allen, who said to me, “I'm not sure what we're going to get when we put you and Pete in a room, Steve, but it's going to literally sing with energy.”

So, I do think USC has a special culture. And, in fact, I think you start learning about passion and tenacity at USC before you ever come here. I think it's the first thing the school teaches. I think you knew it before you ever finished your first tour of the USC campus. The model of this place just sort of, to me, symbolizes passion and tenacity. Fight on, passion and tenacity. Fight on. Passion and tenacity. Fight on.

This is a Steve Ballmer. That's a fight on. This is a class with passion and tenacity. Go get 'em Class of 2011. I know you'll succeed.