Dean Kotlikoff, Distinguished faculty and Colleagues, Parents and Guests, Graduates of the Class of 2013 and Friends:

I once read that to make a good speech, have a good beginning and a good ending, and put them as close together as possible. And so, I will try to be brief!

When I graduated from this College in 1974, I sat on the stage never planning a career in academia, not imagining being on the Cornell faculty, and never dreaming that I would address the graduates of the College. And, though this day is really for you, since the spotlight briefly shines upon me, I’ll pause to reflect on my career and pass on some thoughts as a Charge to the Class of 2013.

First, I offer congratulations to my friends and colleagues in the Class of 2013. Four years of hard work have earned you a seat in this auditorium, a Diploma with your name embossed, and a lifelong challenge to excel in your chosen profession. Second, I extend my gratitude for the Zoetis Teaching Award. I am humbled to stand before you as the recipient knowing full well that there are many teachers at the Veterinary College who are just as worthy, equally dedicated, and who are similarly motivated to pass along their knowledge and experience to students who truly want to learn. It is not hard to teach at the Veterinary College!

I also want to thank Shira Rubin for her kind and eloquent speech at our Awards Gala earlier this week. I will try to live up to all her gracious comments, Thank you Shira!

And, I need to add a big thank you to Annie, my wife of 40 years – next week is our anniversary. Thank you for standing with me through all the challenges of this career; we are looking forward to a long retirement career starting soon!

You know, I've seen quite a few classes mature from first-year student to graduating veterinarian. It's rewarding to watch the class become progressively trained and more confident. I still marvel at the change from fresh-faced, clean-white-coated, somewhat timid, hesitant, new third-years starting in the clinic, to more experienced, not so clean-white-coated, veterans of many rotations, long emergency shifts, countless coffees and rounds, and rounds, and rounds who emerge in the fourth-year. Your heads
swim with knowledge and new experiences, trying to connect it all, understand one more principle, master one more hand-tie, and figure out – when does it become my fault! Well, it’s getting closer! One more review session, one more big exam and I’m through, I’m done, put a fork in it! But, you’re not done - You’re actually just starting. You’re starting a career that demands you keep learning new skills: getting better at surgery, trying new medical treatments, interpreting more medical images, helping more animals and providing a professional service to yet another client. You have learned a new language these past four years. Now comes the time to practice those phrases and add vocabulary until you become literate and graceful in the practice of veterinary medicine. And, don’t forget to add some real life balance too - family, home, business, loans, partners, employees, community; sports; hobbies; social life! Maybe throw in a mid-life crisis someday.

So, what can I tell you today, to help you meet these challenges? Well, there are a few things that keep me going; maybe they'll work for you.

Allow me to read to you a poem written just a little more than a century ago by Rudyard Kipling, titled, "If"; it hangs in my office and will be one of the few items I will take home when I clean out! I’m sure you can “Google it” by the time I’m finished reading.

If...

IF you can keep your head when all about you
   Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
IF you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
   But make allowance for their doubting too;
IF you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
   Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
   And yet don't look too good, or talk to wise:

IF you can dream - and not make dreams your master;
   If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;
IF you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
   And treat those two impostors just the same;
IF you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
   Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
    And stoop and build 'em up with worn out tools:

IF you can make one heap of all your winnings
    And risk it on one turn of pitch and toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
    And never breathe a word about your loss;
IF you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
    To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
    Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

IF you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
    Or walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch,
IF neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
    If all men count with you, but none too much;
IF you can fill the unforgiving minute
    With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
    And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!

Well, that seemed pretty confusing advice when my father first recited that poem to me, which he knew by heart; I was probably five or six years old and wasn't much into poetry anyway. But, now those phrases mean quite a lot to me. The message here is all about:

•  Confidence, honesty, civility and humility
•  It’s all about understanding yourself and respecting others,
•  It’s all about working hard and taking chances, accepting success and failure equally, and moving on to new challenges,
•  It’s all about believing enough in yourself to persevere against the odds you will encounter in life,
•  it’s all about keeping your head screwed on straight, understanding your own fallibility, appreciating relationships and working at the difficult task of having a fulfilling life.

And, if you’ll allow me a clumsy oral footnote to bring this poem into the 21st century: “IF” applies equally to daughters as it does to sons!
For me, these ethics and principles are fulfilled through my career as a veterinarian and a teacher. Though, you earn the veterinarian portion with four years of hard work, the teaching part, I think, takes a little longer to develop. Gradually, you are influenced by parents, friends, and colleagues, and mentors to realize that satisfaction in life comes from helping others learn and succeed even beyond your own successes. My father certainly started me on this path and the distinguished faculty here today and other veterinarians with whom I have worked helped me along. Your careers will also develop over the years. You may start out in primary health care, move into the entrepreneurship of practice, industry, government, research, yes - even education. Let the message from "If" guide your choices - remain true to yourself, respect other people, accept challenges, expect and learn from your failures, persevere in what you know is right, and maintain a healthy perspective on your own mortality.

A friend once told me that every night when you close up shop you should ask yourself, did I have fun today? Did I learn anything?

Whatever career path you choose, I hope all of you will be able to answer YES to those questions. I think that teaching someone something is the best way to satisfy those goals. But, learning and teaching are intertwined. "See one - do one - teach one". This may the most understated truth in education. We may joke about this monkey see - monkey does approach to developing skills but the most important component is the last one. No doubt in my mind, the best way to learn a subject is to have to teach it to someone else. When I was a radiology resident at Penn, my first assignment was lab instructor in Freshman Anatomy. I kept a few days ahead of the class, and I know I re-learned more anatomy than they or I learned the first time. And believe it or not, it was more fun the second time around. After years in practice, I was having a ball relearning all the details I'd forgotten. I definitely left work each day answering YES.

I know each of you have had the experience of watching a technique and feeling insecure. Then you make the first few tries with clumsy fingers, struggle to find the right words, try to remember the sequence of a procedure or logic of a treatment; then it happens, you do it once - it worked and now you are the experienced one. The next person comes along and now you explain the how and why. Confidence grows!

My charge to you is to recognize and remember throughout your career, whatever you do, that when you teach, you learn. And, when you stop passing along knowledge, to clients, to employees, to
colleagues, to whomever, you will cease learning yourself and the career will no longer be fun.

You may know that my career changed from practitioner to radiologist. The change was made because I needed to learn more as daily activities became too much like daily activities. I was advised to write down those things that really made me want to go to work every day. Well, it wasn't the flea speech, or the next neutering procedure, or the next hit-by-car, though I do miss the healthy puppies and kittens. What it boiled down to was the satisfaction gained explaining/teaching things to clients. That's what satisfied me most in practice and armed with that kernel of truth; I changed gears, learned some new skills in imaging and sought a job in education.

This is what you have to do. You have spent a lot of time and money learning a set of new skills. You have to find out what makes you get up in the morning and want to run to work. You have to find out for yourself where the motivation comes from for those long hours and hard work that somehow is fun. There are many career paths you can choose in this profession. Primary care of animals is where many of you will start – and change is where many of you are headed. Learning new skills will be necessary hard work to keep up with the profession. Passing on that knowledge is a part of the learning process and possibly the most satisfying aspect. You can accomplish all this and more with dedication and direction to your career in Veterinary Medicine. Remember the message from “IF” – I’m sure you can find it on the Web, print it out, hang it on the wall, and pass it along. Learn and teach – I think it will make you happy!

Congratulations and best of luck!