You’ll notice the lack of specifics in my introduction; I will probably be employed after graduation, probably be living in Chicago, probably be able to pay my rent. We’ll see. But somehow I was still given the opportunity to speak to you all today, and was forced to look at the specifics of my own undergraduate experience. Mark Twain once said, “I didn’t have the time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead,” and I am going to attempt to follow his implied advice – the same advice our honors professors tried to teach us as freshmen – one final time in my undergraduate career by keeping things brief.

Fellow Honors students, professors, faculty, guests, and any community members who seem to occasionally wander into these things—first, and most importantly, congratulations to all the soon-to-be graduates, and thank you to the wonderful friends, family, teachers, and mentors who helped us get here. We have successfully completed an academic, rigorous, demanding, interdisciplinary honors program (that occasionally made us sleep-deprived, stressed-out, and less-than-caring roommates) while at the same time completing all of Loyola’s additional major-specific and undergraduate requirements. That is undoubtedly impressive.

But this is not going to be “that kind” of speech. I won’t be rattling off the impressive achievements of everyone in this room. We get it, you’re all smart—you’re going to medical school, law school, graduate school, the depths of corporate hell, your room-turned-yoga-studio back home. Everyone here is doing impressive things and we’ve all heard this speech already. Many of us have heard it for 22 years now, ever since we started reading or writing or completing complex chemistry equations at an absurdly young age (I know nothing about chemistry, but I guarantee someone in this room was nerdy enough to be “that kid”). We will probably hear this speech again at graduation, and it will make us feel accomplished, happy, instantly gratified. This speech tells us how incredibly bright we are, how high our grades were, how much information we have been able to absorb, interpret, and write a last-minute paper on because you chose to meet your friends at Bar 63 the night before. But this kind of predictable speech doesn’t really get us anywhere—it’s overwhelmingly surface-level. It sets the bar, but then tells you that you’ve reached it. So congratulations. That’s it. You’re done. Next stop retirement, pension, and Florida, hopefully.

This type of speech strokes our ego, validates our self-centeredness, and although it claims to speak to us as a group, it focuses only on our own – albeit notable – accomplishments, our individual-level triumphs. And although we are all the passionate, unselfish, social justice advocates that Loyola has taught us to be, we often subscribe to this line of thinking, even if just viscerally. I know I certainly have at times. In essence though, this tells us: we came, we saw, we conquered…and that’s it. Now don’t get me wrong; academic achievements are good, personal achievements are good. But the kind of praise we often receive for these accomplishments tells us little about the derivatives, the immeasurable benefits that are far more important than the designation of "honors" on our transcripts, résumés, and diplomas.
The fact is that when I leave this room I am going to be just as unsure about what comes next, regardless of whether I’m praised for hitting high marks, and I guarantee many of you feel the same way. But if this program has taught us anything it is that its gains are not to be measured solely by our grades on papers, tests, or in hard courses.

I recently read a piece in the New York Times in which columnist David Brooks offers an explanation for what he perceives as our two sets of “self”: a résumé self and a eulogy self. On one hand, our “résumé virtues” are the academic accomplishments and career skills we’re about to bring to the job market. On the other hand, our “eulogy virtues” – kindness, courage, honesty, humility, thoughtfulness – are those that will leave a lasting impact on others, and on the world. This may seem like a grim and trite distinction, and may be clichéd in this particular context, but I think it’s an important one nonetheless. However, Brooks criticizes our educational systems for focusing more on “how to build an external character than on how to build inner character.”

But the Honors Program has worked to defy this claim: we have built inner character. We hear the word “millennial” thrown around, usually intended as a euphemism for unmotivated, lazy, or selfish, and I don’t think this is a fitting description of the remarkable people in this room. We have witnessed an immense amount of change over the past four years: in ourselves, on campus, and within society at large. I am thankful every day that I am not the same person I was freshman year. Loyola looks completely different than it did when we arrived in 2011; and so does the world around us. But we haven’t just stood idly by. We’ve embraced some of these changes, and have challenged others. We aren’t idealists; we haven’t put blinders on upon witnessing injustices. But we aren’t fully cynics either, and we’ve rejected the idea that any prejudiced reality has to be a capital “T” truth. Instead, we use what we have learned about the subtleties of humanity to envision, vocalize, and make the kind change we want to see. And as a result, we continue to work on cultivating these truly meaningful virtues; virtues measured by our interactions with others.

Which is why this kind of speech is not just about us. We have achieved impressive things, but the true gains of this program, and our forthcoming degrees, are measured by the connections we’ve made, the people we have impacted, our aptitude for thinking critically about the world around us, and our ability to continue to inspire this same kind of curiosity in those we meet. We’re not just going to stop after “we came, we saw, we conquered.” So we’re obligated to ask ourselves (and everyone around us), what comes next?

The unknown abyss of post-graduate life is going to be challenging, terrifying, and exciting. But we have already done challenging, terrifying, and exciting things, and that capacity is not going to disappear when we graduate. As we get older, our definitions of personal success will continue to change. Today, for me, success was being able to pull myself together, make it here, and give this speech after yesterday’s Senior Bar Crawl. What won’t change is the opportunity we’ve been given to positively affect others; something that this program has helped to lay the foundation for.

However, you should take my words with a grain of salt; after all, you heard my very ambiguous introduction; I have no clue what I’m doing next. But, just like the rest of you, I’m sure as hell going to try to do it well, and with an understanding that this medallion is about more than just my own personal achievements. Thank you.