

Hi everyone! My name is Sharanya Chatterjee, and I just graduated from Freedom High School yesterday, which still doesn't feel completely real and makes me feel a little bit old. I was accepted into Columbia and MIT, and I'm going to be attending Columbia University in New York City this fall to study Computer Science and Applied Mathematics. I'm really excited to be here with everyone today!

Let me start by congratulating all the students here—you guys are so amazing. I am so honored to have been invited to speak to you all. Thank you so much to Ms. Moye and Ms. Moukaddam for this opportunity. And to all the students: I'm especially excited to be able to talk to *you*. Because I remember sitting right there in your shoes at my own Evening of Champions five or six years ago. And I can tell you, from firsthand experience, that you are all so lucky to be Eagles. The memories I made in my three years at HCMS are some of my most valuable ones: I still remember doing literacy circles with Ms. Hobbs and going to MPA with Ms. Bichler and learning about the Stamp Act with Ms. Occhipinti and Essa, as I'm sure a lot of you guys have done as well. I'm so thankful for the way that all my teachers at this school supported and prepared me for everything that's come after in my life, and I hope that you guys feel the same.

When I got invited to speak here and I was deciding what I wanted to say, I thought about what I needed to hear when I was in middle school. And so I decided I wanted to give you four pieces of advice, and I really hope that at least something I say tonight will resonate with you.

The first piece of advice that I think is so important but also very easy to forget is to branch out in your interests. And I know you've probably heard that before, that curiosity is really important, but how often do we only sign up for classes and activities we already know we're going to like? I know I used to do that. But here's the problem: if you only try things you already know you like, you miss out on discovering new passions. Let me give you an example: when I was in middle school, I really wanted to be a rocket scientist. And I was 100% set on it; there was no other option. So when I got to high school, I was so ready to devote all of my time to taking Aerospace classes. But it turns out that for me, rockets are cool in theory, but I don't actually like being the one to build them. And so I had a mini identity crisis, certain that my future was dead. Thankfully, one of my teachers instead encouraged me to look into programming and computer science, and oh my gosh, the next thing I know, Computer Science is my new passion, and that's what I'm going to be studying next year! But if I had never taken that one intro class, I would have never known how much I love computer science. What I hope you take from that is don't narrow your scope too early, because when you do that, you eliminate possibilities in your future. I bet some of you here already know what you want to do when you grow up, and that's incredibly admirable, but don't be so set on something that you block out other opportunities. In the next couple of years, be sure to try as many new things as you can, because you never know what you might be interested in until you actually try it.

That brings me to my second piece of advice: don't get caught up in the numbers game. Let me explain what I mean: when I was in middle school, I was a huge perfectionist. And of course, it's good to strive for perfection, but it's also important to remember that perfection is not always attainable, and that's okay, because at the end of the day, the goal isn't perfection, it's to be

happy. Throughout your time in school, you're going to have a bunch of numbers attached to you: your GPA, your SAT score, your CFE grades. And they're important, don't get me wrong, I had a pretty high GPA and a perfect SAT score, and I'm really proud of those things. But that's not what defines me. What's more important is how much I grew from trying to achieve them. So you may be able to scrape an "A" in a class by doing the bare minimum or boost your GPA by taking classes you don't actually care about. But twenty years from now, it won't be your grades or your GPA you remember, but the knowledge you gained from pursuing them and how you grew as a result of that. And you can cheat the numbers game, but you can't cheat knowledge. Numbers and scores are just that—they're just a numerical way to represent a specific quantity that someone out there decided they wanted to measure. That's not the important part, the important part is what you learn. So please, go get that high GPA and get that good test score, but remember that those are not substitutes for true learning.

My third piece of advice is to always appreciate the people around you. And to add on to that, please don't forget to be kind. It's a really easy thing to give someone a compliment or help them out with something, but too many people don't, and so the world definitely needs more kindness. Think about your best friend who's been there for you since elementary school or that one teacher who went out of their way to help you understand something in class. Try your best to keep these people in your life—don't sideline the people who care about you the most. I still remember how much Ms. Moye inspired me to love reading as much as she does, and she's the reason I still make sure I find time to read, even amidst my hectic schedule. And Ms. Moukaddam played such an instrumental role in my middle school years, and it was such a perfect moment to be able to hug her on stage at graduation yesterday. So even though you're all going to leave HCMS behind eventually, and it's easy to lose touch with people when you don't see them as often, I hope you still keep those who have helped you to come this far close at heart.

And finally, my fourth piece of advice: don't forget to have fun. And I am *definitely* guilty of forgetting that sometimes. I mean, even these past three weeks, I've been so overwhelmed with AP exams and CFEs and more tests and graduation that I've had absolutely no time for anything else. But looking back on the last four years, my best memories are obviously not from studying or getting a hundred on a test; instead, they're from spending time with my friends and teachers, from that one pizza party we had in physics to getting ice cream with my friends at Multicultural Night. So throughout the next few years, go out and meet new people and join clubs that you're interested in. If you like music, don't stop playing your instrument. If you're a sports person, go try out for a team. I have so many amazing memories of being in this PAC and performing in Orchestra concerts and Prism concerts, and I'll remember those moments forever. Just keep in mind that once these years are over, they're over forever, so make as much out of them as you possibly can.

Now, to all the eighth graders here, I know a lot of you are probably coming here to Freedom next year. And I just want to tell you that you are in the best hands possible. Every single teacher I've had here and every class I've taken has taught me so much, and I'm so grateful to be a Freedom graduate. You can be confident that the next chapter of your life will be amazing.

And even if you're not coming to Freedom, I know you'll be amazing too—just make sure to take advantage of every opportunity that comes your way. And to all the 6th and 7th graders: treasure the years you have left at HCMS and make the most of them. I can tell you for a fact that you go to the best middle school ever.

You all have incredibly bright futures ahead of you. I wish you all the best of luck, and I hope that you'll take some of my advice as you go into the next chapter of your life. Thank you so much for listening!