



By [Kelly Franznick](#)

This week I had the honor of giving the commencement address for the 2015 University of Washington's [Human-Centered Design and Engineering Department](#) graduation ceremony. I'm a big fan of the program, so when I was asked to speak I eagerly agreed. It didn't hit me until I was working on what to say that I am almost always presenting something when I speak—research, design concepts, business plans. I enjoyed the fresh challenge of simply writing out my thoughts and not thinking through "the deck." It was a great ceremony and a true pleasure to see so many happy faces getting their degrees and talking about their futures. For the curious, I'd like to share with you what I said:

My theme today is that The Future Will Not Be What You Expect.

I'll say that again, The Future Will Not Be What You Expect.

I'm going to share a few stories with you to explain what I mean.

The first reason that I say the future is not what you are expecting is that it is going to be beyond your wildest imaginations. When I graduated with a design degree, 22 years ago this month, the world was a very different place. As a quick aside, I don't remember who our commencement speaker was, or anything he said. So I have a very low bar to overcome. ☐

Anyway, at that time, there were no degree programs in anything like HCDE. As an aspiring product designer the products I thought I would be designing included things like answering machines, VCRs, and stereos.

Instead, I've had the opportunity to work on products like one of the first MP3 players, Instant

Messaging Applications, in-car navigation systems, and cloud computing platforms. These were all things that I could not have imagined when I sat where you are today. You too may think you have a clear picture of the types of projects you will take on in the future—drones, self-driving cars, VR systems. I’m here to tell you that your list is all wrong. You can’t yet even imagine what exciting things are ahead in the next 22 years.

The key is to be ready and willing to keep learning. Think about your education thus far as teaching you how to learn. How to build confidence, communicate, and collaborate around a specific topic or problem. Keep sharpening that saw. These are the skills that are most valuable when those unexpected technologies of the future materialize.



The Future Will Not Be What You Expect—It's exploding

Our chosen profession is on the edge of an amazing rise.

We are witnessing products becoming commodities one after the next. We see businesses like retail stores and car dealerships struggle to find their roles in this new online world. Having a great user experience was, at one time, a novelty. It soon became a differentiator. It has now become a business requirement and in some instances, the business itself.

Human-centered design and engineering is being recognized by business as a strategic competency. A commodity like a coffee bean is being transformed into a smiling barista and a comfy chair by a fireplace. A commodity like an inexpensive CCD camera is becoming a cloud security system that gives you confidence on vacation.

We have seen, just in the last few months, user experience and design firms being purchased by leading companies who have recognized that user experiences are the key differentiator for them. This includes Facebook’s acquisition of Bolt Peters and Teehan+Lax. Capitol One’s acquisition of [Adaptive Path](#). Most recently, McKinsey’s acquisition of [Lunar Design](#). While it will no doubt take hard work to establish your career coming fresh out of school, I’ve seen salaries for some senior positions rise as much as 25-30% in the last year.

The Future Will Not Be What You Expect—It isn't about your degree

I was recently on a panel at UW for a large group of students who all seemed to want to develop the next big app. After answering some questions about the challenges and rewards of starting a company, a student near the back of the room raised his hand and asked, “Do I really need a degree to create the next great thing?”

I found myself thinking about this question for a long time. I spoke a little about school teaching us how to learn, but it was very hard for me to draw a direct line between my degree and any professional achievement. However, when I look at my professional career, I’ve consistently worked with the students and faculty that I went to school with. Classmates had hired me, I had hired classmates, I have had numerous fellow students as clients over the years. I’ve also received some amazing referrals from faculty through the years. So my answer to this student, and my advice to you is, to look around this room and think about this community as the people you will have a chance to work with in the future. There will be no need to establish credibility, no need to talk about your work ethic, no need to explain your point of view on things. Time will show that these people around you will be a great trusted network for you and your career.

The Future Will Not Be What You Expect—It SHOULD feel risky

When I was an undergraduate student, I was viciously focused on school and maintaining straight A's. My senior year, we had a visiting professor from Kansas State University's Landscape Architecture program who came in to teach a workshop on hand rendering and perspective. I learned more about drawing in those two days than I had in my entire life. The professor would assign us a drawing to do, and then walk around the students giving feedback and talking about life.

Aside from the drawing skills, the one thing that stuck with me was his comment that he had seen many classes of design students come and go in his tenure as a professor. The bold statement he made that day was that it wasn't the A students that would go on to professional success. Sure they would find jobs and go on to have happy lives, but it was those students who took big risks and received B's and C's that would go on to change the world. I'm here to tell you that he was right. Now, don't worry if you are an A student—you are not doomed to mediocrity. But I can tell you that the biggest successes I've had in my career were risks that I took to satisfy myself, not to earn the praise of others.

The Future Will Not Be What You Expect—Don't build value where you think you should

I expect you are sitting here thinking about your futures and dreaming about the great things in store. Part of that story for some of you probably includes creating great personal value. I had the good fortune to attend a talk given by Tim O'Reilly—for those that don't know, Tim O'Reilly is the founder of a media company, and the person credited with popularizing the terms Open Source and Web 2.0. Tim shared some advice the day. It was simply this: CREATE MORE VALUE THAN YOU KEEP.

I think this is great advice, but also can be challenging to our natural instincts. We tend to want to hold on to the whole pie—not thinking about how much we would have if we keep just one slice of a much larger pie.

You can see this play out around us if you look at the success of the Open Source movement. You can even look to the success of early UX pioneers who took the simple step of sharing their wireframe templates on the Internet for others to use, but in exchange were recognized as thought leaders. I would challenge you graduates to do the same. What will you create? What unique value do you have to share? How can you make your community, your industry, your world a better place?

So I'll say it one last time: **The Future Will Not Be What You Expect.**

I hope you enjoy discovering what the future has in store for you. From where I stand, your futures look very bright.