

# Academic Excellence Assembly

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**Address by Special Guest, Mr. Eric Shi (ON' 2010)**  
**Wednesday, 17 February 2016**

## **Intro**

Good afternoon Dr. Mulford, Distinguished Members of the Official Party, Parents, Staff, High Achievers of the Class of 2015, and Young Men of Newington College. It is a great pleasure and honour to have the opportunity to speak to you all today and to share in celebrating the wonderful achievements of all the award recipients here today. By way of a quick introduction into what I have done since I left Newington, I'm about to start my sixth year of university and an outside observer could be forgiven for thinking that I was finding increasingly elaborate ways to procrastinate having to face the real world and gain full-time employment.

What I would like to briefly share with you today are some of my own musings on success which are things that I wish I had thought about a bit more during my time at school. I will cover two general themes in this speech, although I will inevitably run out of time to address the second: the first involves dealing with a specific type of failure and the second concerns expectations and micromanagement. My hope is that, as I believe these topics are generally applicable to success in all areas, be they academic, artistic, sporting, personal, professional or otherwise, this will provoke you to form your own conclusions on the matter.

## **Dealing with Failure**

It may seem counterintuitive for me to open a speech in an assembly celebrating academic excellence with a discussion of failure but I think that it is true to say that some of our greatest achievements have come after a period of failure, resilience and learning from our mistakes. One of the greatest virtues of Newington in my mind is that the learning environment here encourages and fosters personal development through a combination of hard work ethic and critical self-reflection. The incredibly impressive results being recognised today are surely a testament to the effectiveness of this approach in teaching that perseverance and effort will translate to positive outcomes in the long-term.

But I want to focus here on a particular type of failure that may at first seem more difficult to reconcile. What I'm referring to is the obstacle that is not wholly attributable to the inadequacy of one's efforts, the disappointment that arises either partially or completely because of the acts of others, the setback that occurs through no fault of one's own. When we are taught, and rightfully so, that we can achieve our goals through sheer discipline, effort and determination, the realisation that there at times there is nothing in how we could have prepared or applied ourselves that would have avoided a particular negative outcome can be a confronting thought that makes us feel rather powerless.

To give a brief anecdote, a couple of years ago I was convinced to join a ticket that was participating in an election to run the Sydney University Law Society. We spent weeks brainstorming and drafting policies, devising a social media campaign that relied way too much on Mean Girls references than I'd probably care to admit and finally trying to convince as many disinterested law students as we could to take thirty seconds out of their day to go vote. Which they did, only to promptly return to tell us they voted for the other ticket. In the end, despite all our efforts and hard work, my incredibly short-lived foray into student politics was thankfully cut short by, of all things, our very own campaign manager being found guilty of committing electoral fraud, which meant we were immediately disqualified without a single vote being counted.

Now in hindsight this entire rigmarole is something I find rather amusing but at the time it was certainly a confronting experience that so much investment had been seemingly wasted with countless opportunity costs and hardly anything to show for it. And I think that situations like this, where the cause of our failures is an external factor over which we have little or no control, are some of the most challenging to deal with. Yet that is what makes the way we react to these occurrences worthy of reflection. Disappointment, anger and indignation yield marginal returns even where they may be justified. To be able to extract the positives even from unfair and undeserved moments of adversity can strengthen our resolve and preparedness for the future.

### **Expectations and Micromanagement**

One way I have gradually learnt to do this is to occasionally challenge my own perspective of what success entails, which subtly segues into my second theme. One of the things we get taught from an early age is that planning is paramount and that by breaking an imposing task into smaller chunks, it makes achieving that goal more manageable. But one of the pitfalls in relying too greatly upon this way of thinking is that the plan, and the pathway upon which it leads you, runs the risk of being particularly limiting. Deviation from that plan can then become subconsciously equated with failure and inflexibility becomes masked in feelings of security and familiarity.

That is not to say that that making plans and being structured in one's approach to achieving goals is not immensely helpful most of the time. But what I have learnt is that sometimes it is equally important to question how we define success and why we do so. Because our priorities and values are sure to change as we mature and grow as individuals and undergo new experiences, and it cannot be true that plans made two weeks, months or years ago are necessarily ones that are right for us now.

When I left school, I had pretty much planned out the next five years of my life. I would start by getting an Arts degree, subsequently complete my law degree and then get a job working in criminal law. I duly set about planning out exactly how I would get where I wanted to go but by the end of first year, I already had suspicions that this wasn't exactly where I would ideally finish up when I left university. But I mostly relegated those thoughts to the back of my mind because I viewed them as counterproductive to achieving that goal I had set for myself. It wasn't until the beginning of third year that I made the decision to follow my intuitions and switch majors in my Arts degree to English.

In hindsight, the opportunities I am now most grateful for came as a result of that decision; nowhere in my original plan had I anticipated being able to spend a whole year writing a thesis on irony or spending a summer researching maritime arbitration of all things. Sometimes, taking time to reflect about our own motivations not only allows us to define success in a way that makes it easier for us to drive ourselves to achieve our goals, it allows us to view our past experiences through new lenses and to learn new lessons from them. Most importantly, it can also expose us to new challenges and new possibilities for success.

And so if I can conclude on this, one of the greatest privileges of growing up at Newington was the genuine abundance of opportunity in all spheres of endeavour. To all the current students here, I urge you to make the most of these chances to stimulate your interests, discover new pursuits and develop your perspectives as broadly as possible so that you leave here with the strongest foundation upon which to face the challenges that you will encounter in the future. And to the departing high achievers, I wish you all the best in making the most of the strong foundation that you have already worked so hard to build. I am certain that many more successes lie in wait for all of you, even if the path that leads there may resist you at times and your final destination may surprise you. Congratulations again on all of your achievements, and thank you.