

Delivered at morning assembly, Monday, March 01, 2010, by Kwaku Frimpong.

Grad at Grad ~ Academic Excellence

Good morning everyone. I am here to speak to you about being Academically Excellent. When I was asked to give this talk, honestly the first thing that came to mind was “Are they sure they have the right person? I’ve been called a lot of things in my day and can think of many adjectives to describe myself, but Academically Excellent—never!”

My original opinion of a person who is Academically Excellent was limited to someone who works hard in school and receives 90s or above in all classes. That’s one example of academic excellence, but I am not that kind of student. I don’t have a 95 average or spend all of my time doing school work, so how could I be Academically Excellent? I have always believed that it’s not good to keep our heads in the books all day and at some point we should take a break and relax. I also realize that the classroom is not the only environment where learning takes place— everyday, when we wake up and open our eyes, we awaken to a classroom without knowing it, because the world is our classroom. As I considered what academic excellence means, I realized that one aspect of such excellence is connecting our school classrooms with our world classrooms.

I’ve always wanted to be someone who is considered an intellectual. Whether it means learning where and when to walk in certain places at night, or having Mr. Joseph teach me how to take a foul shot, I have never wanted to be someone considered dull or brainless. I’ve also always thought people who speak multiple languages are intelligent and really cool. I’ve been studying Italian for the past 4 years. When I first started it in my freshmen year, I felt it was another way for me to come off as a smooth intelligent

guy. But Italian didn't come as easily to me as playing basketball or smiling when pictures are taken. It was extremely hard and made my freshmen year a living...well you know. It was the first time I ever studied a foreign language and it was a huge challenge for me. As difficult as the class was, though, I always felt as that if I decided to drop it then, 1) I wouldn't be able to graduate, and 2) it would hold me back from becoming the man that I want to be in the future. I struggled but I persevered. I stuck with it, and even though the conjugations annoyed me, vocabulary killed me, and the expressions sometimes confused me, I continued to work hard and do what I had to do to pass. I ended freshmen year passing Italian, and no, I did not finish with a 90 or above—not even an 80. Although I did not finish the year with the grade I would have liked, I proved to myself that I was able to adjust to this new learning format. I showed myself I could do well enough to pass if I just continue to put in a good effort even though I had never taken a foreign language before.

I had a similar experience with Biology during my freshmen year. It was a class that I did not particularly enjoy because I didn't consider myself to be a scientist or want to be one in the future. Learning about X-Y Chromosomes and different alleles didn't really interest me. I struggled throughout the year, and seeing my classmates picking these things up more easily than me didn't help me to enjoy the subject matter. I knew I had to pass this along with Italian if I wanted to become a sophomore, so I put all my feelings to the side and did what I had to do to pass this course as well. But again I did not finish with a 90 or 80. Although I did not finish with an ideal grade, I took pride in the work that I had completed my freshmen year. The grade may not have been pretty,

but I had passed, and that was an accomplishment I could be proud of and build on for my sophomore and junior years.

As the sophomore and junior years came, I did just that. I continued to take language and science courses. But shockingly, every year I got better at them. Italian 2 was better than Italian 1, and when I took Chemistry it went a lot better than Biology; I was also better at physics than I had expected to be. Both years, I finished these classes with grades in the low to mid-80s. I was proud of myself because I knew that these weren't my strengths, but hard work was paying off and I was improving year after year.

As seniors we have the choice to select the classes we want to take. We may drop some subjects and pick up electives, and take anything of interest to us. When it came time for me to select courses for my senior year I thought to myself, "YES! No more science or language." But as the time came closer to make a decision I realized that I can't quit now. But I thought about how I had worked hard for 3 years and haven't gotten worse, but improved. I ended up taking Advanced Italian as well as Computer Science and Applications.

Someone who is academically Excellent is someone who has a general knowledge of the central ideas and concepts of multiple subject matters. In my opinion, being academically excellent means being well rounded – not just having one skill but many. Who would ever have thought that I, Kwaku Frimpong, would take a course in computer science? When I tell people I have Computer Science next period they say "you in Computer Science?" I just tell them "Yeah, when the seniors dressed up for Halloween, I wasn't trying to be funny, I was being serious."

I wasn't sure if I made the right decision picking these classes. I knew my first semester of senior year was extremely important for college, and on the first day of Computer Science I did not understand a word Mr. Richroath was saying. The computer language he spoke sounded like "blah, blah, blah" in my ears and my head began to hurt. It didn't feel any better as I looked around and saw my classmates nodding as if they understood everything he was saying. I left class thinking "Am I crazy? Why would I do this to myself?" The first Italian class didn't go any better as Mr. Tram didn't speak one word of English. Again my head started to throb. I left school thinking to myself "I can't speak computer language or Italian," and with the help of Doctor Meade, I was beginning to question whether I even knew how to speak English—but that's another story for another time.

As the weeks went by, I went to office hours for Computer Science and constantly went to Mr. Richroath and asked him as many questions as I could until I understood the different topics. I began to understand what I was learning to the point that computer science wasn't so much a class anymore, but something I enjoyed doing. All the work I put in began to show in my grades and also my love for the subject.

My struggles in Italian continued a bit longer than expected. I didn't really notice any significant improvement until I stopped by Ms. Ferran's class one day. She asked me to say things in Italian and I was actually able to do it. I was surprised at how easily I was able to speak in a different language. I never realized that I knew as much as I did. I proved to myself that day that those vocabulary words had become familiar enough that I could use them in complete sentences. The feeling I had when I would think about it was something I couldn't explain. My confidence in Italian began to develop. As it grew I put

in even more work to finally complete what I had started freshmen year. I can happily say that I have been doing significantly better in both of these subjects as the year has gone on.

Now back to being Academically Excellent. What does this all mean? I believe that to be Academically Excellent, you don't need to have the 90 or above average, although you may achieve that. You need to just put in the work and all the hard work you put in will one day pay off. I would have never thought my senior year I would take electives in Italian and Science. But I did, and doing this is helping me developed into the well rounded person I want to be in life. I now have the confidence to know that I can help you develop a database or say "Hello," "Bye," and "You're so beautiful" in Italian.

My brother once asked me if I could go back in time and tell myself anything, what would I tell myself? I told him I would tell myself "Don't stop doing what you're doing. Keep working hard and believing in yourself because you will turn out just fine." This is the message I hope to pass along to each one of you today. Don't quit; keep working hard. And though you may not believe you're academically excellent or fit the ideal, know that being academically excellent is about the effort, not just the grade. I've realized that my perseverance and attitude in terms of school work and Loyola's definition of Academically Excellent are one in the same. Despite the fact that I don't have a 90 average and I don't take all AP courses, by my hard work and openness to challenge, I am still proving to myself everyday that I am Academically Excellent.