Katherine Darke Schmitt–Remarks at W&M Public Policy Program Degree Ceremony
May 20, 2023

I am so honored to have been invited to be part of this celebration of the 2023 Public Policy Program graduates. My diploma says it was 29 years and 361 days ago that I sat in Ewell Hall for the celebration of the first class of MPPs to graduate from William & Mary.

There's not a Google photo "on this day" reminder of that because there was no Google photos then. Or Google. Or phones with cameras in them.

I was the student graduation speaker for that inaugural class. And even without Google I do remember thinking it went well, but it is just possible that I am back here in front of you today because Professor MacBeth wanted to give me another shot at it.

I am deeply committed to this institution, as I was then, and so grateful for the scholarship, and creativity, and risk taking that are hallmarks of the College and particularly of the Public Policy Program. They shaped me in ways I am still discovering.

I want to talk to you this afternoon about what you know, and what you don't know, and why you should relish the latter. Even if you are feeling the pressure of expectations to "know what you want to do with the rest of your life" today as you prepare to leave this campus.

If you already have a plan –or even better—a job offer or a graduate school placement – bravo. If you don't, please try not to panic. From the 30-years out vantage point I can assure you that your level of certainty at this moment about what you will do or be has <u>zero</u> bearing on how the rest of your life will turn out.

On May 16, 1993 I had a job offer, which was rescinded shortly thereafter as the early 1990s economic downturn deepened. I then took a job that was a poor fit for my skills and ambitions. I moved back home with my parents. I had a few really interesting years of figuring out what I did NOT want to do.

I entered federal service pretty much on a whim after 5 years in think tank policy research jobs. That was 25 years ago.

Today I'm a member of the federal Senior Executive Service and the job I have now – my dream job – I did not even know existed in 1993. I say this to assure you that it is OK to <u>not know</u> lots of things at this point.

But let's talk about what you for sure do know, and now have the paper to prove it!

You know economics, micro and macro, and political theory. You have a sound understanding of federalism and Constitutional law that describes the roles and

prerogatives of the three branches of the federal government. This is all imperative for policy actors in a democracy.

(So, if by any chance you are fuzzy on these, please see me before you leave today.)

You know how to use data to inform decisions; and you know how to evaluate the applicability of those data or that model for any particular analysis. You know a lot about how to use a policy lens to analyze problems and evaluate competing interests and solutions.

It is not nothing that you know how to a draft policy recommendation in 2 pages that could easily be 30-pages if you spelled out everything you know about your topic. (Note from your future boss — please don't.)

All that you now know — this expertise that Lily talked about — will serve you well.

And you know each other, which is also not nothing. Aarushi described your many connections to each other, and that was just as true 30 years ago.

My best friend is a woman I met in "summer math camp" at the public policy program in 1991, and I have gotten jobs and made job offers on the strength of my William & Mary connections.

You are poised to both leverage the people you know and also to start reaching back to offer an assist to the students coming behind you.

Do both.

There's a whole professional universe where you will be of service because of the things you know and the people you know — in Tribal, local, state or federal government. In academia. In private practice. In community-based organizations. In advocacy roles.

You may be pleasantly surprised to find out how easy it is to cross among those disciplines with your public policy degree. I think some fields of study lead you steadily down an academic and professional trajectory on which there is not a lot of room to turn around or branch off in an interesting direction. Your public policy degree is the exact opposite of that.

But. No matter how diligent your last reading period before finals, no matter how successful your results, there are some things you do not know. For the worriers in the crowd that goes without saying. Some of you may feel acutely that you are being launched from this program and you're not sure if you know enough yet.

You don't.

And that's a good thing.

It's a good thing because being curious about things you do not know will feed a lifelong appetite for growth. For reading. For exploration. For not being satisfied with the status quo. For asking Why? Why not? What if? For cultivating relationships with interesting people EVEN IF YOU'RE AN INTROVERT.

For seeking out people who teach you, and challenge you, and inspire you. Those people are not all being left behind on this campus, although I know you will miss SOPHIE—and this place and these faculty.

And as an aside—if you're lucky, and a reliable financial donor, you will be invited to come back here periodically.

Some of those people who will support your growth are still ahead of you—you haven't even met them yet.

There is a whole leadership literature on this idea of a growth mindset—let me define that term by starting with its opposite.

This is a paraphrase of Carol Dweck's definition from 2015. "In a fixed mindset, people believe that their potential and their intelligence and talent are fixed traits. They spend their time documenting their intelligence or talent instead of developing them."

If you've come across people like that in the classroom or in the workplace you know exactly what I'm talking about.

But in a growth mindset, people believe that their abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—that innate intelligence and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment, Dr. Dweck concludes.

Approaching your policy work with a growth mindset will make you more creative, and help you lead more creative teams. You will produce more inclusive solution sets—and therefore be more likely to have the optimal answers in your set.

You won't be satisfied with the answer, "because we've always done it that way" – which honestly can be the bane of working in an institution.

You will be more likely to take risks, and as you take risks, more likely to discover new things. Those discoveries will both be things that work, and things that do not work. Both kinds of discoveries will be valuable.

So what if, with your growth mindset, you approached every policy problem with, instead of "what do I know about how to fix this" with "what do I <u>not know</u> about this problem?"

Albert Einstein is reported to have said that if he were given an hour in which to do a problem upon which his life depended, he would spend 40 minutes studying the problem, 15 minutes reviewing it and 5 minutes solving it.

That is the opposite of the usual approach—which is typically leaping to solutioning the moment the policy problem presents itself. You see this phenomenon all the time—in organizations, in the media, in legislatures, and in executive agencies.

I want to be candid about the fact that people who come up with quick solutions are frequently praised and promoted. Being a "quick thinker," a "problem solver", a "go getter" seems so much more laudable than being a "slow thinker"" or a "stay here and ponderer." I have both observed repeatedly and been the beneficiary of career advancement based on technical skills – essentially quick problem solving.

And because I was rewarded for that, I framed my own value in those terms.

It was not until years into my career that I realized that that I relied too much on assumptions and other intellectual short cuts to get to quick solutions. That I tended to value speed over understanding, and favor forward motion over connection building. Essentially that I valued what I knew over what I didn't know.

I urge you to slow down and think about what you don't know. And don't panic about it.

Revel in it.

Invest time and effort not just in flexing your technical acumen and policy expertise but also in thinking about thinking and how to ask better questions.

How to cultivate growth mindset behaviors and support an environment where it is safe for the people who work with you and for you to do the same. Welcome risk taking, and welcome what you learn from failure.

When you're the boss, pay attention to rewarding good questions, not just good answers. Embracing a willingness to "not know" is what it took for me to get to the Senior Executive Level.

I hope it's not a major downer for me to take 10 minutes of your time at your graduation to talk at you about what you don't know.

So I'll flip back to talking about what you do know once more as I close.

You know yourself. You know who you are and you know your values. In the face of everything that you will face that you won't know, you will know what values drive you.

If you're not sure what I mean here, I point you to three seasons of the philosophical genius of Ted Lasso on Apple TV.

If you haven't thought in concrete terms about your values—I urge you to do so. I mean write them down. Rank order them. Put them on a sticky note next to your passwords on your monitor. Or over your office door.

I do the same values ranking exercise with every new team I lead to make sure everyone on the team has this literal or metaphorical sticky note at hand. It helps us in decision making. It helps us understand each other's perspectives when we are having difficult conversations. It helps us hold each other accountable. It helps me hold myself accountable.

It reminds me, when the data are inconclusive, or the models inadequate, or the stakes very high, where my insight rests. Those of you who have had ethics with Professor Manna have heard him champion "values-based decision making." Decisions informed by data. And evidence. And aligned with your core values.

So congratulations on everything you know! And congratulations on everything you do not know! And on all those opportunities coming where you will continue to learn.

I am so happy to celebrate your graduation from the William & Mary Public Policy program with you, and delighted to welcome you, with Devin and Laura, into the ranks of the alumni. You have a lot to offer the world, and we cannot wait to see what you do. Go Tribe!