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# DOCTORAL COMMENCEMENT

## DECEMBER 2024

### GRADUATE ADDRESS

By Perla Y. Saucedo-Oloño



Good afternoon, distinguished faculty, family, friends, and my fellow graduates.

Today marks a moment of triumph for all of us. We celebrate the end of a journey and the countless twists and turns that brought us to this moment. As I reflect on my path to standing here before you, one thought keeps coming back to me: Sometimes, the path we find ourselves on isn't the one we expected to take, but it's the one we were meant to walk.

Like many of you, I began my journey with certainty. I had a plan. At least I knew exactly what I absolutely did not want to do: I did not want to teach. I was going to be a businessperson and study business administration. Until one of my professors warned me: "If you don't have a company in your name by the time you graduate, you'll end up being a professor like me." The thought of being a "lowly professor" – apologies if there are any professors here today – set me on an entirely different path. A path that has led me to where I am today: I have accepted a faculty position here at Clemson University!

As an undergraduate, I pursued a degree in mechatronics engineering, then found myself teaching bioengineering in Mexico. That path brought challenges, moments of doubt, and decisions driven more by circumstance than passion. The struggle for tenure reminded me that sometimes doors remain closed until we're ready to open the right one. I left my position on the bioengineering faculty to pursue a Ph.D. in chemistry at Clemson.

A Ph.D. program is an experience unlike any other. It tests your resilience, questions your resolve, and shapes you in unexpected ways. When I started at Clemson, I was overwhelmed about leaving home, starting fresh in a new country, speaking in a foreign language throughout everyday life, and diving deeper into a field where I still questioned my place. What I found was more than a lab or a classroom; I found a new version of myself.

One of my most transformative moments came through teaching, a role I had once avoided but now treasure deeply. Teaching isn't just about imparting knowledge; it's about building connections and being the mentor I wished I had during my own struggles. It's about supporting and encouraging others to see their potential. That love for teaching has shaped my path, and today, I am proud to say that I am the Director of the General Chemistry Labs at Clemson University, a position I hold with immense pride and gratitude.

Clemson has given me more than just a degree. It gave me a job, a second family, and a new place I could call home. The people I've met here, professors, colleagues, friends, and students, have enriched my life in ways I could never have imagined. The challenges I've faced here have pushed me to grow, and the successes have reminded me of the power of perseverance and community.

I would be remiss if I didn't take a moment to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Rhett Smith. His guidance, mentorship, and unwavering support have been instrumental in shaping both my academic journey and my personal growth. Dr. Smith's belief in me, even during the most challenging moments, has been a source of strength and inspiration. Thank you for your dedication and patience and for constantly pushing me to achieve my best. I couldn't have done this without you. I would also like to take a moment to

thank my parents; this is the first time ever that they are not in person to celebrate a milestone with me, but I just want to say: ¡Lo logramos! (We did it!).

As we step forward into our futures, the responsibilities that come with our education go far beyond titles or degrees. We are innovators, leaders, and collaborators equipped to tackle the challenges of our time. We can shape a better world by creating sustainable solutions to protect our planet, inspiring the next generation through teaching, or simply being a source of kindness and support in our communities. Our education has given us the tools; now, we must use them with purpose and passion.

So, what is the most important choice we face now? I believe it is this: choosing to embrace the unexpected, lean into challenges, and recognize that growth often comes from the paths we once resisted.

To my fellow graduates: This is just the beginning. Let us take the lessons we've learned, not just in the classroom but in life, and carry them forward. Most of us probably have a plan. But our time at Clemson has shown us that we must be open to the twists and turns because sometimes the path you didn't plan for leads to the most fulfilling destination.

Congratulations to the Class of 2024. May we go forward with courage, curiosity, and conviction to transform ourselves and the world.

Go Tigers!