Jed York, San Francisco 49ers CEO, delivered the keynote speech at Commencement on May 11. The College’s ties to the 49ers can be traced back to 1946 when the football team’s summer training camps were held on Menlo’s campus.

York shared his personal experiences with an enthusiastic crowd and described his road to success, as well as the obstacles he faced along the way. He emphasized that graduating seniors should focus their work on what they’re passionate about and that they should treat failures as lessons, not hindrances. He also underlined the importance of persistence and encouraged the graduates to make their dreams become a reality.

“The story of Jed York’s entrepreneurial efforts in turning around a major sports team at the beginning of his career was an inspiration for students and the community,” said President James J. Kelly. “He met with formidable challenges in building the SF 49ers and in creating his own identity in sports management, especially coming from a family who owned the business. He described his experience with humor and humility. We are honored that he shared his insights with the students and community at Menlo College.”

“In the 1940s, the 49ers’ practices were quite open, and we shared facilities, so we were thrilled when players like John Henry Johnson would give our players playing tips,” recalled Chuck Shea, Menlo College alumnus and five-sport, stand-out athlete. He remembers practicing football at Menlo College 1954–1955 while the 49ers practiced in the adjoining field.

Jed York became CEO of the San Francisco 49ers in 2010. His promotion of Trent Baalke to General Manager and the hiring of Jim Harbaugh as Head Coach put the 49ers back in the playoffs after a ten-season hiatus. York spearheaded a successful ballot measure for the first LEED certified NFL stadium in 2010. He secured financing in 2011 and obtained $200M of NFL support for the Santa Clara stadium in February 2012. York graduated from Notre Dame with degrees in Finance and History. He sits on the boards of Tipping Point Community and the Commonwealth Club.
The 49ers have roots at Menlo College. We started our original practices on these fields and that is special to me. When I look at what can I impart to you who have many opportunities in front of you, I want to boil it down to three simple things.

1. Pursue something you’re passionate about.
2. Embrace a culture of failure.
3. Persevere.

When my grandfather’s parents came over on a boat to the USA from Italy, their daughter was one-year old. My great-grandmother was pregnant with my grandfather and they wanted to set a better life for their kids. On that journey, her husband passed away, and she was left with a child and a baby on the way.

Some might look at that and say, “We made the wrong decision. We should have stayed at home with our family.” But my great-grandmother remarried, they had four more kids, and their son, my grandfather ended up going to Notre Dame, the first in his family to go to college. He started with a small construction company, building homes in 1933.

Several years later World War II broke out, and he saw the suburbanization of America. At that time most people lived in the inner cities where the shopping and commerce were. He decided to build an enclosed shopping center that ended up becoming the shopping mall. He built ninety of them.

This decision allowed him to pursue his other passions. He loved sports. He bought the San Francisco 49ers in 1977. For those of you who don’t know his son, my uncle Eddie [DeBartolo] ran the 49ers, and won 5 Super Bowl Championships. Pretty successful. If you remember my uncle, he was a little passionate about the 49ers. He had a little bit of fire in his belly. That created one of the greatest teams in the history of professional sports.

Where does that leave a kid like me who has extremely high bars that have been set by his family and who grew up with a lot of wealth and opportunity that few people have. I didn’t want to be a rich kid who didn’t do anything with his life. I wanted to follow my passion—my family and sports. I became the CEO of the 49ers when I was 28 years old.

What happened? We hired Coach Jim Harbaugh from Stanford. We put together a team that had a good foundation. The team competed for the NFC championship in our first year and competed for the Super Bowl in our second year. We went from being the laughing stock of the NFL to one of the teams that folks look at and say they run their thing pretty well. This is a model you might want to replicate. That is very important. When you are faced with these tough choices, don’t be afraid to fail.

Even being down 28-6 in the Super Bowl — when there’s hundreds of millions of people watching you and your team; the lights go out; somebody hits pause on one of the worst moments of your life. Not really a good feeling. Not quite sure how its going to play out. What happened was we had one of the best quarters in that half of football that anybody’s ever seen. Unfortunately, we came up a bit short.

But we’ve embraced each other and said we’re going to keep on competing for Super Bowls and we’re going to win Super Bowls. We’re going to come together as a group. We understand that we took some chances. We didn’t quite reach our goal this year but we will reach it multiple times. We’re going to make the Bay Area and all 49ers fans proud.

You have an unbelievable opportunity right now to do whatever you want. Your vision is completely wide open. Take a chance. Don’t be afraid to fail in the decisions you are going to make, whether it’s the job you’re going to take, where you’re going to live, asking that cute guy or girl out, doing something that’s just spontaneous. They might say no and it might blow up, but that’s okay. Embrace that culture of failure; persevere through those tough times and just follow your passion. Congratulations, everybody.