As I began to think about preparing this speech on Tuesday, I was fortunate to have delivered this week’s copy of Newsweek magazine. Emblazoned across the cover is the headline “Why College Should Take Only 3 Years,” by none other than Senator Lamar Alexander, who is a former secretary of education and a former president of the University of Tennessee. Accompanying that article is another entitled, “What’s College for Anyway?” This is an interview with an assortment of deep thinkers, most of whom can’t answer the question. So it’s worthwhile spending a little time on that question today. What’s College for Anyway?

Before we get to that question, let’s address Senator Alexander’s issue. He feels strongly that students should be able to graduate in 3 years. He believes that colleges should restructure to make that possible. Well, at the University of Florida, we did that a long time ago. And guess what? The students don’t want to graduate in 3 years. In fact, in this year’s freshman class, over 1/3 of the class –
that’s well over 2000 students – arrived with 30 college credits or more. This means they arrived with one year of college already under their belts. So they could easily graduate in three years. However, less than a tenth of these students – that’s around 200 – graduate in three years or less. What’s going on? Evidently, they don’t want to leave that quickly. Maybe they find something rewarding here that keeps them here. And maybe they know something that Senator Alexander has forgotten.

What’s College for Anyway? Your answer to this question may not be the same as your neighbor’s. But students who figure out the answer will be in a good position to get the most out of their college years. To tell the truth, the same goes for the faculty.

For many students, college is for Getting Away, for Leaving the Nest, for Taking that First Step Out into the world. Will it always be this way? We are on the cusp of a remarkable change in higher education. It is already possible for students to stay home and obtain a college degree through the internet via distance education. This is a marvelous option for many people who are place bound and
can’t leave their responsibilities to attend a distant university for four years. Perhaps it’s for everyone? Some pundits suggest this is the future of higher education. Go to cyberspace or die as a university. As we move into the distance education era, will the University of Florida cease to exist physically and become just another web address with a stadium for football Saturdays? I doubt it. So long as 18-year olds are born and raised in the homes of their parents, they will continue to spread their wings and leave to study at the university. And when they do, many a parent will shed a tear and breathe a huge sigh of relief. The young will always try to leave the nest. And if not, the parents will often push them out.

For most students, College is about new experiences and personal growth. The body and the mind can change dramatically between the ages of 18 and 22, and the university campus offers the opportunity to mature in a rich and stimulating environment that is culturally, philosophically, and academically diverse.

For many students, the University is the place to rub shoulders with passionate faculty who are world leaders in their fields. Led by the
faculty, students have the opportunity to discover their own passions to sustain them through a lifetime of active learning and important contributions to society. Today’s students will be asked to solve problems that we cannot even dream today. The best training for that is side-by-side work with faculty who are solving today’s problems. UF makes such research opportunities available to many undergraduates, and we expand those opportunities each year. UF faculty win over half a billion dollars per year of competitive research grants and contracts, so there are plenty of interesting questions and worthwhile work for the motivated undergraduate. Incidentally, I might add that the half a billion dollars per year is a major contributor to economic development in this state.

For some students, College is about getting a credential that leads to a good job. Those students will appreciate that career success depends as much on your academic training as it does on your ability to communicate, understand, and manage your environment. By now, you have heard the catchphrase “The Gator Nation is Everywhere.” That has a practical meaning for you. You are forming a rich network of personal friends, academic contacts, and business
associates for whom the Gator bond will remain strong for a lifetime. That camaraderie will stand you in good stead as you move through the world. There is often substantial truth in the old saying, “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” You are fortunate to know Gators.

For all of you students, College is about the Best Time of Your Life. It means new friends, social activities, and, of course, football, basketball, and maybe even lacrosse. You have enormous energy and insatiable curiosity. You soak up knowledge and new experiences like sponges. Take full advantage of the academic offerings and campus life. Try different subjects. We still believe in the virtues of a liberal education in this country (and I do not use the word “liberal” in a political sense) which is why we ask you to take courses in the humanities, the social sciences, and sciences. Once you leave here, you may not be able to spend as much time in settings as diverse, welcoming, stimulating, and, frankly, inexpensive, as the University of Florida.
But don’t spend too much time here. We know this is a great place to spend four years to mature intellectually, physically, and emotionally. But there is life after college. The world needs you out there. And the university needs the space to admit your brothers, sisters, and cousins.

So what have I said in these few minutes? Figure out what you want from this university and go for it. We can open your mind to what excites the faculty and your eyes to the diversity and complexity of the world. This is your time to grow your innate abilities and perfect your talents. If you take full advantage of what UF offers, then the Best Time of Your Life will get even Better.

Thank you and goodnight. And Go Gators.