

## President's Commencement Address - December 2024

It is a great honor for me to be the first to formally call you Dr. Ferrer. My heartfelt congratulations go to the newly minted PhD here and to his family, who have joined us to celebrate the significant milestone in his life. We greatly appreciate your presence today. Thank you very much.

About thirty-some years ago, I was also a graduate student who fought my way to a PhD. So, I know getting a PhD is challenging, and two PhDs must be even harder. You have been striving with your eyes kept on your goal, one PhD from Paris-Saclay University and yet another from NAIST. We salute what you have overcome and accomplished. Of course, we must not forget Professor Kawai's support here.

As you may have realized, you are the only one who has received your diploma today, and my commencement address is only for you. So, I decided to make it a little personal.

I was born in Wakayama, a seaside town about 70 km from here. My family had little connection to academia; indeed, I was a “first-generation student,” meaning I was the first in my family to go to college. My parents probably didn't expect me to go even beyond college and attend graduate school for a PhD. Choosing my major also didn't go as planned. In my sophomore year, I accidentally peeked into a biology lecture where a professor explained how stimuli are transmitted along a nerve cell. The mechanism was fascinating enough for me to switch my major from physics to biology. Indeed, looking back on my career path, I realize a number of chance events affected my decisions at the crossroads of my life.

After completing my PhD, I moved to San Diego, California, to do a postdoc in the laboratory of Prof. Paul Russell, an eminent cell biologist, because he happened to be a good friend of my PhD supervisor. Four years later, I applied for assistant professor positions at more than 30 different institutions in the US, and I could have ended up at any one of them. After all, I received a job offer from University of California, Davis, where I was fortunate to work with excellent colleagues for more than 10 years.

In my decision to return to Japan and join NAIST as a faculty member, happenstances again played an important role. I don't have time to explain those happenstances today, but many people asked why I left UC Davis and if I missed the place. Alexander Graham Bell, known for his invention of the first practical telephone, said, “When one door closes, another opens; but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us.” Indeed, coming to NAIST opened yet another door for me, which was an unexpected career opportunity as a university president.

According to one survey-based study, two-thirds of people believe that chance events have significantly influenced their careers, and obviously, I am one of them. Such chance events or happenstances are sometimes called “縁” in Japanese, a word derived from Buddhism. Considering the role of chance opportunities in driving our career, making definite long-term plans or commitments may not be very sensible, particularly when the future is uncertain in the era of VUCA: Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity.

But don't get me wrong, Dr. Ferrer. I am not suggesting you should passively rely on luck or be in the right place at the right time to pursue your career after departing from NAIST. Instead, I would like to point you to “the planned happenstance theory” advocated by Professor John Krumboltz of Stanford University. “Planned happenstance” is an oxymoron and sounds strange. Still, the theory presents an interesting view that we can plan and prepare ourselves in advance for chance events and happenstances that can lead to opportunities to build fulfilling careers.

Krumboltz's planned happenstance theory proposes that we should develop five skills to recognize, create, and use chance as career opportunities. The first skill is curiosity, which encourages us to explore new learning opportunities. The second skill is persistence, which is critical for exerting effort despite setbacks. The third skill is flexibility, which allows us to adjust under different circumstances. The fourth skill is optimism, which enables us to view new opportunities as possible and attainable. Lastly, a “risk-taking” mindset encourages actions facing uncertain outcomes.

Like most of our alumni, you must have already acquired these skills in the course of your graduate study and are ready to explore the next stage of your career. But it is still worth remembering that indecisiveness about your future career is not necessarily bad. Krumboltz suggests that we can reframe indecision as open-mindedness. Enjoy whatever comes your way. We are truly proud of what you have achieved here and even more proud of what you will accomplish in the years to come. Show us what you are made of.

May your future be rewarding and fulfilling!

Kaz Shiozaki  
President