

# A Year In Review

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2017 Edition

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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome back! This is the fourth and final installment of my year in review series, and as such I thought that I would shake things up. I've split my time between co-op and classes in the past year, with most of that time devoted to school. Instead of going into excruciating, month-by-month detail, I'm going to give a brief description of last year, and then focus my attention on a "years" in review. I think that it is appropriate to reflect on how the last four years have changed me because my time at college is coming to an end. Ready?

## 525,600 MINUTES<sup>1</sup>

After submitting my 2016 year in review, I spent a few more months in Boston. I don't know exactly where things left off, but I know that those last months were probably filled with work. I met a few people outside of the office, but spent most of my time alone. I worked long hours on Monday - Thursday with the goal of getting Fridays off, which was when I went hiking and exploring. As I said in last year's reflection, I learned to love doing things alone. I found interesting books to read in the park, spent time exploring the city, and hiked numerous trails in the Massachusetts/New Hampshire area.

Two months and 650 miles later, I was back in Cincinnati for my senior year.<sup>2</sup> The experience, in a word, was miraculous. Senior courses for chemical engineers (and probably most engineering disciplines) are meant to help students review fundamental concepts and tie them together in a design-based environment. I took two process design courses, worked on senior capstone projects<sup>3</sup>, and completed a chemical engineering laboratory class. I closed out my undergraduate research, took electives in environmental modeling, and worked again as a teaching assistant. I also coordinated an honors experience meant to help teaching assistants be more effective leaders in class.

That's a long list of things, and it feels weird to condense eight months of my life into one paragraph. I thought about giving more detail, but realized that it would inevitably result in me climbing on a soap-box and ranting about the weird things that happened to me in the past year.<sup>4</sup> Instead, what I'd like to point out is the thing that these activities have in common: they all helped me take the knowledge I've gained over the past four years and form it into a cohesive whole. Capstone courses helped me organize my engineering knowledge into a structure I can rely on when I start working full time in industry. Finishing undergraduate research helped me

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<sup>1</sup> I am required at this point to begin each year in review with a horrible pun

<sup>2</sup> Some may be asking, "Alex, if you finished senior year, why are you writing this? Aren't you done?" Well, not really. I've completed my Bachelor's degree, but still have two semesters of Master's classes to finish up. I'm part of UC's ACCEND program. Look it up, it's legit

<sup>3</sup> Yes, there was more than one

<sup>4</sup> For example, I survived Boston with my car intact, but got rear-ended during a 36-hour visit to Chicago

condense three years of work into one fundamental idea, and working as an honors experience coordinator developed both my leadership and teaching skills. Based on what I know my personality type and learning style to be<sup>5</sup>, the past year was an integral part of my development as both an engineer and as a human being. I function best when collecting large amounts of information, and I choose to process concepts introspectively with the goal of developing a broad understanding of the entire system. The classes and roles I was placed in this year allowed me to exercise these aspects of my personality. The result was an intellectually and personally rewarding senior experience.

## GRADUATION SPEECHES

Confession time: I don't like being subjected to graduation speeches. Yes, they can be interesting and, yes, they usually give good advice, but once you've heard a few, you've heard them all. The message usually includes *challenge yourself*, *follow your passion*, and *you can't achieve greatness overnight*. These are all valid sentiments, but I think they are virtually useless for everyday life. Getting out of bed on a Monday morning after staying up 4 hours too late on Sunday is challenging. Following your passion can mean anything, and doesn't help those who don't know what their passion is. Also, what, *exactly*, is the difference between a passion and something that I love to do?<sup>6</sup> Finally, it's true that greatness cannot be achieved overnight, but hearing it over and over across hundreds of speeches doesn't make the process any easier.

I'm probably being too harsh on graduation speakers. I've never given a graduation speech, which means that I probably have no room to talk. I have, however, thought about what I would say if given the opportunity. This reflection led me to the conclusion that speakers usually talk about one of two things: the past or the future. "Remember four years ago when we were all strangers?" "Think about the great opportunities that we will encounter when we move on to college/the workforce!" I've heard these lines paraphrased innumerable ways. The one thing that I have *never heard*, however, is a graduation speech that addresses the *present*.

This matters to me because I hardly remember my high school graduation. I spent so much time thinking about memories of the previous four years and about the exciting things that the future held that I completely forgot to think of what was happening right in front of me. I wish that someone had given a speech and told everyone to stop what they were doing and think about their surroundings *in that moment*. Someone should have said to forget what college you're going to, and to forget about the hilarious time when you wiped out during the second week of freshman year.<sup>7</sup> Forget about shopping for your dorm room, finding your first apartment out of college, and about how terrifying the first day of school seemed. I wish someone had told me to

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<sup>5</sup> INTJ, for those who are curious

<sup>6</sup> For example, I love taking photos, but it is not my passion

<sup>7</sup> I'm speaking from experience. It was raining and they had just waxed the floors...

look around at the people who surrounded me – friends, family, and teachers – and to take time to feel the emotions of the moment. Sadly, however, the emotions were probably gone before most people even realized they were there. I think that we should have all held on to those feelings, just a second, instead of rushing through graduation and running on the next big thing.

## A LETTER TO ME

I was watching a YouTube video the other day, and the host was doing a Q&A session.<sup>8</sup> He brought up a comment that he heard on the radio, and it went something like this:

“Would you rather have lunch with your past self or your future self?”

I watched this video *months* ago, and I am still unable to answer that question. I’ve learned from my past and I am excited for my future, so I’m not sure that I would want to change either one. Interestingly, though, I’ve spent some time reading over my previous years in review, and I realized that it is almost exactly like having lunch with my past self. However, instead of 2017 Alex giving sage advice to 2013 Alex, the conversation is the other way around. I’ve been sending myself the same message for three years in a row.

I spoke in 2014 about how I wanted to get better at seeing the big picture, and about the importance of efficiency to help open more personal time in my schedule. In 2015, I talked about how I reflected on my goals to set my career path while simultaneously developing my skills in areas outside of engineering, such as in photography and music. Last year, I talked about the importance of being able to spend time with myself, and about truly connecting with people by making technology less of a distraction.

These reflections all have the same truth behind them: the truth that college was a time that allowed me to tune into my personality type. My reflections in 2014 are tailored to my systems-thinking, and to the importance of giving myself time to introspectively process new information. 2015’s sentiments represent the part of my personality that likes to plan, and the part that enjoys learning a broad range of things. Last year’s writing showed that I need to be comfortable exploring my personality, and that I need to learn to tune into others as well.

This brings us back to my graduation speech. Knowing yourself is something that happens in the present. Reflecting on the past may give good insights<sup>9</sup>, but can be blinding if it becomes your sole focus. Actions in the past are not guaranteed to predict how you’ll respond in the future. Reflecting on the future, moreover, tells you nothing about how your life is going right now. What I’ve found – what college has taught me – is that the only way to know yourself is to focus on the present. I am *not* saying that planning for the future is not important – it is! But with

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<sup>8</sup> Credit: <https://www.youtube.com/andrewgoesplaces>

<sup>9</sup> That’s basically what I spent the last page doing, so I guess I’m being somewhat contradictory. Oh, well

regards to knowing yourself, tuning into the emotions of the present is the only way. I *hope* that the future is exciting and holds many opportunities, but I won't know until I get there. I know what happened in the past, but I also know that time moves in only one direction and that, no matter how joyous or difficult the past was, I cannot live through it again.<sup>10</sup> The only thing that anyone truly knows is what is happening right now.

And me, right now? I'm sitting at a Panera Bread in Avon Lake, OH watching three generations of family members discuss the youngest child's new job at the zoo. I'm watching a high school student work through summer English and Chemistry tutoring, which I know takes dedication and commitment. I'm watching a middle-aged man work on a computer, and I'm watching a child play hide and seek with his dad.<sup>11</sup> I hope that each of these people are tuned into the emotions of the present, instead of focusing on the worries of tomorrow (a Monday) or on the disappointments of yesterday. I hope that the three-generation family feels what it is like to be together, and I hope that the high school student feels the accomplishment of working through this grams-to-pounds conversion. I hope that the middle-aged man is feeling accomplished in his work, and I hope that the father and son are experiencing joy together. I hope that everyone pays attention to how they are feeling in this moment, because if they don't there will be nothing to remember. The sunny day at Panera will be lost, and all its joy with it.

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Let us commit to never losing a sunny day again. Let us commit to savoring the moment and truly knowing ourselves. This is what I've learned in college. It is a lesson that will persist long after my knowledge of thermodynamics, calculus, and chemistry have faded into the past.

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<sup>10</sup> One of my hobbies is sticking the word "yet" onto the end of scientifically accepted phenomena. So, I'll modify that statement to say that we cannot go back in time...yet.

<sup>11</sup> I'm not being creepy. I'm just noticing things that everyone would notice if they took the time to look