

# Embry Riddle Aeronautical University Winter Commencement

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Russell “Chip” Childs, President & CEO, SkyWest, Inc.

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Thank you, President Butler. I appreciate the opportunity to be here. And good morning, Embry Riddle Eagles!

I want to begin by saying to all of you: students, faculty, your family and friends:

Congratulations, Embry Riddle Class of 2018! What an achievement in your educational careers. I've been where you're sitting before, and I know what you're thinking: when is this guy going to stop talking so I can go have lunch. I assure you that I'm with you. At work I sometimes joke that I have the attention span of a gnat, so I'll make this brief. I do want you to take a minute though, and appreciate the hard work and effort it took to get you to this point. The late-night studying, the hours and years you've dedicated to planning and mastering your chosen studies, all have led up to right now. Enjoy it. Of course, there will be more late-night worries and over-caffeinated days in your careers ahead. But for now, take a minute to congratulate yourself on making it to this awesome milestone.

Believe it or not, I've been in your shoes. As a young graduate, I was ready to take on any challenge. I was hungry and eager to make a difference. I was just a kid from a small town in Southern Utah, who spent summers laying asphalt for my dad's construction company. And let me tell you, if you've never felt the 400-degree temperatures of hot asphalt on a summer day, or driven 4-axle trucks, you haven't lived.

I've learned a lot since then, and I'm still learning. As you begin the next step of your path, I want to share a few fundamental truths that have helped me in my career.

I didn't study engineering or aviation like many of you. I'm okay at math...so I studied finance and economics. I've even been known to say that everything starts mathematically. And while I do believe that, my advice to you first and foremost is to remember that no math adds up to success without strong relationships. Foster them. Make the important relationships a priority – your family, your employees, your customers – and everything else will fall into place. And I don't mean just be nice to these people. Build trust and credibility in your relationships by doing what you say you'll do. Act with integrity.

At SkyWest, we have four customers – not the 50 million passengers we carried this year, although they're part of it – we have just four customers. These four customers are our major

airline partners who pay for our product. And I work on those relationships constantly. I don't mean just being friendly with them. I mean doing what we say we'll do, acting with integrity, and owning up to any mistakes while delivering on solutions. And because of that commitment, today those four relationships continue to thrive.

Second, make it a priority to simplify. Few things are as complex as operating 3,000 flight departures every day. The work it takes to get one flight off the ground can take up to 100 people, from the network and scheduling team to the dispatchers, from the mechanics to the fuelers, from the rampers to the crew operating the flight. It can be easy to get lost in the weeds of the complicated processes, procedures and machines. But as CEO, my job is to simplify. Take a complex problem and boil it down to its most basic core – and then solve it. I can tell you that learning how to simplify any problem will not only help you on your path, it will also help your relationships.

Third, know your weaknesses – and your strengths. A few years ago I took flying lessons on my path to become a private pilot. I will tell you I'm the safest possible pilot, because I decided not to become one.

And that's a critical lesson that any basic business book will tell you in so many words: know your strengths, as well as your weaknesses. Of course, knowing them is the easy part; acting on that knowledge is a little more difficult. Putting that knowledge to work and effectively navigating your weaknesses will open the right doors. Don't waste time brooding over a weakness, just move ahead. Leverage your strengths. This ability is rarer than you might think, but I credit it with much of my success so far. I know better than to pursue something that could end in disaster. But for the record, I'm a great pilot in the simulator.

Fourth: it's good to have a plan, but be prepared for unexpected opportunities. No doubt getting to graduation has taken plenty of planning. Maybe you're here today after changing your mind – maybe even more than once. I want you to stop and think for a minute whether everything leading up to today went as planned. If it all did, I applaud you. You're clearly a unicorn. More often than not, there are unexpected twists and turns and new roads. Be ready to take those opportunities.

I accepted a position as Vice President Controller at SkyWest in early 2001. Some of you may have been very small at that time, but hopefully the year has some relevance to you. I moved my family to St. George, Utah, SkyWest's headquarters, on September 7, 2001 – with no idea the change in course for my industry and our country that would come in the days ahead. That was a fateful week for America and for the aviation industry. A few days later, with boxes still all over my new St. George home, I sat in the executive offices at SkyWest watching,

dumbfounded, as a second commercial aircraft flew directly into World Trade Center II. I vividly recall seeing it crumble to the ground, thinking, 'what the hell have I done?'

SkyWest Airlines' planes would be among the first back in the skies after the airports reopened days later. We got to work, harnessed our teams, and delivered exceptionally well considering the circumstances. Like all in our country and industry, we carry the scars of 9/11, and we will never forget.

Because we were capable and continued to meet our commitments to our customers, SkyWest continued to grow in the years that followed. I've never received a promotion when things are going well. I didn't plan on becoming CEO of the premier regional airline when I sat in your seat. I also didn't map out a specific five or 10-year plan. Work hard, execute with precision, and be prepared to act on opportunities. No one has a crystal ball, but if you're willing to work hard and rise to the opportunity – even an opportunity you didn't plan for – you'll be successful.

And finally, I'll leave you with this thought: be grateful. Be grateful for this moment, this milestone. Look around you at the family members, friends and mentors who supported you this far in your journey. Thank them for their support. Be grateful that you have the ability to work hard and have it mean something. You've attended an outstanding university where you've learned essential skills to help you succeed. Use these skills and experiences, and be grateful that you can do that and have it mean something. Your work can and will make the world around you better than you found it.

Graduates of Embry Riddle, this prestigious university, Congratulations once again. The future is very bright, and it's yours.