



Icahn  
School of  
Medicine at  
Mount  
Sinai

## 2022 WHITE COAT REMARKS

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# ICAHN SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AT MOUNT SINAI

Class of 2026, family and friends, faculty, and members of the Boards of Trustees, welcome to our annual White Coat Ceremony.

Some years ago, during a visit to the Museum of Modern Art I was struck by an unconventional exhibit. It was a canvas. That's all— just a canvas, painted white.

I wondered, "How does that get into the Museum of Modern Art?" One of my grandchildren could have done that. I could have done that!

The concept, of course, is a *tabula rasa*—a blank slate. Through our own perspectives, each of us, in our mind's eye, pictures something different on a blank canvas.

The 17th century philosopher John Locke suggested that the young mind is, "void of all characters." Knowledge, Locke argued, is acquired through our own experience of the world.

At the beginning of your schooling, each of you was, in a sense, a *tabula rasa*. Through years of education and personal experience you have grown to be outstanding, intellectually curious students. Your canvas is filled with exceptional achievements and your promise is virtually unlimited. That's how you arrived here at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

But, now, as first year students embarking on a career in medicine, the white coat you are about to receive represents a new *tabula rasa*.

How will you paint that blank canvas? What will you contribute to the field of medicine? How will you relieve suffering? How will you help to improve human health? How will you make scientific discoveries that will help millions of patients? These are the challenges we place before you. Today it is now time to begin painting the canvas of your life's work.

As part of your base camp experience, we asked, "What does the white coat symbolize to you?"

Here are a few of your answers:

"The white coat means an **opportunity** to advocate and care for the communities I represent and to serve as an ally for the communities I have learned from and with."

"The white coat symbolizes the **American Dream** coming to fruition for a family of immigrants that has persevered through discrimination, inequality, and socioeconomic barriers for over twenty years."

"To me the white coat serves as a **bridge**, connecting me to the world of cutting edge research and clinical practice to the world of the disadvantaged, marginalized and without access to spaces like Mount Sinai."

"My white coat symbolizes **sacrifice**. Its fabric is woven from the sacrifices my loved ones have made so that I may have the freedom, personal liberties, and privileges they did not."

"For me, the White Coat is a symbol of the **perseverance** and **courage** my family had to immigrate to the US from Mexico in the hope of a better future."

"The white coat symbolizes the humble **acceptance** of a new **responsibility** and privilege to uphold the principles of human dignity and scientific truth in the care of all people, indiscriminate of their identity."

Your answers—all of them—are inspiring.

Here at Icahn Mount Sinai you will learn how to make the symbolism of the white coat a reality. You will have the opportunity to fulfill your dreams by studying the science and art of healing, while gaining insight into how the practice of medicine can be improved.

And, that is what we need you to do. We need you to dream big and aim high. We need ambitious innovators, people who are dissatisfied with the status quo because medicine is not all it can and should be.

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As much as medicine has advanced, there are still far too many questions and too few answers. We need to understand the mechanisms of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias and find effective therapies because today there are none. We need to be better prepared for the next pandemic. We need to keep advancing oncology to develop more curative treatments for cancer.

These are among the greatest challenges confronting humankind. Yes, they are daunting. But, these challenges can and must be overcome.

Winston Churchill said, "The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty."

In short, we need you to make a difference. That is why you are here at Icahn Mount Sinai.

Here you will be exposed to innovative thinkers and inspiring teachers—scientists and clinicians who are relentless in their pursuit of better treatments and cures. During the first wave of COVID-19, when Mount Sinai was at the epicenter of the pandemic, our faculty members courageously stepped forward to the frontlines in our hospitals and clinics, and in our laboratories where they made discoveries that were crucial to the fight against COVID-19. They demonstrated great courage in the face of personal risk, working tirelessly to save lives. These heroes are now your teachers, mentors, and role models.

Mount Sinai's character has been molded by adversity, never more so than during the trying days of the pandemic. Now, you are a member of the Mount Sinai family. So, you need to know, for us, rising to a challenge is the norm, not the exception.

In many ways, that is the essence of being a great physician—it requires you to continually rise to the challenge.

In announcing our nation's ambition to go to the Moon, President John F. Kennedy said, we choose to do so not because it's easy, but because it's hard.

You can say the same for becoming a doctor and scientist.

As a doctor, you'll regularly face challenges that most people never experience. Patients turn to you during the worst moments of their lives. Sometimes, there will be little you can do to help. Some of your patients will die and you will need to console grieving families. You will be expected to stitch up the victims of adversity, both physically and mentally. You will need to make sacrifices on behalf of your patients, even when you are facing personal challenges. Through it all, you'll be expected to be a pillar of strength.

Yes, being a doctor is tough. But it is also a privilege. To use our knowledge to heal, to demonstrate courage, strength, and grace under pressure—these are gifts, unlike any others in the world.

Those of you who become research scientists will need the creativity and insight to come up with new ideas, and the perseverance to see them successfully proven in the lab. Through it all, you will have to confront skeptics, even ridicule, until you prove your theories and gain universal acceptance.

Some of you will make discoveries that will expand scientific knowledge and can help many, even millions of people. Many of you will save lives.

Granted, these moments do not occur as often as we wish. But they do happen. They are not a myth.

Class of 2026, you have immense potential. So, we expect greatness from you. But, that does not mean perfection, nor does it mean constant success.

Do not fear failure. To become a transformative scientist, you will need to take bold bets, some of which will fail. Thomas Edison, perhaps the nation's greatest inventor, understood that the road to success must be paved with failure, though he didn't like to use that word. "I have not failed," he said. "I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

Bouncing back from failure and setbacks will be essential to your success. So I highly recommend that you build your capacity for resilience. We will help you. A resilient mind will serve you very well in medical school and far beyond.

The canvas of your white coat will be far more than a title or a set of grades. Much of what you will create on that *tabula rasa* will not always be seen. But it will be felt. It is your commitment to your patients, your persistence, your personal sacrifice, your collaborative spirit, your willingness to step forward to lead and to serve.

These are the qualities that make great clinicians and scientists. Class of 2026, I know that you all have that potential. With the education you will receive at Icahn Mount Sinai, you can and will become transformative leaders who will improve medicine for the benefit of humanity.

Thank you.