Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

# Commencement Address 2026

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## Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

Good evening, everyone. Welcome to this 57th Commencement Ceremony of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. I am thrilled to see today's graduates in their academic regalia, and so many family members and guests here to celebrate their accomplishments.

Graduates: through your outstanding academic work you have earned the admiration of our faculty. Our medical students have not only excelled academically and clinically, but also demonstrated a passion for expanding scientific and medical knowledge. The class has contributed to more than 800 peer-reviewed articles. Our PhD students, publishing their research in the world's most prestigious journals, have applied cutting-edge technologies to address some of the greatest challenges in biomedicine. Together, our students have identified mechanisms that drive disease; applied sophisticated AI-based computational methods to increase our understanding of disease and improve care for patients across populations; and uncovered processes behind human decision-making. These achievements required painstaking work.

We recognize the intense dedication and long hours it's taken to be here today. This is a moment for all of you to savor!

Graduates, when you arrived at Mount Sinai, New York City was emerging from the worst of the pandemic. As you witnessed, this was an epic battle, with medical professionals valiantly caring for COVID-19 patients, and scientists working relentlessly to understand and conquer the virus. In the process, our inspiring workforce reinforced Mount Sinai's reputation as an institution built on courage and compassion. These qualities are in our institutional DNA, and you should embrace them always as physicians and scientists.

As much as I hope we never experience another pandemic, we likely will. But regardless, I know that you will confront deadly diseases. And you will need to demonstrate courage.

Courage is the willingness to accept a great challenge—a challenge whose full dimensions may be unknown. Yet, however great the challenge may be, it is essential that you remain willing—and committed—to push forward, for your patients, for your science, for the greater good.

Winston Churchill described courage as "the first of human qualities because...it is the quality which guarantees all others."

For scientists, that means being courageous in tackling the most complicated scientific questions facing humanity. Courageous in not being intimidated by failures or by the enormity of bold and risky undertakings.

For physicians, that means being courageous in assuming responsibility for your patients' health, even when confronting the most difficult cases. And courageous and compassionate in comforting patients and their families when you do not have an answer, when there is no cure, and sometimes not even a treatment.

You will need to demonstrate "grace under pressure," as Ernest Hemingway described courage.

Yours will be the first generation of doctors and scientists who must also be courageous in harnessing the massive amounts of data that are now foundational to biomedicine and will become increasingly integrated into routine clinical practice.

Consider that the human genome has roughly 3 billion base pairs of DNA—a linear string of four bases, A, T, C, or G, 3 billion units long—that make up the blueprint of our bodies.

We must have the courage to embrace the challenge of understanding this daunting amount of information. With the immense computing power of artificial intelligence, we have for the first time the capacity to make sense of it, to learn more about the function—and dysfunction—of physiological processes, and thereby solve the mysteries of disease and devise new interventions that stimulate or block a given gene.

While this is difficult work, Mount Sinai is embracing the challenge: we will lead the way in providing genome sequencing for all of our patients and integrate it fully with troves of other clinical data to better diagnose, treat, cure, and prevent disease. This effort is at the heart of Mount Sinai's courageous goal to become the world's first true learning health system, promoting precision treatments, and health and well-being, from before birth through advanced aging.

Practicing science and medicine also requires that we maintain humility to recognize that there is still much we don't know about fundamental biology. Today, we have a partial understanding—perhaps only 20 percent—of human disease across organs.

All doctors and scientists face moments when they must have the

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humility and honesty to say, "I don't know" ... the courage to admit when they're wrong ... and the willingness to revise their thinking.

Many of your patients will not heal. Some, sadly, will die.

Many of your experiments will fail. Sometimes, an entire research program will fail.

You must be prepared to accept failure and learn from it.

And you must be courageous in standing up for science and medicine in a society where too many doubt the validity of knowledge and the effectiveness of proven therapies.

Graduates, you sit here surrounded by adoring family, friends, and faculty. How wonderful if you always experience the same admiration and respect that you feel in this majestic hall today. But that won't be the case.

Traditionally, doctors and scientists have been among the most widely respected members of society. The public has wanted to hear what we have to say.

Imagine my delight when, as Dean of one of the nation's elite medical schools, I received a hundred likes on a post on X on which I have 10,000 followers.

...That is, until I learned that Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have more than half a billion people following them on social media. And that Selena Gomez has 400 million followers awaiting her next post.

Well, it's not easy for scientists and doctors to compete with athletes and actors—especially in this age of celebrity. I can accept that.

But what we cannot accept is the politicization of science: when "follow the science" means—to people on all ends of the political spectrum—following what you already believe to be true. That is the very opposite of science. Science is never settled. It is the never-ending quest for understanding. It requires continually questioning and revising knowledge—especially for biomedicine, where we still have so much to learn.

Sadly, this politicization has damaged the public's trust in science and medicine.

According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, nearly a quarter of Americans have little or no trust in scientists to act in the best interests of the public—up significantly from pre-pandemic levels.

And just 53 percent of Americans believe doctors have high ethics and honesty, according to a 2025 Gallup Poll. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, that figure was 77 percent.

Science, of course, has no political agenda. It knows no political party. New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who served both Democratic and Republican presidents during his illustrious career, said, "Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts."

Class of 2026, as physicians and scientists, you will need to resist distortion and oversimplification, defend the facts, and exercise the courage to stand up for your work.

You are entering a community of service—of honor and integrity—that calls upon you to do all you can to better understand human health and disease, to heal patients, and to insist upon equity in care. In the words of poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, to remain "strong in will; To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

You are fortunate to be at the start of a revolution in science and medicine, an era in which biomedicine is approaching a renaissance that will fundamentally improve our ability to fight disease and maintain health, with approaches that seemed like science fiction when those of us on stage were in your shoes.

Wherever you further your work as a physician, wherever you conduct research as a scientist, you will always be a member of the distinguished Mount Sinai family. You are part of a continuum whose task is to expand biomedical knowledge, improve human health, and ensure that all patients receive the care they need. This is a great responsibility—but I know you will embrace it with courage.

Let these challenges inspire you through what we are confident will be long and productive careers that will make us all proud.

Thank you and congratulations!

We will now present honorary degrees to our distinguished guests.

Our first honorary degree recipient is Hasso Plattner, Chairman, SAP, and founder, Hasso Plattner Foundation. Presenting this degree is Dr. Alexander Charney, Director, the Charles Bronfman Institute for Personalized Medicine, and accepting on behalf of Mr. Plattner is Dr. Lothar Wieler, co-director, the Hasso Plattner Institute for Digital Health at Mount Sinai, and Chair, Digital Global Public Health at the Hasso Plattner Institute in Germany. Dr. Charney and Dr. Wieler, please step forward.