Good evening!

Most of our batch mates know me as “Mister Shift”: I entered Ateneo as a Health Sciences student, shifted to ME, then planned to go to AMF, but officially shifted to [Pure] BS Mathematics after a year, then went back to ME after one summer. This experience gave me a perspective of a life in and out of the School of Management.

For the past four years, the prevailing narrative and the dominant caricature of a SOM student is a person dressed up in a suit and tie, cogged in the corporate machine, and drowning in bills and coins. Undeniably, we have been at the center of a lot of issues. A student-initiated strike last year labeled the job fair as “SOM-centric” with the strong presence of big corporations, and the lack of other enterprises/sectors in the said event. A lot of professors criticize a business education to be too pragmatic, too vocational; one even called it “BS College” – a generic education that does not have space in an institution of higher learning like the Ateneo. A lot of us disagree and some have even taken it personally. However, these accusations also tell us that maybe there is a need to better understand this education. We cannot simply dismiss their concerns; instead, we should embrace them and tell them the reason why we stand for the choice we have made to devote at least four years of our lives studying the field of business.

If we are here to truly celebrate the excellence of Ateneans who best personified the SOM education, I think it is important to first ask, “What are we really celebrating? In essence, what is an Ateneo business education to begin with? Does it even make sense for a Jesuit institution – which has philosophy and humanities at its core - to be involved in the field of business? Are the two incongruent and incompatible?”

I found my answer to this question through three people I met in college.

The first one is a SOM student – the first Atenean in a family of businessmen. Something his family could never understand was why their son was spending too much time understanding Fr. David’s readings and reflecting on the works of Plato, Marcel, and Heidegger. More than these subjects being time consuming, they questioned why they were investing resources on their son’s understanding of film, art, culture, the Trinity and even the philosophy behind death, when they envision their son to be the future CEO of a company. It all seemed irrelevant. Even counterproductive.

This encounter illustrates my first answer to the question “what is the essence of a Jesuit business education?”

Our liberal arts education makes us better businessmen. As marketers, for example, our reflections about life and relationships, love and pain, family and friendship, sociality and individuality deepen our consumer insights, humanize our marketing communication efforts, and establish a connection to a target market even if we are not personally part of that segment.

We are able to empty ourselves and become open to the real business needs of the people around us. This is how Target Market X transfigures to Nanay Rosita, a mother of five who wants nothing but the best for her children when she chooses the milk for her family, and how we are able to subsequently align all our advertisements to messages that pierce through her heart. The same goes for operations, and how we get a buy-in for proposed process improvements because we understand their work on the level of human struggle and we then talk to them as human persons. In short, we become better marketers, managers, and entrepreneurs because we understand the bigger reality around us.

On the other hand, the purpose of this education isn’t merely utilitarian in nature, and the second person I’ll introduce showed me a deeper value of this Jesuit business education. He was a high school valedictorian, an ME student, but he ended up not pursuing a corporate career. People talked behind his back and said, “Sayang naman yung Ateneo degree niya.”

In response, my second answer to the question is that a Jesuit business education does not just make you a better professional; it makes you a better person. This is something I want to share to my fellow awardees. I hope we do not forget that the way to make Ateneo proud is not just to win all these awards, but to remain faithful to the formation it tried to give us.

Whether we like it or not, life is uncertain: we are unsure whether we’d end up in Marketing, Sales, Operations, Finance, or Entrepreneurship. Heck, some of us may even find ourselves in law school, in med school, or in government. We really do not know, and it is in this unknowing that we realize that the only certain fact in our life is that we will always be a Filipino, we will always be a friend, we will always be a son, we will always be a
person. These are facets of the self that will remain with us forever. This is something we cannot shift out of or escape from. And this is where our formation matters the most.

Without Ateneo, I would have never fully understood the idea of self-donation – the willingness to give yourself because you find joy and self-fulfillment in the service of others. I will never forget the service-learning project under MEA and Dr. Yu, where we taught sari-sari storeowners basic inventory and accounting systems. I don’t like accounting, but the joy of teaching those mothers and their realization that net income is different from ending cash, was incomparable. I probably won’t be a banker, but Ateneo allowed me to discover that I could get joy from selflessness. This moment of self-discovery will always be with me.

Without Ateneo, I would have never deepened my notion of relationships and how they make you human. Suddenly, Sunday lunches had a different meaning after I learned in Philo the brokenness of parents, and even something as seemingly trivial as one’s presence in a batch party had depth after seeing your Year Devt Council Representative working so hard to make his coursemates happy. I became a better son, a better friend, a better person.

Similarly, the second friend I met in college would probably have to re-appropriate his LS skills in the context of a public school as a TFP teacher or there is a small chance a genetic algorithm would be necessary, but what I want to highlight is that when life threw the greatest challenge and the biggest surprise in the middle of the night, he was ready to be unhinged because he was full as a person. This readiness is something that cannot be stripped regardless of our career, regardless of what will happen to us in the future.

At this point, it seems like the conclusion is for all of us to get a liberal arts degree. However, this is where I will disagree and respond with the value of a business education in Jesuit formation. What we celebrate tonight is the excellence in the field of management – the excellence in making the abstract real, the excellence in translating our deeper understanding of life into concrete steps to make real people experience it.

This is where I’ll share the story of the third person I met in college. She is a Management Engineering major who ended up putting up her own social enterprise. It is a cocoa business that directly benefits poor farmers in Davao and Bicol. Her story is a testament of how her deeper understanding of poverty, human dignity, and development translated into a promising business enterprise. If we did not learn strategy formulation, financial management and operational research, then maybe these values would remain within the self.

The beauty of taking up business in college is that we are able to rethink the reality of commerce and try to find ways to make it better. If we wait until employment before we critically assess business, we might find it to be too late already – we cannot speak up because we are afraid of our boss, we cannot get a buy-in because we do not have a solid proof that this is feasible, or we will simply be frustrated and we will be eaten up by the system. Mr. Claudio was right – college is the only time you can enjoy film, art, culture, and literature - but college is also the only time you can ask questions about the imminent reality in front of you. Tonight, we celebrate our excellence in rethinking the way we do business – the way we decide on our investments in IRC, the way we look at corporate sustainability in IIBD, or the way we innovate our products in SOMBA.

I hope we do not forget how we can push for green initiatives through socially responsible investments, how we can create better products for low-income households because of a good proof of concept in Marketing, or how we can create better workplace conditions through business process re-engineering. What is more humanizing than making the lives of others more humane?

Lastly, I do not want to end with an idealist advocacy that we should all be social entrepreneurs or we should all enter the corporate world demanding a 180 degree turn. The message is simple: find the good in what you do, never lose hope in change, and embrace the critical doubt inside your head.

Find the good not because it is beneficial but because that’s what you are meant to do to remain faithful to yourself. Magpakatotoo ka. Never lose hope because being good is a struggle, but find the joy and the strength in the little steps you take. There are now a lot of good people in government. Corporations are investing and spending on sustainability initiatives. Only in hope do we find the thrust to continue doing the good. Reversing a cliché, Habang may pag-asa, may buhay.

With this hope and determination, I hope we don’t get too comfortable with our MT positions and family businesses. Be disturbed. Honestly, finding the good is not as clear as differentiating black from white. There will be conflict between two goods or two evils. There will be cost: it might hold back your advancement or it might even cut some of your profits. However, embrace this difficulty because this is where you discover
yourself even more. This is the opportunity to become magis – not just to achieve more, but live more. My only wish is that regardless of the career we take, we are all leaving Ateneo with a question in our heads: where is the good in what I do?

Those are my three answers to what we are celebrating tonight. Tonight is a celebration of the promise to do what is good, of the potential to translate our understanding of life into meaningful experiences for us and for others, and of the willingness to embrace the challenge and uncertainty of life to live it better.

Sa huli, gusto kong humingi ng tawad sa mga magulang na naririto. Patawad sapagkat winasak ng Ateneo kung sinuman ang anak ninyo. Ang dali sana kung sweldo lang yung basehan. Ang bilis sana ng ROI ng Ateneo education kung sarili lang yang iniisip. Mas mahimbing sana yung tulog nating lahat pag gabi. Pero ang masasabi ko po ay tinulungan kaming Ateneo na buuin muli aming mga sarili, at iyong nabuong sarili ay iyong sariling kaya naming panindigan at mahalin kasi masasabi naming, “ito talaga ako.”

The daunting task of embracing the unknown is not a solitary experience. Hence, on behalf of the batch, allow me to express a few words of gratitude:

Let us thank our student organizations for being our families away from home. To MEA 2013 and Ateneo Debate Society, you guys taught me the value of community, companionship, and fun.

To our groupmates and teammates, thank you for enriching our Ateneo education. Here in SOM, we all challenged to work in a team environment, and we have to be thankful for this opportunity. To my LS GK groupmates – Delfin, Kenric, Ross, Cam, Anj, Dorcas, Team IIBD 2013 – James, Ed, Sam, Team Sante – Trixie, Dale, Mirick, Joey, Superproject Groupmates – Ed, Aiko, Irene, Nigel, Team Brandstorm Heights – Timmy and Therese, Block T2, Ateneo iTaste Team – Michelle, Lea, Jut, Kenric, James, thank you for the patience, the forgiveness, and the opportunity to build my character.

To Ma’am Marijo, Ma’am Pindy, Sir Johnny Filart, Sir Jay Cruz, Maam Pam Da Silva, Sir Hector Guballa, Sir Tanchoco, Sir Darwin, Ma’am Achoot, Dean Ang, and all our teachers and mentors, thank you for the opportunities, the guidance and the trust.

To our family and friends, thank you for the unfailing love and unwavering understanding. Mom and Dad, I may not be as open and expressive of my emotions and experiences as others, but I will always be here for you.

Lastly, let us thank God – You have been so good to all of us here tonight and even if our love will never suffice, we give our totality to You.

Thank you for listening. Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam.