

Friends, fellow scholars, aspirants to excellence,

Let me begin by telling you something crucial, something fundamental: *you are not alone in your battle.* Everyone undertaking a significant project stands at the edge of what feels like an insurmountable mountain, filled with doubts, wondering if you have what it takes to get to the top—know this—what you feel right now is part of the human condition. And that condition is one of being in a battle.

In the words of St. Augustine, *we were born into a world marked by imperfection, a world where sin and brokenness define our starting point.*

Everyone, no matter how brilliant or driven, carries the weight of that fall. This isn't just about theological doctrine—this is the reality of every person who's ever faced adversity and tried to rise above mediocrity and do something truly exceptional.

St. Augustine's view of humanity's fallen state—that we are inherently flawed, born into a condition where the road to good, to excellence, is fraught with obstacles—is an important reminder for each of us, as mentioned in *Inspiring Excellence*.

You might wonder, *why does this journey feel so hard?*

why do the moments of isolation, the nights where it feels like the research is leading nowhere, hit you so hard?

why does the path to your doctorate sometimes feel like you're pushing a boulder up a never-ending hill?

It's because you are battling external obstacles and the limitations you carry inside.

The fear, the self-doubt, the insecurities that whisper,

“You’re not good enough”

“You’ll never finish this,” or worse,

“You don’t belong here.”

These whispers, these fears, are part of the human condition. Do not believe them, though. St. Augustine would tell us that these battles are rooted in something deeper than mere intellect—they are tied to the brokenness we all carry from birth. But—and this is critical—this is not the end of the story.

Overcoming Through Grace

St. Augustine knew this: left to our own devices, we are indeed limited. On our own, perfection eludes us. But the beauty in it all—and what you must embrace—is that *grace steps in where human effort falls short*. Grace is what bridges the gap between our fallen condition and the heights of excellence we aspire to reach. This grace is not just divine intervention; it's a force that propels you forward and helps you rise when everything inside you tells you to quit.

When you're deep in the trenches of your doctoral work—when your research seems to stall, when mentors are nowhere

to be found, and when you feel like you're battling alone—remember this: you are not battling alone. St. Augustine would remind you that the grace of God is not passive; it's active. It empowers, it uplifts, it transforms. This grace isn't something you earn by your intellect or effort. It is something bestowed upon you simply because you are on the journey. This grace gives you the strength to push through, even when the weight feels unbearable.

Leadership and Scholarship: Becoming More Than You Think You Are

Now, you may have started on a journey to a doctorate (or any life-changing project, for that matter), thinking it was about gaining knowledge, about research, and about becoming an expert in your field. But St. Augustine teaches us something deeper. The real journey is about transformation. You are not simply working toward a degree; you are becoming someone different, someone stronger, someone wiser, someone *more*.

Leadership, as you rise through the ranks of scholarship, is not about wielding authority. It's about becoming the kind of person who, despite knowing the limitations of humanity, steps forward and leads by example, by humility, by service. This is the type of leader you are becoming as you navigate these challenges, and that is no small thing. St Augustine's teachings remind us that through grace, we are equipped to lead—not through our power alone but through a greater strength.

Scholarship is not just an intellectual exercise. It is the deliberate pursuit of truth, and in that pursuit, you must make room for the moments of doubt, for the long silences where it seems the truth will never reveal itself. The truth, much like grace, often arrives when we least expect it—when we've struggled, when we've worked, when we've reached the end of our human capacity—and then, in those moments of surrender, clarity comes.

Embracing the Critical Decisions and Thinking Beyond the Limitations

In a world that is constantly pulling you in every direction, your ability to engage in *critical thinking* becomes your anchor. St. Augustine's own life was one of deep reflection and critical thought. He didn't shy away from tough questions; he grappled with them. You, too, will be called to ask difficult questions, not just of your research but of yourself: Can I do this? Do I have what it takes? Should I continue?

And the answer, dear scholars, is **yes**—you can. But not alone. St. Augustine would tell you that reason and faith

go hand in hand. So, as you make decisions, as you weigh options, draw on both your critical intellect and your spiritual insight. In doing so, you'll find that even the toughest decisions become clearer and more manageable. Remember, your thinking doesn't need to be perfect to be powerful. Grace perfects what you begin.

A Commitment to Life Beyond Academia: Balancing the Academic and the Personal

The doctoral journey can consume you. It can feel as though every moment must be devoted to research, to writing, to perfecting your work. But St. Augustine would remind us that a truly good life is one of balance. *Inspiring Excellence* is not just about academic success; it's about recognizing the value of your entire life—mind, body, and spirit. St. Augustine understood that we are not merely minds in search of knowledge; we are whole beings in search of meaning.

As you pursue your doctorate, do not neglect your soul. Take care of yourself. Spend time in prayer, in reflection, in nature—whatever nourishes you. This is not a distraction; this is essential. St. Augustine knew that without tending to the spirit, all the knowledge in the world would leave us empty. Your commitment to a balanced life will, in the end, make you a better scholar, a better leader, and a better human being.

Divine Guidance: Trust the Plan, Trust the Journey

Finally, let's talk about purpose. Augustine would tell you that *nothing* you are going through is random. There is a plan—there is always a plan. You may not see it now, and that's okay. St. Augustine himself spent years wandering, searching, trying to understand his purpose. But when he finally did, when grace entered his life fully, he realized that every step, every struggle, every moment of doubt had led him to where he was supposed to be.

Doctoral students trust this journey. Trust that the sleepless nights, the frustrations, and the setbacks are all part of something bigger. They are shaping you, molding

you, refining you into the scholar and the person you are destined to become. St. Augustine's theology reminds us that even in our darkest moments, we are guided by a divine hand. You are *never* truly alone, and you are *never* without purpose.

Ultimately, your journey to a doctorate is about far more than earning a degree. It is about discovering who you are, about embracing your limitations, and about leaning into the grace that will carry you beyond what you ever thought possible. You are on the road to excellence, and though the path may be steep, remember: *you walk it not by your strength alone but by the grace that empowers you.*

Now go forth, embrace your journey, and trust that the excellence you seek is already within you, waiting to be revealed.