By Rachel Gillett

If self-made billionaire Larry Ellison hadn’t trusted his instincts and dropped out of college, he may have never founded Oracle, one of the largest technology companies in the world.

Speaking Friday at the University of Southern California’s commencement ceremony, Ellison said his plan growing up was to attend the USC medical school, get married, raise a family, and move to Los Angeles to become a doctor, which was considered the “pinnacle of professions” on the south side of Chicago.

“Virtually everyone important in my life — my family, my teachers, my girlfriend — wanted me to be a doctor,” Ellison said. “Over time, their dreams became my dreams. They convinced me that I should be a doctor.”

But as hard as he tried, Ellison said, he couldn’t force himself to study something that didn’t interest him, and after a few difficult years of being an unhappy premed student, he decided to drop out of college and move to California.

“At the time I thought I lacked discipline and that I was selfish,” Ellison said. “Maybe so. But whatever the underlying reasons, I was unable to make myself into the person that I thought I should be. So I decided to stop trying.”

After moving to California, Ellison became an environmentalist and split his time between computer programming and working outdoors as a rock-climbing instructor and river guide. “At this point in my life, I thought I was making real progress on my journey of self-discovery,” Ellison said. “I had found a cause. I had a couple of jobs that I loved and one that was fun and paid the bills. I was pretty happy with my life — but my wife was not.”

He said that what his wife saw in him was a college dropout who lacked ambition, and eventually she kicked him out and the couple divorced, which Ellison described as another pivotal moment in his life.

“Once again, I was unable to live up to expectations of others,” he said. “But this time, I was not disappointed in myself for failing to be the person they thought I should be. Their dreams and my dreams were different. I would never confuse the two of them again.”

Ellison said that throughout his 20s he continued to experiment and try new things, constantly changing jobs. He eventually helped create a new kind of database that was considered a “defining technology at the dawn of the information age,” cofounded Oracle, and built it into one of the world’s largest technology companies.

“Every day I learned something new and interesting — something I did not know the day before — I liked that,” Ellison said. “I had found a place in the world,” he said, noting that his family finally forgave him for not finishing medical school, and no one ever accused him of lacking ambition again.

His advice to graduates is to never be afraid to experiment and try lots of different things — and to never let people discourage them when they challenge the status quo.

“Each of you has a chance to discover who you are, rather than who you should be,” Ellison said. “A chance to live your dreams, not the dreams of others.”