

Commencement Remarks
Anne E. Huot, President
May 10, 2014

Greetings! And a warm Keene State welcome to our honored guests, the friends and families of our graduates, and our faculty and staff, all of whom have gathered here to celebrate and formally recognize the tremendous achievements of the Class of 2014! Graduates, this is your day! I know well the sense of joy, hope, sadness, gratitude, and apprehension that fills your hearts and minds. It is indeed a day that pulls us in many directions.

Let me focus on gratitude for a moment. Sitting before me are many of the faculty who have dedicated themselves to you and your education. I know them to be scholars in their fields, dedicated to teaching and learning in and out of the classroom. They have been your mentors, your advisors, and in many ways, the people with whom you have apprenticed as you deepened your expertise in your discipline and broadened your learning in the liberal arts. I recently received a letter from the mother of one of our graduates, Jordan Chase. Paraphrasing from her letter, she states that her son is graduating today because Barbara Hamel, Professor Lezcano, and Professor Gilligan saw something in him that he had not yet discovered. They gave him guidance and support and importantly, challenged him to pursue something greater. I know that this story of transformation is shared by many of our students. Graduates, please show your gratitude for the role that your faculty have played in preparing you for a future filled with hope with a round of applause.

And through your educational journey here, you have come to know a professional staff that is deeply committed to your success. Keene State College benefits greatly from their presence. Many of them are here today to share this celebration with you, and to ensure, above all else, that this is a joyous, memorable, and safe occasion. They too, have been your mentors and advisors.

I have watched with great interest the creation of this beautiful venue on the Fiske Quad. It started with the construction of this stage, the attention to the beauty of the grounds around us, and culminated with the placing of the banners and the very chairs you each occupy. It is so easy to say, and yet it takes a monumental effort to pull off and to do so with grace. As many of you know, we lost a dear colleague just three short weeks ago today. Mr. Nate DeMond has been the master behind this set up for years. His meticulous attention to detail was the underpinning of the beauty of this venue and in particular, the exactness with which the chairs you sit in today were set up. I ask that everyone take a moment to appreciate the beauty of our surroundings and offer a warm round of applause in honor of Nate, the crew that worked on the set up, and in gratitude to the many staff who touch our lives every day.

On the occasion of my inauguration I spoke about the importance of those who supported me over my lifetime – my family, my friends, my mentors. It is the rare person who truly goes it alone. And, as evidenced by the thousands of guests here on campus today, I know that the wind beneath the wings of our graduates also includes family, friends, and mentors. Would our graduates please rise, face the audience, and offer your appreciation to your families, your friends, your colleagues, and your loved ones, for the support and encouragement that has made all the difference for you.

Regrettably, not every student that was part of your cohort sits with you today. Some have stepped away, some have transferred, and a few have left this world far too soon. Notably, our hearts are heavy today for the very recent loss of your classmate, Sean Thomas Casey. A poignant reminder that life is precious, short, and unpredictable, compelling us to make the most of the time we have.

Last August, I welcomed the class of 2017 to Keene State College. In my remarks, I offered our incoming class the following advice, “College is not a bleacher sport. Nor is it merely the consumption of information. Rather, it is a place for transformation, exploration and growth. You have one thousand four hundred days at Keene State College (plus an intersession or two). Don’t waste them. You will never be as free as you are right now to boldly embrace the pursuit of knowledge.” Whether you started here as a first year student or transferred to the College, your time here has been marked by a finite number of days. It is my hope that they were days well spent, that you have boldly pursued knowledge, that you have found your passion, and that you leave here with an appetite for lifelong learning and a commitment to civic engagement. I have shared 315 of those days with you. Like you, my journey during that time, has been marked by tradition, by exploration, by learning, by recognizing and seizing opportunity, and by meeting the challenge of the unexpected. And, I believe, those last few points are the hallmark of a well-educated person. Recognizing opportunity, having the courage to take risks, and being prepared to handle the unexpected with grace and humility, are the characteristics of the citizens that our communities and our country need. At the risk of sounding cliché, you really are our future. What you choose to do, as well as what you choose not to do, will define your generation and become the legacy you leave to the generations that will follow you. I invite you to choose well. And of course, have fun along the way. Be the person that lifts the spirits of others with a smile, a joke, an embrace, a kiss, an outstretched hand, and a spirit that chooses to see the opportunity in all that life will bring your way.

Let me offer a few examples from your class that give me great confidence that the world is a better place for your presence in it. Just the other day Justin Tracy drove by a burning house and heard someone screaming for help. He selflessly put on his protective gear, entered the house, and brought an elderly gentleman to safety. He literally saved a life. Many of you have participated in our alternative break program. Your work in Guatemala, Panama, the Florida Keys, the District of Columbia, and Utah has forever changed those communities. And, you are great ambassadors for your College. In our local community our students give of themselves through volunteerism and service learning. The most recent year saw 75,713 hours of service that support local non-profit agencies and impact community wide efforts such as The Cheshire Coalition for Tobacco Free Communities. And, to the scholar athletes that are graduating today, you leave behind an impressive record with 33 NCAA Championships, 25 Little East Titles, 2 ECAC crowns, and 18 All-Americans. You are stars on and off the field. Students involved in Greek Life touched the community with more the 2,000 hours of service and a few of the organizations have been recognized for excellence. Hundreds of students graduating today have been engaged in Student Government, Student Activities, and in dozens of Clubs and Organizations that enrich the vibrancy of life on this campus. Many of you have excelled academically and been inducted into honor societies and recognized for leadership. In short, you leave here well prepared academically for your chosen profession with an established track record of being highly engaged in your community. You entered to learn and you go forth to serve.

Perhaps the novelist David Foster Wallace articulated the true value of a liberal education – learning how to think and what to do with that. He says, “Learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad little ways every day.” I find that a beautiful statement about what it means to be an educated citizen.

Every college has its mascot. Ours, the owl, was a wise choice for the symbolism that it brings to our community. There are 200 species of owls, they range in size from 5 to 28 inches, they weigh between 2 ounces and 9 pounds, they are head turners, they possess exceptional vision and hearing, and they have an unusually long life span. In character, they symbolize wisdom, they are attributed with seeking and keeping souls, they have great insight, and they are recognized for their accuracy and their savvy natures. As our mascot, the Keene State Owl represents the diversity and the individuality of our students. It speaks of the exploration, the learning, the seeking of opportunity, and the ability to meet the challenge of the unexpected – the qualities that I spoke of earlier. The qualities that you have earned in your one thousand four hundred days at Keene State College. This is what we mean when we say that each and every one of you has the “Wisdom to Make a Difference.”

On the occasion of my inauguration I declared my great honor in wearing our colors-red and white-and my commitment to Keene State College as “an Owl for Life.” And, so too, are you an owl for life. You will continue to earn recognition, break records, and contribute to the vibrant life of your communities. It is your nature. And we will all celebrate that success with the great sense of joy that we feel here today. Keene State College is your alma mater – think of it as your nest – and return to it often. I invite you to stay engaged with this community, and to wear your colors with a deep sense of pride. Hearty congratulations to the class of 2014!