

Commencement 2016
Lower Columbia College
Mary Cullinan

Good evening, everyone. I'm so delighted to be here with you—and I'm grateful to President Bailey for inviting me to speak to you. Lower Columbia College and Eastern Washington University embrace the same values. Our institutions provide excellent academic quality along with a focus on access and opportunity—and we are committed to helping students be successful in college and after they graduate.

I've attended many, many graduation ceremonies over the years, but this is the first time I've been an invited speaker at a college graduation. It's an honor. But I know that the speakers at Commencement are much less important than the students. In fact, any survey of people 5 or 10 years after graduation would reveal that NO ONE remembered who their Commencement speaker was.

One year, when I was vice president at a university in Texas, the Commencement speaker got our campus confused with another Texas university. He thought he was somewhere else. All through the speech not only did he get our name wrong—but he kept calling us by the name of one of our huge football rivals.

Thousands of people sat there in stony silence. I thought they were going to storm the stage and drag him off.

THOSE graduates definitely remember his speech. But they probably don't remember who was speaking. *I* don't remember who was speaking.

So all I can hope for today is that you remember a few of these thoughts as you pass through the doors that are opening for you today. Every one of you has a story about how you got here. Every one of you knows the obstacles you had to overcome, the things that slowed you down or got in your way—the financial challenges, maybe—or the people who needed your help before you could continue your education.

And every one of you knows the opportunities that came along, the people who supported and mentored you, the teachers, faculty, and staff, the family and friends who helped you find your way to this ceremony today.

So: three thoughts:

First—Remember the people who helped you. No one gets to graduation completely by themselves.

Last month, Eastern Washington University honored a man who went to college in the 1930's, during the Great Depression. Struggling to pay for college, he waited tables. He worked in a lab drawing blood for 40 cents an hour. Then he received a scholarship. That scholarship changed his life. Once he was financially able to, he set up a permanent

scholarship fund for others. Now those dollars support SIX science majors at EWU. His legacy will continue transforming students' lives for generations.

So—remember the people who helped you. And make sure that, somewhere along the way, you help someone else.

Second—Keep learning, keep exploring. One gift that college gives you—maybe the MAIN gift—is the opportunity to explore a huge variety of ideas and points of view.

I often hear people make statements such as, “I just hate that” or “I’ll never do that” or “I don’t believe that.” Keep your mind open. Try saying: “Maybe I’ll try that” or “Maybe you have a point” or “Maybe I need to learn more about that.”

Remember how varied the world is, how many different perspectives and experiences are out there. The world isn’t a simple, closed system—it’s fantastically complex and nuanced. As a student, you’ve learned, you’ve absorbed new ideas. Don’t let your mind close now that you’re graduating. Keep exploring.

So: Remember the people who helped you. Keep learning and exploring

Third—Be fearless. You’ve already broken down barriers and moved forward in remarkable ways. Don’t stop now. Someone once said to me that I should “be an adventure.” She didn’t say, “Go experience adventures.” She said, “**BE** an adventure.” Embrace change and opportunity. Don’t be afraid to say **yes**: whether it’s moving some place new, changing your career path, learning new skills, or reaching out to new ideas and people. **Be an adventure!**

Those are my thoughts for you. Some of you will go on to attain some more formal education. Some of you have jobs already; some of you are looking for jobs. Some of you are settled here; some of you will head out across the state and around the world. All of you have great plans—all of you have great dreams. I hope you go to all the places you want to go. I hope you achieve all your dreams.

Achieving your goals and dreams means saying “yes,” opening your heart and mind, and being fearless.

Whatever paths you take, whatever decisions you make, make sure that, somewhere along the way, you help someone else get to the place you are today. Keep learning and exploring. Keep doors open. Keep your mind open.

And be fearless. Go out and be an adventure!

It’s so inspiring to see you all here today. Congratulations!