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**Commencement Address May 28, 2015
Manchester Community College
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Hello, everyone. I would like to thank President Glickman for the honor of being invited to speak at today's commencement ceremony. And congratulations to the graduates! This is your day to be rewarded, and it is truly a privilege to be sharing with you the celebration of your hard work and dedication. The successes that have brought you here today are something of which you should be deeply proud.

It has been only one year since my own graduation from MCC. Not so long ago, I was part of the rather confused crowd of students lining up prior to the ceremony. And I was even more confused when it came to the bigger questions about my life after graduation --- like, where to find the nearest restroom.

So, today, my lovely captive audience, in the hopes that I can provide some advice, I would like to share some of my experiences, and discuss some of the larger issues that affect us all.

Like bridges.

And not construction bridges, but the bridges we build throughout every stage of our lives.

Looking back, I realize that in this past year I have changed significantly. Last year during graduation, I was sitting way in the back, and today I find myself on this stage, with a year full of experiences behind me. In this single year, there are bridges that I have successfully crossed, and bridges that I have burned.

I distinctly recall that one year ago, though I may have appeared self-assured, I lacked much the inner confidence required to be giving advice on this stage. But since then, I have found strength in my own voice and this past year has proved to be one of remarkable growth.

Like many of you, I earned my Associate's degree from MCC, in Liberal Arts and Sciences. But I had no idea what I wanted to do with my education. I didn't have a career in mind or a cause I was devoted to. Online placement tests and career profiles, which mainly highlight salaries, could not answer the countless questions rattling around in my mind about the future, nor could they show me how to find a meaningful direction.

But I was enrolled in the GAP program, which transferred all of my credits from MCC to UCONN. And based upon my academic performance, I also received a scholarship to UCONN.

Once accepted there, I selected a major in Nutritional Sciences. I believed I could build my future from that major, brick by brick. But even with that bit of direction, I still feared that I did not know where on earth my life was going.

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Now, during my first semester at UCONN, I struggled. I found myself quite torn, living with one foot in the door, and the other foot on the way out. And I faced some of the most difficult days of my life.

There are some drastic differences between universities and community colleges. So for those of you considering transferring to a larger university, there are a few things I must emphasize.

The most striking difference can be illustrated with just one word. Leggings. You all know, the rather “defining” pants --- they’re like spandex, with a little less 80s flare? Well there are leggings everywhere. And I guess I missed that fashion notice when I arrived at UCONN. I’m not sure if it’s spread to MCC since I left, but guys, I don’t think we’ll hear you complaining. And girls, as much as I am a fan of old blue jeans, leggings are far comfier.

The second difference you will notice, is the sheer size of these campuses. It can easily take thirty minutes to walk across the entire campus at UCONN, and over thirty thousand students are enrolled there. I think it’s only a 5 minute walk to cross MCC, which is especially helpful when you’re running -literally running- late.

But the smallest of my classes at UCONN had 75 students, and class sizes typically peak in the hundreds. This means the responsibility of communicating with professors, if you find yourself struggling, falls directly upon the students.

We have luxuries at MCC that I didn’t fully appreciate until after I transferred, including the strong sense of community and personal mentoring we receive from our professors.

Social adjustments to UCONN became difficult as well. With so many students attending UCONN, walking around campus can be disorienting, as you pass crowds of people that you are unlikely to ever cross paths with for a second time.

It is more difficult to make friends in such a comparatively distant community, especially if you are a commuter.

But this factor was overcome when I initiated conversations with my peers, and found common ground by arranging to be study partners. As I made more acquaintances, I started to recognize our similarities, and realize that they weren’t simply faces amongst the crowds of students.

They, too, were finding their ways through college. They had friends and cute pets at home, people who loved them, and their own unique life stories. They had flaws and weaknesses, but they also had strengths. We shared strength in our pursuit of an education, with surprisingly similar goals.

There was also an eye-opening experience I had about one month into my first semester, when a tidal wave of first exams revealed some flaws in my study habits for my intense science courses. I learned this lesson with slightly less force than a grand piano falling from a second story window.

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By the last day of that exam week, I'm pretty sure I had more caffeine than blood in my veins and I was essentially holding my eyes open with duct tape. With my background in nutrition, it is necessary for me to say, this approach is not advised.

After that, I knew I had to develop a more effective approach to studying. Hopefully, those of you following a similar path can find yourselves more prepared.

On especially cold days, the prospect of having a 20 minute walk to class in negative 3 degree weather was rather unappealing. So I familiarized myself with UCONN's bus system.

And just a word of advice, don't always trust apps to tell you to the exact minute a bus will show up. Because sometimes they come just one minute early.

And on a bitterly cold day this past winter, I rushed down a steep ice-covered walkway, and hurried my way to the bottom --- without slipping, much to my relief --- but I made it to the bus stop just in time to watch the bus I needed to catch driving away.

That was one turn of events that left me doubting myself, wondering, on my frosty walk to class, whether I even belonged at UCONN.

Attending UCONN brought the extra task of commuting through morning traffic, taking an hour on some days, as well as the rush to find a parking spot before all of the convenient parking lots were filled.

Part of my later adjustments to UCONN included driving to campus an hour or more before my classes started. This meant waking up earlier, but also relieved a mountain of stress. I no longer felt rushed, and I used this extra time for studying or drawing. Art was a means of expression I had put aside for quite some time, but this rediscovery was a daily source of inspiration.

I also adapted to the task of commuting by testing out a new route, travelling windy, yet scenic, back roads to avoid morning traffic.

On my first day of this new route, I crossed a bridge leading over a river, to an old rusted railroad track bearing graffiti that read, "Free yourself from this."

I paused, half expecting this to be some sort of joke. As if someone were telling me to just give up on college and give up on the struggles I encountered after transferring.

But the sign didn't say "give up."

I drove by this sign every day afterwards, wondering from what it was I had to free myself.

But I didn't ever give up.

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Because the idea of dropping out and quitting a path to which I had already dedicated over two years of my life just wasn't an option.

In time, I came to the realization that I had to stop living my life half in and half out. I had to free myself from the doubts I had about my own capabilities. I finally understood that it was entirely within my power to bridge the gap from my successes at MCC, to the challenges I faced at UCONN.

And that is when the world really opened up to me.

I started walking with a new sense of confidence, feeling love for myself, feeling love the people around me, and a heightened sense of wonder for this incredible world we live in. I viewed my education at UCONN and career prospects with renewed passion, and I realized it was my own choice to be there.

No one else could tell me I had to stay, but I did. I stopped living in uncertainty, and started building a bridge to becoming the woman that deep down, I always knew I could be.

And just as no one told me I had to stay in college, no one else can tell you what to do next. Finding a successful path is my own responsibility, just as it is the responsibility of each of the graduates here today.

Thus, as we move forward, making some of the biggest decisions in our lives, understand that it's okay to get lost, and even realize you may be on the wrong path. Perhaps the main commuter route is not the best route for you, and you too need to travel along more scenic roads.

I know I still don't have everything figured out. But I am working every single day to build a life for myself. Because I have learned that I won't magically find it out there already waiting for me. I have to create a life I am proud to live, one step at a time.

And even if you're struggling with the bigger decisions in life, don't forget the small decisions. Like smiling to someone you pass by, or complimenting a stranger. Those little things have the potential to turn someone's entire day around, and the smallest kindnesses have lifted me through some of my toughest days.

On a walk this past weekend, I saw a mural quoting Anne Frank, who wrote "you can always, always give something, even if it is only kindness."

As you decide what to do now that you've graduated from MCC, remember that your goals may change. You may take an unexpected path, and that new direction may or may not work out.

You will have to adapt to new situations, new experiences, and the new aspects of yourself that you will undoubtedly discover on your journey. This is called growth.

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And even if you go in the wrong direction at first, and encounter failure, you will learn more about yourself and the world around you. So try new approaches, and don't be afraid to be a little crazy Express yourself in the ways that make you an individual.

In your eagerness to build new bridges, don't fear tearing down old bridges. You may find yourself in the wrong place at times, and even after giving it your all, you may decide that change is necessary.

This world is so vast, and there are too many opportunities for us to get held back and stuck in one place.

The worst decision you can make in life is to stay somewhere that you know in your heart, you don't belong.

I have found that happiness comes not out of the obligations we feel for others, but in the places we choose to be, driven by our own free will. Free will that our veterans, and service men and women, make immense sacrifices to protect. We have them to thank for protecting our rights to decide the course of our futures.

Earning an education from MCC has provided us with a strong foundation for our next bridge. So remember, that as graduates, what you decide to do next is entirely your own choice. This isn't the only opportunity you'll ever have to make decisions. You get to choose your path every single day of your life. And you may change your mind another three times before you finally decide on something, and start the process all over again.

So find a place out in this beautiful world or make a place of your very own. Somewhere you can wake up day after day, pleased with the knowledge that you have adapted, improved and that you are exactly where you want to be.

As I leave you today, I would like to share how I ended my last semester at MCC. One of my most inspiring assignments was given to me in art history by the incredible Professor Chiang. Let's take a moment to thank those who have guided us in our journey to becoming the accomplished individuals we are today, and take a moment to applaud the exceptional faculty and staff here at MCC.

The paper I wrote in art history discussed the futuristic movement in art, and a piece of work by Joseph Stella, called the "Brooklyn Bridge".

In my paper, I wrote:

"Humanity should not merely discard the useful knowledge that has been accumulated over generations. Rather, we should familiarize ourselves with this knowledge, while keeping an open mind that is prepared to set forth on new paths of exploration, as we cross from one side of a bridge to another."

As we move forward on new, exciting paths, remember that our time at MCC has provided us with the foundation to build strong lasting bridges.

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One side of this bridge is now firmly embedded in our education.

And the other side? Well, my soon-to-be fellow MCC alumni, where the other side leads is up to us.