

Text of MCC Commencement Address
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It is indeed an honor and a privilege to have been asked to speak at this, the 53rd Commencement Exercises of Manchester Community College. Congratulations to the Class of 2017! Thank you President Glickman and my dear friend Dean Duncan Harris, and a UCONN alumnus, for the invitation.

I would also like to thank my family and colleagues who have joined me today for this important occasion in the lives of so many of you. One of whom, Jennifer McCartney Burckardt, is a very proud graduate of this very institution and I'm very proud to have an MCC Cougar working alongside me.

10 months ago, I took a risk and left a great position in a private sector organization to follow my passion back to higher education as the Chief Diversity Officer at UCONN. Working with individuals to achieve their highest potential is indeed one of my life's passions. There is nothing more encouraging and motivating to me than to see all of that possibility and excitement on someone's face as they begin to explore and dream what their future opportunities can be. I see that possibility among so many of you this evening. Not to be cliché but today is indeed the first day of the rest of your life. Shortly, you will walk across this stage into a new reality. You will hold a degree that holds the key to the achievement of your next level of possibility. For some of you, it will propel you into further study towards perhaps a bachelor's degree; for others, it will be your ticket to expanded employment opportunities and for others still it will stand as a representation of the mastery of a skill. I'm reminded however that you do not stand alone at the cusp of your new reality on this special day. You stand collectively with 900 other graduates, many of whom you likely do not know, but who will forever be connected to you - your classmates with whom

you have shared experiences, leading up to and including this day. You stand with your faculty and administrators, who have been tasked with offering you knowledge and support throughout your time at MCC. Most importantly, you stand with your families, friends and coworkers, who have encouraged you; they may even be the reason that you are here. In fact, it might be you who inspire them to do better, strive harder and be greater. I know that is what my children do for me.

Several weeks ago, President Glickman and I spoke and decided upon the topic that I would speak about today. Formally, the topic is Building Connections, Building a Future. I was supposed to talk to you about the importance of connections - not what can sometimes feel like artificial networking - but rather deep intentional and authentic connections. My plan is to share with you some examples of relationship building born out of initial connections that have served me over a lifetime. But I got caught up in the moment!

The month of May is one that has always been one of my favorite times of the year. May is known for flowers (and unfortunately lots of pollen!), Mother's Day, proms and graduations. Graduations have abounded in the last couple of weeks and it is quite appropriate that commencements occur in the spring, which is symbolized by new growth, renewal and a fresh start. I'll get back to the connections piece, but just bear with me for a moment.

Commencement is a very important time in the life of the academic calendar. If you were to look up the definition of the word commencement - you would find that rather than the "END" that we believe it to be, as in the end of your journey towards this particular degree - rather, to commence from the Old French *commencier*, does in fact mean to begin.

I absolutely love this time of the year; the pomp and circumstance - both the song being played and literally the academic regalia - are truly something to behold. For those who have come before all of you graduates, it is a reminder of the hours they spent, the books they read, the assignments completed; maybe even the doors this degree opened for them. They may recall their graduation as a new beginning.

Many of you I'm sure are so glad to have finally arrived at this day. Getting here meant many sacrifices - late nights, early mornings, family events missed, long days at work, lots of coffee (there is no accident that both Dunkin and Starbucks are only just a stone's throw away), money spent on day care instead of fun, the list goes on and on....

And your paths to this day have likely been different - some straight, some roundabout, some pretty crooked. But now you are here, that's all that matters. You're finally done, right? Nope sorry, just like the word commence indicates, you, my friends are only just beginning. Today is indeed your commencement, or a new beginning.

Over the last 10 years, I have learned a great deal more about education than I ever realized possible. As that kid who had perfect attendance and literally loved school, the lessons I have learned have changed my life and my outlook on the importance of education. The first lesson, now as a parent, was that everyone doesn't learn the same way, and yet in many cases, our primary and secondary schools are designed to function in just that way, assuming that we all in fact do learn the same. My daughter, who just this year in 8th grade, was diagnosed as being dyslexic, struggled for years before that revelation was made. I watched her confidence challenged and I watched her become acutely aware of the fact that she learned differently than most of her classmates. That it would take her more time than the others. She was very fortunate in 7th grade to encounter a teacher who acknowledged her strengths as a visual learner

and allowed her to express herself and blossom in that fashion. But I also had to explain to her that likely her education for the next several years would be in a system that did not take her difference into consideration, and that was one of the hardest things I've had to do. Some of you may be able to relate.

Interestingly enough, it is not until you get to post-secondary education, that you actually gain a bit of flexibility to direct your learning. You can decide what you want to learn, to some extent, and where and how you want to do it. And all of you took that opportunity head on by enrolling at MCC and getting to this point.

I'm not sure if you know, but community colleges in particular, are a largely US phenomenon. Community colleges were initially the brainchild of several states, including our neighbor to the north, Massachusetts, who needed a mechanism to train teachers. They have evolved over time - from normal schools to junior colleges; from 2 year institutions with a liberal arts focus intended as a pit stop on the way to a traditional 4 year baccalaureate to institutions who answered the call to support the development of a labor force. Today, they are a hybrid of both. On its website, MCC asserts that it serves first time and "returning students" who already hold associate, bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees by providing workforce training and skills enhancement, special advanced certifications or retraining in a new field. For some of you graduates MCC provided the space for you to dip a toe in the vast ocean that is higher education. Maybe you needed to prove to yourself that you could do it. Maybe it was convenient because of its proximity, maybe it was a dream of your parents, spouse or partner or friends that you pursue higher education and you are preparing to make the dream come true. For others still, maybe your story is that you are looking for that next step up on your job or to make the transition from a job to a career.

The second important lesson I learned is that though education is considered to be the pathway to the American dream; for many who do not have the means, it becomes like Langston Hughes said, a dream deferred. Many of you know that story all too well, maybe it took you a couple of starts — a few credits here, another couple there, some time off. Maybe it just got too difficult to balance home and work AND school. Maybe the tuition money was needed for other responsibilities. Maybe the financial aid had run out. Maybe you needed to take care of your child, parent or sibling and the timing just wasn't right. Only 32 percent of the students here at MCC are full time, which means that the overwhelming majority of students here are likely balancing many, many things - work, home and school to name a few. And as such MCC filled that void - it made getting a post secondary education possible - and instead of a dream deferred - tonight your dreams are realized!

That my friends is what makes today extra special. YOU DID IT! You persevered. You have smashed many barriers that others might have been deterred by. You faced your fears head on. You have proved those who didn't think you could do it WRONG— and boy is that an amazing feeling. The many different paths that led you to this day, are what makes you strong - and it's that shared experience that will keep you connected. To learn the stories of your classmates that either confirm or changes your whole concept of what this world is, is also what this experience was all about. You've spent at least two years in and around this environment - with classmates of all ages, races, ethnicities, gender, religion, sexual orientation, shape size, etc. With classmates who speak different languages. With classmates who have children and those who do not. With classmates who work and those who do not. Here at MCC, the average age is 25, 54 percent of the student body are women and almost half of the credit students are from under-represented racial and ethnic groups. This broad diversity is simply a microcosm of what you will face as you head out into this new beginning.

You are indeed building a future, building a life, that may possibly change the outcomes, not only for you but for your families and friends.

Now as for these connections as promised. I always like to do a little research on the things that I talk about and I was intrigued by what would happen if I simply typed into Google, making connections. As I mentioned earlier, as the mom of daughter with dyslexia, connections in the written word are critical for students to gain deeper understanding. In fact my learnings were supported by the following from the website: readwritethink.org

The introductory paragraph starts:

Students gain a deeper understanding of a text when they make authentic connections. However, teachers need to know how to show students how a text connects to their lives, another text they have read, or the world around them.

Making Authentic Connections

Making authentic connections means finding ways that this experience at MCC, now coming to an end, will become meaningful in your life, as you set your sights on the future.

- **What connections have you made here, on your job, or in the community that will be important to you as you take the next steps in your life?**
- **What have you learned that will stay with you as you determine your career from this point forward?**
- **Are there faculty or staff who you are connected to?**
- **Are there other students who you are connected to?**

Every single job that I have gotten has been a result of connections that I have made. I have never searched the internet, signed up with a job board or ever walked the aisles of a career fair other than as an employer. As far back as my days as an undergraduate, I took my fate into my own hands and remember walking into the Music Department to ask if they needed any clerical student workers. You see I was motivated by the fact that I did not want to work in the cafeteria and so I made it my business to find an alternative. I walked in, asked the question, struck up a conversation with the secretary and about a week later, I received a call that they did in fact need a student worker. When I graduated from graduate school, the positions I had applied for were no longer able to pay me due to the government shut down, and in an off-hand conversation with a friend, I was introduced to the opportunity that ultimately brought me to Connecticut more than 20 years ago. With each career move, I gained new connections. Simply as a result of sharing with trusted colleagues what I wanted to do, opportunities abounded. Being authentic about what I wanted to do, allowed colleagues to keep me top of mind so that when they heard of new opportunities, I was the one that they thought of. As time moved on, it became apparent that the 6 degrees of separation that is widely embraced became more like 3 degrees of separation in my world. It seemed that everyone knew someone, who I either needed to know or wanted to know. In the meantime, I continued to be authentically me, doing my best, staying true to my passion, learning as much as I could and most importantly sharing my gifts and talents with others. The reality is that even the fact that I stand before you tonight, is as a result of connections that I have made over time.

I'm also reminded of one of my mentees, who I met about 10 years ago. She received her master's degree in business analytics from CCSU just last Thursday night. When I met her, just 10 years ago, she was working two jobs, one of which was at Taco Bell. She knew that she needed and wanted a change, so she took a risk and enrolled at one of your sister community colleges. With the support of a program that she participated in, she was able to not only graduate from

community college within 2 years, transition to CCSU and graduate, all while working part time at the company who sponsored the program. Today she remains employed with that company where she has since been promoted twice. She, like you, began her pursuit of new possibilities at a community college. And just think, only 10 years ago, she was making chalupas.

But she was actually not formally my mentee, I had actually been assigned to another young lady. But she made sure that she scheduled regular time with me. She took it upon herself.

There was something that led her to realize that I could have information and support that she would need along her journey, and as a result, she maintained her connection with me. Years later, I was fortunate enough to attend her wedding and just last week was invited to the party celebrating her most recent accomplishment. But do you think she knew at the time of her graduation from community college that she would be where she is today? Not at all. She knew enough though to maintain an authentic connection, both to me and to the company where she is employed. It was that connection that she continued to cultivate, that made all the difference.

MCC has given you the tools that you need to ensure that your 'text to world' connections are robust. You've been in any number of classes with students who are both like and different from you. And because we all as humans have similarity bias — meaning we like to be with people that are like us, it takes some energy — and intentional work — for us to reach out and build those important, strategic and long lasting connections which will lead to success for you as you begin anew - and take this world by storm. But don't be fooled, this is not easy, authenticity is real and it requires some work. It's not just about what someone or some organization can give you, but it's also about what you can give. In order to make authentic connections, you must give, not just receive.

Building connections with others is critical as you charge out into the world with this new degree in hand. We make the assumption that everyone understands just what this degree means but

your milestones are only yours until you share them with somebody. And you'll be surprised at what you can learn when you simply take the first step to build connections!

While there will certainly be the urge to relax after tonight, now that you have achieved this milestone, now is not the time. Be vigilant, stay hungry and do the work. Walk proudly in recognition of all that you have accomplished. But, don't forget to extend a hand to help someone else along with you. You also need to be good stewards of the connections that you have built or will build, as you never know when you will need them— or they will need you! This is a small community, so be true to yourself and most importantly, truthful with others. Bad news has a way of traveling fast, and you don't need any reason for someone to not connect with you because you did not protect your brand. Find ways to stay connected with your classmates, faculty, former coworkers and friends. Leverage social media like Facebook and Linked In to stay on top of career moves and to keep track of your own. And in spite of how helpful technology is, never underestimate the power of face to face connections. Make time for people and people will make time for you.

If you take nothing away from this speech tonight, know this, you are the author of this book of life that you are writing. Your road, like mine, is uniquely yours! You, like me, likely have supporting characters, protagonists and even antagonists - those, we know as the haters among us. But you, you are now unstoppable. You have the power to dictate where you will go from here. You have chosen to begin — again. Yes, you have this degree in your hand, but don't forget the dreams still to be realized in your heart. It is up to you to write that next chapter. You already know its never too late to begin again. So go out there and do it.

CLOSING

As we celebrate your commencement tonight, remember just because something good comes to an end, it does not mean that something better won't begin! This chapter at MCC is now closed, or at least it will be as soon as you move that tassel over tonight, but your something better is coming!

My friends, commence to maintain those connections; commence to believe you can do more than you ever thought. Look where you are now! Commence your next chapter. Commence that new opportunity, that new relationship, that new idea, that new vision. Commence - begin - to see yourself better than ever before! Commence - begin - to do something new today - to leverage your connections - don't be afraid - just be genuine and authentically you. Commence - begin - well, actually keep learning! Whether in a formalized academic setting - or through reading (and I don't just mean Facebook) and staying on top of what is going on in your town, your city, our country, our world. We are all depending on you to begin —once again! To enhance dialogue and begin to talk across the aisle. To begin — to learn about issues and attack the issues, not the people. To begin to embrace each and every graduate here for the unique perspectives that they bring.

So connect - before you depart tonight. Stay in touch with MCC. Connect to the alumni of this great institution - they have much to offer. Connect with your community - they, we need you. Reconnect with your families and friends - yes, you are done — for now.

Your determination gives us hope. Your accomplishments make us proud. Your dreams are yet to be realized!! CONGRATULATIONS! Your best is yet to come!