

Syracuse University

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on May 14, 2017

Location: The Dome

Remarks: Syracuse University Commencement Address

The Chancellor was introduced by Vice Chancellor and Provost, Dr. Michele Wheatly.

Welcome to the 2017 Syracuse University Commencement. Welcome everyone—graduates, faculty, staff, alumni, family, friends, trustees.

After I speak, you will hear remarks by the outstanding President of State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, my friend, Quentin Wheeler.

This is a happy day. Each of you who are graduating today got here because of your own hard work. Each of you who are graduating today also got here because of so many who have faith in you.

Some of those people—your faculty, and the staff—are sitting in front of you and working all around this Dome and outside it. Some of the people who support you and have faith in you—friends, family, classmates—are right behind you and next to you, where once again, as always, they have your back.

Some of the people who have supported you are watching this ceremony through the webcast from all around the world.

I thank every single person, here in the Dome, or around the world, who helped each of you arrive at this glorious day.

Syracuse University is full of dedicated faculty, staff, alumni, and trustees who give their hearts and souls for this place and especially for the students in it. These are people who are there when you need them. There are many such people here today, some of whom are stepping back from positions as you graduate.

They include Dean Samuel Clemence of Hendricks Chapel; Dean S.P. Raj of the Martin J. Whitman School of Management; and Dean Bea Gonzalez, who led in various roles at University College for more than 30 years ... I thank each of them.

One of the great hallmarks and strengths of Syracuse University is this: for almost all of our history, we have welcomed and benefited from students who come from all over the world. The students in this year's graduating class come from more than 100 countries, as the flags to my right bear witness. More students in this year's graduating class have studied abroad than at almost any other great university. At our best, we are a university that has embraced the world. That is particularly true of graduate education at Syracuse University.

Members of the Class of 2017, you will today hear several speeches addressed primarily to undergraduates. Today, I have a brief message addressed instead primarily to the graduate students.

I speak to the graduate students who are today receiving a masters degree, or an MBA, or a J.D., or a Ph.D. or many combinations of these degrees. I congratulate you. It has been a long, challenging, and expensive road. We are proud of you, just as we are proud of the students receiving a B.A. or a B.S. degree.

Yet for the 193 of you who are receiving the Ph.D. today, we have one last unique torturing challenge ahead for you.

I have seen hundreds of previous Ph.D. candidates receive their doctoral degrees in this dome.

Each of you will come up this ramp on my right. In front of 20,000 people, you will give Provost Wheatly a card with your name on it, and you will hope and pray that your name is pronounced right. Then, while balancing this weird hat on your head, you will be encumbered for the first time in your life by a loose, trip-wire like hood that will dangle over your neck and reach almost to your knees. So attired, you must immediately stride with authority and grace across the stage. You will have to do so while twisting the top half of your body ninety degrees, while you smile broadly for that camera over there and for your loved ones over there. While doing that, you will need to reach forward with your right hand to shake my right hand. But you must not extend your left hand to take this diploma, because that will be delivered on a different occasion. So this is what we make you do.

Why do we do this to you?

Graduate students, this jujitsu is symbolic of your years of education here. For undergraduates, this jujitsu may be a metaphor for your future as you seek out graduate and professional school.

Each graduate student accomplished the improbable here. You managed your discipline, you managed your thesis, you managed your advisor and your committee, you managed the university and federal bureaucracy -- all while managing somehow simultaneously to twist and turn and accommodate your teaching or work obligations and your family and your spouses and partners. You worked, hard. Many of you did all this in a language that was not the one you grew up speaking at home. Many of you did this in a culture that seemed to be turning less welcoming to those from abroad. But you did it, and we are so grateful.

Of course, this is nothing new in Syracuse. If you want evidence, look into Cornelia Clapp. She was an honors bachelor of sciences graduate of Mount Holyoke who was teaching at that school. As Mount Holyoke evolved, she could not conduct complex research unless she got a faculty appointment. To get a faculty appointment she needed a doctorate. She therefore came to one of the few universities in the United States that would even consider a woman for a doctorate in biological science - Syracuse University. She excelled in biological research, and graduated in 1889 - the first woman with a Ph.D. in biology from an American University. She did that at Syracuse. She returned to teach at Mount Holyoke, where they assigned her, the first female Ph.D. recipient in biology in America, to teach gym classes and gymnastics. So Cornelia Clapp mastered the biology and physiology of gymnastics. She published the authoritative treatise on the subject. A celebrated researcher and teacher, after 15 years of teaching and research, and intense debate, Mount Holyoke finally made her a full professor. The biology laboratories there were eventually named for her.

To those of you with newly minted graduate degrees, I say: May you have the fortitude and commitment and inspiration of Syracuse graduate Cornelia Clapp. May you overcome whatever obstacles life puts in your path just as you have overcome them here. May you be a blessing to the world. And please God, may this country and this University continue to embrace you and welcome you, and students like you, wherever you have come from and wherever you may go.

To all members of the class of 2017, graduate and undergraduate, I say thank you, on behalf of all of us on the faculty, staff, alumni, and all in the community. You have done wondrous things here. You will do marvelous things in the future. Please aim high. And always go orange.

Thank you.

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