

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on April 20, 2023

Location: Tan Auditorium, Gayle and Dan D’Aniello National Veterans Resource Center

Remarks: The All-Volunteer Force at 50: Higher Education and America’s Volunteer Military

*Chancellor Syverud was introduced by Vice Chancellor Mike Haynie*

Thank you, Mike, and thanks to all of you for participating. I have learned so much from our panels, and talks, and breakouts.

This summit was never intended to be a one and done. It was intended to be a call to action on a critical problem facing our military and our country – a call to action for higher education to be part of the solution, rather than bystanders to a problem.

There are people in this room, in academia, in government, in private enterprise who are the coalition of the willing who actually care about our culture of service through the military and understand what it creates for the country. I met a lot of them today, and I think we can work together for the common good and that's special.

This summit was never intended to be a one and done. It was intended to be a call to action on critical issues facing our military. We had a belief that by getting together we'd identify some issues we could work on and make meaningful progress on that wouldn't take a ten-year strategic plan or a committee ten years of meetings to accomplish. Like any successful summit, our discussions have gone in some very interesting directions and as we wrap up, we need to identify some common steps and action plans to move forward with from this summit.

What came out of this summit most for me is a focus not on veterans after they have become veterans, but on what produces, across the whole lifespan, the sort of active citizen who chooses military service, who go on to help build and maintain this country, and who then want to access educational opportunities either while still enlisted or after their military service is complete. We need to take concrete steps to create varied, attractive and clear pathways to opportunities for enlisted personnel, and we need to tell stories about those pathways. These pathways need to include much less siloed cooperation which allows for moving back and forth between jobs, between academia, and between the military.

I want to tell a story to illustrate this point. These are two Syracuse students. There are a lot of similarities between them, and one crucial difference.

First, the similarities. The guy on your left is called MP, for Michael Patrick. He is a local kid here, the son of a doctor. He came to Syracuse to major in biology and minor in policy studies. He did really well academically, changing his major to physics, and also grabbed many opportunities to grow at this University. He is a senior now and is the pitcher for the club baseball team. He has travelled widely. He has given a history lecture at Cooperstown at the Baseball Hall of Fame. And next year, he will enter medical school, and also plans to attend simultaneously business school at UVA, because he is interested in starting a health-related business.

The guy on the left is Dan. Dan is the son of a farmer and a nurse. He came to Syracuse to major and graduate in biology. He did really well academically, and like MP also grabbed many opportunities at this University. He participated in sports, he travelled widely, he became fluent in Spanish, which he did not speak at all on arrival. And this year, he will graduate from Georgetown Medical School, and is already planning to start a health-related business.

Those are the similarities, and now the difference. MP came here right from high school. Dan out of high school enlisted in the Marine Corps and served multiple tours in Afghanistan as a Reconnaissance Team Leader and Scout Sniper. Dan earned a Purple Heart along with college credits here and there along the way, and then struggled to get admitted and accepted to Syracuse University as a transfer student.

The point I want to make is this - there are hundreds and hundreds of kids with stories like MP’s at the selective colleges in this country. MP’s is the traditional pathway, which is very well defined, and we in higher education do this pathway very well.

But Dan had to build a bespoke pathway. Dan is much too rare at selective colleges today. A kid going from high school to enlistment to combat duty to a grab bag of college credits to a selective college and then to a great professional school. That is rare and hard. Building that pathway is extraordinarily difficult and that is the problem. Why today should an ambitious, hardworking kid with good values choose Dan’s route if he or she can choose MP’s route, even if that kid is patriotic and physically and mentally up to the challenge of volunteer service?

I’ve told this story to friends in higher education. The usual response has been sobering. They say, in nicer words than these: “But those enlisted kids aren’t the same academic and professional material.” In other words, they are just not in the same league.

I think all of you after this conference and from your lifetime work, you know that just ain't true. You know these students are incredible material, and they are the material that our country needs.

So, what I’d ask is that if we do one thing out of this conference is that we work on creating flexible, nimble, different, non-normal, but well defined and clear pathways to opportunities - not just to medical school - but to the corporations that are present here and to the opportunities that are most important to high school kids and people in their twenties. What are the things that are most important to them that affect their decision to serve their country as an enlisted person?

I ask for your help with that. I don't know how exactly to do it, but as I said, this summit wasn't going to be a one and done and I'm looking forward to working together to figure this out.

I thank you all for helping so much and we're going to work forward on this. Thank you.