Thank you, President Chapman, for that gracious introduction and for your dynamic leadership of this college. Thank you to all of the honored guests. And congratulations to the Lewis and Clark Class of 2016.

Today is like a homecoming for me. Sixteen years ago, I married into a family that has lived in Central Illinois for generations.

On my frequent trips to visit my in-laws, I have driven by Lewis and Clark several times a year, and I’ve always marveled at your beautiful campus and your proximity to a beloved Midwestern institution.

Of course, I’m talking about Fast Eddie’s. I’m told that I probably shouldn’t wear my Sunday best if I stop in.

I am here today with two extraordinary women in my life – my wife and my mother-in-law – so it’s natural for me to think of family. And really, that’s what makes graduations so special.

Today is a celebration of family. Make no mistake, graduates, you have worked hard to get to this day, but you certainly had some help. So, if you hear nothing else that I say today, please join me in thanking your family and friends who supported you along the way.

Today is about family, our most important American value. But that’s not the only American value on display. Today is also about opportunity. Lewis and Clark stands for the principle that everyone has the potential to succeed and contribute to this remarkable country.

This idea is at the heart of the basic bargain in America. If you get an education, work hard, and play by the rules, you can share in the limitless
opportunities offered by this country. That's the American Dream. And there is no better representation of the American Dream than a community college.

At Lewis and Clark, a school where one-quarter of the students are the first in their families to attend college, I see the unbridled optimism that drew my parents to this country 60 years ago.

My parents were teenagers when they traveled to America to attend college. They arrived in the segregated South in the 1950s with not much money and not much English.

But what my parents had was something more valuable. They had hope. Hope in the simple, yet enduring, principle, that here, more so than in any other country in the world, anyone can succeed. We have no castes. We have no royalty.

My appreciation for colleges like Lewis and Clark is both personal and professional. Both of my parents attended two-year colleges – my father in Tennessee and my mother in Georgia.

As the Deputy Secretary of Labor, I know that community colleges are the “secret sauce” of our education and workforce system. Community colleges are incubators of innovation and opportunity. They strengthen businesses and invigorate local economies. And that is why the Department of Labor has invested billions of dollars recently in community colleges, including Lewis and Clark.

Our investment is not just in the buildings and the equipment. Our investment is in our most precious natural resource: the graduates of today and tomorrow. As President Obama has said, community colleges are “a place where people of all ages and all backgrounds – even in the face of obstacles, even in the face of very difficult personal challenges – can take a chance on a brighter future for themselves and their families.”
We are surrounded today by graduates who know what it takes to succeed in the face of obstacles.

Take, for instance, Stevi Johnson, a working mother from Benld. She was involved in a terrible car accident nine years ago. Because a remarkable team of nurses and doctors helped her, she was inspired to enter the health care profession. This past December, Stevi received her degree in nursing from Lewis and Clark, and she now works in an emergency room in Clayton, Missouri. She’s also on stage today as a trustee of this college.

Brian Craig is a grandfather of three and an Army veteran who served in Iraq. Brian didn’t get to finish high school, but he made sure that his two kids received a college education. A few years ago, Brian seized an opportunity to advance in his career through Lewis and Clark’s welding program. He graduates today into a wide-open future. Although Brian isn’t quite sure what he’ll do next, he says, “no one can take my education away from me.”

All of the graduates here today have a similar story of perseverance and triumph. And your reward is a Lewis and Clark diploma that will be your passport for a journey of endless possibilities.

Yet, even as we celebrate this joyous achievement, it is important to remember that all of us are the beneficiaries of others who have opened doors for us. So, I have one last homework assignment for you: consider how you can keep these doors open for those who come after you.

This challenge is more important today than it’s ever been.

In recent years, our nation has undergone a remarkable economic recovery from the depths of the Great Recession. Unfortunately, the fate of far too many people is still determined not by their brains and talent, but by the zip code of their birth.
Often, our attention turns to these problems only when they make headlines in places like Ferguson, Baltimore, and Flint, but we know that persistent inequity and disparity exist all across the country.

Too many of our neighbors have felt their economic security slip away, dragging their self-worth along with it. Too many feel like their government doesn’t care. Too many have stopped believing that the American Dream applies to them.

Faced with adversity and a lack of opportunities, it is easy to see why some might resort to finger pointing and scapegoating. It is easy to see why some might believe that our country’s problems could be solved by excluding people who don’t look like us, who don’t worship like us, or who weren’t born in this country.

But that is not who we are as a nation. As Scripture tells us: "You shall not oppress a stranger . . . for you also were strangers once." Or to quote a more modern saying, we know that blowing out your neighbor’s candle does not make your candle burn brighter.

In the United States today and always, our diversity is our greatest strength. Even with all of our differences, we are inextricably bound by a shared pride in our nation and a common belief that in America anything is possible. It is the optimism about the future that drew my parents to these shores. It is the hope that every mother and father sees in the eyes of their newborn child. It is the dream that is alive and well today at Lewis and Clark.

As a future President from Illinois said in 2004: “Hope in the face of difficulty, hope in the face of uncertainty, the audacity of hope: In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation, a belief in things not seen, a belief that there are better days ahead.”
But those better days ahead are only possible if each of us does our part, in our own lives, to understand our responsibilities to the broader American family. Those who are fighting for a better tomorrow are not outsiders. Even if we never meet them, they are our neighbors, people just like you and me, who yearn for a chance at the American Dream.

During your time at Lewis and Clark, you have embraced the word “community” in “community college.”

You are a community of students from 20 states and a dozen countries, with different backgrounds and viewpoints. This is a school with an equal number of recent high school graduates and students over 30 years old.

You are the inner-city teenager who is struggling to escape poverty and crime. You are the middle-aged factory worker whose company has shut its doors. You are the recent immigrant who dreams of owning a small business. You are the working mother who recovers from a car accident and decides to become a nurse. And you are the Army veteran and grandfather who trains to be a welder.

You are the face of Lewis and Clark, but you are also the face of America.

Despite your differences, you have become a community because each of you is a traveler on the same winding journey.

When you leave behind Harriet Haskell Memorial Gate, I challenge you to continue looking for ways to build bridges with those in the wider community of our nation.

• Find common ground with people who practice a different religion or hail from a different country.

• Learn from everyone, especially those who share different political views.
• Keep your hearts and minds open. Not everything is quite as simple as it first seems.

• Strive to live up to our highest ideals. Challenge those who seek to make our country less tolerant and less inclusive.

• And just as you have done here at Lewis and Clark, lend a hand to your fellow travelers on the climb up the ladder of opportunity.

If you do all of this, you will have done your part to thank the family that has supported you on this journey – and you will have paved a path for those who come after you.

Congratulations to the Class of 2016. I look forward to watching you contribute to our American community.