

Commencement Remarks — “Carry the Future With Open Hands” Interim President Manya Whitaker

Good morning, graduates, families and friends, faculty and staff! It’s a joy to be with you on the day you’ve all been waiting for.

I want to start by sharing some thoughts from my own journey that have shaped how I think about this moment.

On June 10, 2006, at 20 years and 11 months old, I graduated from college. I had a plan. I was headed to graduate school in a couple of months to get a Ph.D., so I could teach. That was it. That was my plan. And it was a great one. It told me what to do for the next five years. I felt good about it — and I was confident that after four years of a liberal arts education without a predictable next step, I securely carried my future in my hands.

But I didn’t plan to have to work two jobs in addition to being a full-time student, because I otherwise couldn’t afford to eat even two meals a day. I didn’t plan on being the youngest in my cohort and having nothing in common with my classmates. I didn’t plan on the natural disaster that ruined my dissertation data, forcing me to lose four months of work. And I certainly didn’t plan on my brother dying three weeks before my 25th birthday.

In those moments, my hands felt empty and my future uncertain.

Because that carefully laid plan — the one in my head on June 10th, 2006, at 20 years and 11 months old — was incomplete. And in many ways, that incompleteness set me on the path to where I am today — one that was far from linear, and full of lessons I never could have predicted.

We often think we need to have everything figured out before a current step ends, because a clear plan is allegedly the key to success. But what I've come to understand is that life doesn't wait for us to finish drafting our perfect blueprint. Instead, it challenges us to adapt, grow, and carry forward with what we have.

Graduation is a moment of passing. The future, with all its hopes and unknowns, is being placed into your hands. Not to grip too tightly, not to fear, but to carry with openness, courage, and care.

You are stepping into a world that will need your steady hands, your clear eyes, and your open heart. Everything you have learned here at CC has prepared you for the journey ahead. You will carry the future with open hands.

You are ready — because you've been doing this all along. You came to college in the middle of a pandemic, navigating one of the biggest transitions of your lives while the world around you was uncertain and unstable.

Your college experience was marked by political turmoil — wars overseas and division here at home that demanded your attention, tested and clarified your personal beliefs, and strained your relationships.

All the while, you navigated the constant change of the Block Plan — shifting your focus every three-and-a-half weeks, 32 times over — never knowing how much the next block would challenge or inspire you.

260 of you (46% of the class) changed your major, changed your minor, or added a new major or minor on top of your original one — at least

once during your time at CC. And I would guess that almost all of you discovered new passions and many realized the path you started on wasn't the one you wanted to stay on. Something necessitated a change in plans.

And, like the personal hardships I shared earlier, some of you had your plans changed by events or circumstances you never, ever would have asked for.

And yet, you carried on.

So, you already know, in a way, that carrying the future with open hands will test you.

There will be days when it feels too heavy — when the problems seem too tangled, the setbacks too sharp. You will lose things you thought you could not live without. You will try and sometimes fall short.

When that happens, do not close your hands — and certainly do not close your heart.

Because as a CC graduate, you bring something rare to the world. You know how to fully immerse yourself in something meaningful. You know how to act with clarity and purpose under pressure.

You know how to listen — really listen — to voices different from your own, and how to hold space for ideas that challenge you. You know that the most important questions don't have simple answers.

Your experience here — marked by disruption, adaptation, and growth — has shaped you into the kind of person who can make a difference.

Because the world does not need perfection; it needs people who can keep going when things don't go as planned.

The truth is, no one moves through life perfectly, according to the plan. We fail and rebuild. We stand up for what we believe in, willingly accepting the risk and scrutiny that comes with that choice. And we know that sometimes, making a meaningful difference takes a very long time; much longer than you planned.

This is what tenacity looks like — not perfection, but persistence. Not certainty, but openness.

And that is your charge: to keep carrying the future with open hands, even when it would be easier to let go.

I could have let go all those years ago, when I was turning 25, and suddenly my life looked nothing like I'd planned it. I could've abandoned those ambitions I held so tightly, convinced they no longer fit the reality unfolding in front of me. And I probably would have been fine, because like you've done for 4 years now, I could've created a new plan in 3.5 weeks.

But I'm so glad I didn't. Because I never would have lived the life that brought me here to Colorado College. I never would have become someone who appreciates mountain air and loves to ride horses. I never would have encountered all the kind-hearted, strong-willed, and creative students I've had the honor to teach. I never would have gotten to know the faculty and staff I work with every day, who share my joy in getting to play a small part in your plans.

I never would have met all of you.

Similarly, there will be a lot of ‘nevers’ and unexpected challenges ahead of you — but even more than that, you will encounter unexpected opportunities. You’ll have moments that change your plans in all the best ways — moments that you’ll look back on and happily think, “I never could have imagined this would be my life.”

Your experience at CC has already trained you for a life of shifting paths. In the past four years, you’ve changed course dozens of times — actually, almost three dozen. Each new experience brought new people to share it with — Bridgies, FYP buddies, teammates, fellow majors, and housemates. Along the way, you grew your support system and deepened your sense of belonging here at CC.

That same instinct — the ability to adapt, grow, and say yes to what’s next — will serve you well now. There may never be another time in your life when you have to adjust your focus and energy as often or as quickly, and you’ve done it here with enthusiasm and grace.

So, as you step into what comes next, don’t waste time worrying whether every decision is the “right” one. Say yes to what feels meaningful, even if it doesn’t fit your original plan. Some of the best parts of your life may start with the word never. And those moments won’t always arrive when you expect them — but when they do, let them in.

So, go boldly. Say yes to the detours, the unexpected openings, the doors you didn’t plan to knock on. Because your story with CC doesn’t end here — it launches from here. Let your life be proof of what a CC education makes possible — not just for you, but for your communities, your causes, and the world. You are now part of this college’s living

legacy.

And how you lead, how you listen, how you lift others? Those choices will help write the next 150 years of our shared story. So, take up that pen. Write the future not with fear, but with hope. Not with control, but with curiosity. Write it with the kind of openness that invites others to dream, to build, and to belong.

I promise, you are more ready than you know.

Congratulations, Class of 2025. The future is in your hands — carry it with possibility and write it with courage.

It is now my pleasure to invite Jeff Keller, Chair of the Colorado College Board of Trustees, alumnus of the Class of 1991, and parent of a 2023 graduate, to extend congratulations on behalf of the Board.