

Rep. Lori Trahan NECC Commencement Address

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Thank you, President Glenn.

Graduates, esteemed faculty, honored guests, and families, it's a privilege to join you here at Northern Essex Community College for this year's commencement ceremony.

Today is a day of celebration. It's a day to honor your tremendous accomplishments, your relentless perseverance, and your unmatched dedication to your studies and to yourselves.

As we gather here together, I stand before you with profound admiration for each and every one of you.

This moment is the culmination of years of hard work, sacrifice, and determination.

You have dedicated countless early mornings spent in classrooms and late nights poring over lessons, often while juggling jobs, kids, and a host of other commitments necessary to support yourselves and your families.

But through it all, you have shown an unwavering and impressive commitment to your education.

Of course, today is not only a celebration of your academic achievements – those speak for themselves – but it's also a recognition of your resilience in the face of challenges big and small that threatened to derail you from being here today.

You made it, and for that, we applaud you.

As we reflect on your journey to this point, it's important to acknowledge the significance of this moment and this place in history.

Massachusetts is on the cusp of a new era, a time of profound change and opportunity.

And we've been here before.

Nearly 250 years ago, it was young adults here in Massachusetts – many of them not much older than most of you who will make the walk across this stage in just a few minutes – who courageously stood up to the British crown just down the road in Concord.

A shot was fired – a shot heard 'round the world – sparking a revolution against colonialism and for independence, and setting the foundation for the freedoms we cherish today.

A century later, this city and many like it along the Merrimack River powered America's industrial revolution.

Generations of immigrants – my grandparents included – flocked to the region in search of a better life for their families, and they found work in the mills that still line our cities' horizons.

Just years later, a labor revolution was sparked right here.

Mill girls in Lowell – fed up with years of long hours and dangerous work conditions being rewarded with pay cut after pay cut – had enough.

They went on strike – demanding the wages and protections they were owed.

And although they were ultimately unsuccessful, they paved the way for the Bread and Roses Strike just down the road in Lawrence in 1912...

A remarkable moment referred to as “the Strike that Shook America” because of the way young people – many of them young parents –

supercharged the labor movement that eventually delivered weekends and worker protections that we cherish to this day.

Then, just three decades later, an entire generation of young Americans mobilized in response to the rising tide of fascism sweeping Europe and turning its gaze toward our own shores.

Tens of thousands of young Americans crossed the English Channel and stormed the beaches of Normandy on D-Day.

Despite harrowing odds, they charged forward, confronting fear with unwavering resolve.

These brave souls, many barely out of their teens, successfully turned the tide against tyranny and toward freedom.

Graduates, the moment in front of you may differ from the obstacles that generations before you faced.

However, the stakes are just as high.

Both at home and abroad, we are seeing a rise in authoritarianism – from strongmen seeking to start new wars to bad actors looking to fan the flames of conflicts that have spanned decades.

We're seeing people in positions of immense power embrace rhetoric and policies that promise to turn back the clock rather than push our nation forward.

And we're seeing a stark divide in what was once so clearly our shared love and appreciation for humanity.

What we do in response to these threats will determine what kind of country we call home – what world we raise our children in.

Will we stand for freedom like the revolutionaries?

Will we fight for progress like the mill girls and the Bread and Roses strikers?

Will we hold onto our democracy like an entire generation did 80 years ago as a world war raged?

You all will answer those questions – this next chapter in history is yours to write.

No matter the course you choose to chart after today – whether it's to continue your education, enter the workforce, or start your own venture – know that you are well-prepared to succeed in this moment.

And what a moment it is.

As we speak, Massachusetts is seeing unprecedented investments – investments designed not only to bring us into the 21st century, but to win it.

Roads and bridges are being rebuilt, and our water systems are being upgraded, but this is so much more than that.

We're seeing new opportunities in manufacturing, clean energy, and advanced technologies that are creating good-paying, family-sustaining jobs at every level – and they're being created right here in our gateway cities.

These are jobs that you have spent your time at Northern Essex training for.

The skills, knowledge, and experiences you've gained during your time here have equipped you to thrive in this rapidly evolving landscape.

And as you stand on the threshold of the future, I urge you to embrace the opportunities that lie ahead with the same courage, determination, and optimism that have carried you this far.

Make no mistake – the road ahead will have its challenges.

Life will do its best to get in the way just as it did on your road to this momentous achievement...

But looking out at you all today, I have no doubt that each and every one of you has the strength and resilience to overcome any obstacle you come across – because that's who you are in your core.

You know what you want to achieve, and you don't give up until you get there – that will carry you far in the years ahead.

I'll leave you with one final request as you prepare to enter this next phase of your life.

Don't for a second let anyone tell you that our best days are behind us.

We are a country that is going to continue improving with each generation, but that requires you to put the work in – just as you did to earn the diplomas you'll receive today.

Now more than ever, we need you to vote.

We need you to use your voice for the causes you care about.

We need you to push for progress.

Our nation has always benefited when young people lead the way.

There's no better example of that than here in Massachusetts...

Where generations of young people have always – *always* – stood for freedom, for justice, for equality, and for economic opportunity for workers.

Class of 2024, it's now your turn to take up that fight – to carry the values and the expertise we cherish as a Commonwealth and use them to drive our country forward.

Your walk across this stage today is as much a testament to your hard work and your perseverance as it is to how prepared you are to meet this moment.

As you write this next chapter – as you build on the progress made by those who came before you – may you continue to strive for greatness, to pursue your passions, and to make a positive impact on the world around you.

Those who follow in your footsteps are depending on you and I couldn't be more optimistic.

Congratulations graduates, and best of luck!