

NECC Commencement Speech

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Thank you President Glenn for your introduction. And thank you NECC staff and faculty for your ongoing support of your students, and the friends and families that came out to support their graduate today. I'd also like to thank my family for coming, as well as my wonderful fiancé, whose beauty I'm sure will distract me as I speak.

I'm happy to connect with you today at this event, which marks the end of a journey in higher education for some, and the beginning of the next big step in education for others. Regardless of your circumstances, today we all stand together on the brink of something great, poised to influence change and become both leaders and mentors. And when you leave Northern Essex, you'll take with you great friendships, and maybe memories of heartache, of good professors, of annoying professors, of the taste of bad coffee, and of long nights and short semesters.

I fall into the category of graduates who are moving on to another college. And it took me three very long years to get here.

But I'm careful not to forget that I only got here after fumbling through grade school. After joining the army at 19. After becoming a paratrooper and serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. After re-adapting into society after my service. And after slipping and sliding and shaking my fist angrily at the sky this past winter—why, snow?! But after all that, I'm here—and you're here with me.

But seriously, this past winter was a complete drag. The struggle is real, my friends.

And we all struggled, not just in kicking up slush and driving through snow, but to actually get here—to be sitting where you are—and we've all

learned a lot about ourselves along the way. But there were still those voices: harsh, raspy little ones I'm sure you've heard a time or two in one way or another.

They might've said you can't do it, that school's just a waste of time and money, that you won't be able to find a job after you graduate, that you can't influence change, and that you can't have that last brownie because you'll get fat.

But, as the timeless saying goes, "Ain't nobody got time for that."

When I think of those voices and then think of us, I'm reminded of a tale told to me by my older sister, who is here. There are talking frogs in this story, so put your imagination caps on:

There once existed a village of frogs at the foot of a great mountain. One year, a terrible drought came, and many of the frogs feared for their survival and that of their families because of it. However, the frogs knew of a giant lake just over the mountain to the north, but none dared to go for they believed the giant snake monster that dwelled along the path would ravage them if they tried.

All but one frog.

That one frog journeyed over the mountain one day and, tired and beaten down, returned with enough water for itself and many others. Stunned, some of the other frogs asked, "How did you avoid the snake monster?" but the brave frog didn't answer. It turned out the brave frog had been deaf all along, so it couldn't hear their fearful tales, and so had no reason to fear the voyage.

Now, I know we're not frogs—at least I'm not—but we are all here, by some measure, because of our grit, and because we created ways to filter out those negative voices and ideas. Selective hearing is more our approach, you

could say, because just as there was negativity, there were also those who motivated us to do more, and believed in us and got angry with us when we didn't do well because they knew we could do so much more.

I can still see my old English Comp professor angrily dropping my paper on the table in front of me after grading it, as if to say, "you could do better." But since I knew him, I know what he really meant to say was, "I should have you flogged by the whole battalion for this disgrace you call a paper. Do better next time, or don't come back."

And I loved him for that, and because of his mentorship, I can see that I've made immeasurable **progress** as a person and as a writer since.

Progress should be our watchword. Not fearing failure or success, or even spiders or heights or the ocean, but fearing standing in one place for too long. If you know what you care about, you can determine what you want to accomplish, and once you accomplish it, continuously build and improve upon it—like a game of Tetris or Jenga, except more possible to win.

My fellow graduates, in summary, I remind you that we are here on the brink of excellence, no longer bystanders in society, but contributors to it. Carefully choose what you take from others, and don't be afraid to stand out, for, contrary to popular belief, great minds do not think alike, no—great minds think for themselves. And the sharpest among them do so for the good of others. For virtue.

The way that it is is not the way it has to be, so we need to go forth unto a new day, standing by our watchword: Progress; and fight for a world of reason. Fight for a world of acceptance. But more than anything, with education as its backbone, we need to fight for a future worth living. And believe me when I say that only *you* can make it happen.

Congratulations on your accomplishment, and best of luck to you, class of 2015!