

## CLASS OF 2026 PRESIDENTIAL REMARKS



American Public  
University System



Today marks more than a ceremony; it marks a very important milestone, a culmination, and a beginning. Today is your 2026 Commencement!

Before I share my remarks, I want to acknowledge the depth and breadth of the graduates surrounding you. I want you to pause for a moment and realize the perseverance that each of you has displayed.

So, listen closely. In just a moment, I'll ask different groups of graduates to stand. When you stand, please remain standing. OK, graduates, here we go.

Stand up and remain standing if you are a first-generation college student. A mother. A father. Active-duty military. A veteran. In a military family. A first responder. A working student. A student from outside of the United States.

Wow. That's incredible.

Graduates, please remain standing and turn around and face the back of the room.

To our guests — the spouses, partners, loved ones, parents, children, family, and friends of our graduates ... this is what you did. This is who you supported. Please stand, and graduates, let's give them a round of applause.

You may be seated now. Thank you.

I want to share that it has been over 25 years since my graduation. I remember a lot of things about that day. I remember I had a throbbing headache from attending a never-ending party the night before. I remember one of my best friends asked to marry his girlfriend, and so the party continued that night. And I remember a profound sense of excitement about being ready to formally start my professional career.

Of all the things I remember, I have zero recollection of what the president of the university said in his speech. So, if I can't make my speech memorable, I will at least try to make it short.

Moments like today remind us that behind every graduate is a story. Your graduating class has students from 33 different countries, 50 states, D.C., and six territories. At 16 years old some students are just beginning their journey. At 78 years old, others continue to write theirs. Together, this class embodies the power of learning at every stage of life.

Within this class there are 9,677 active-duty servicemembers, 3,927 veterans, and more than 1,000 family members of those who serve or have served ... together representing a powerful commitment to service and sacrifice.

Often, there are generations of sacrifice that made this day possible. And let me tell you, it happened to me too.

My grandparents were completely illiterate. They could not read or write. They lived in a small village on the other side of the world, with fewer than 500 people and not a single paved road.

My parents were the first in our family to have access to education and to graduate from college. I spent most of my childhood and early teenage years with my grandparents on their small farm. I helped with the crops. I took care of the animals. In the winter, there was no heat.

After dinner, we would gather by the fire, where my grandmother would pray the rosary every single night and make me do the same, reminding me that if I didn't, Jesus would be upset with me. And it's funny how things work, because that sense of being God-fearing has stayed with me to this day.

In the winter, when it was really cold, I would sleep in their bed, all of us together, just to stay warm. And I loved those moments. I still cherish them to this day.

When we wanted to shower, we had a boiler that ran on oil. We had to turn it on three hours in advance just to have warm water. And with all of that ... it might surprise you when I say this: I was born into privilege.

Why?

Because my grandparents taught me what unconditional love truly is.

And that made me a better person, a better colleague, and a better father. And because my parents gave me something far more valuable than anything money can buy: They taught me that life is about the choices you make.

Good or bad, it comes down to you. Do not blame anyone else. Do not play the blame game.

If you get an education. If you are willing to work hard. If you are willing to fight, to push through problems and difficulties. If you have strong ethics and values. You can achieve something truly meaningful. And most likely, you will.

From a very early age, I felt that this privilege I had received was almost unfair to others. Because I never saw a reason to complain. I never saw life as unfair. I saw challenges as opportunities. Opportunities to grow. Opportunities to become better.

I realized that coming from an economically disadvantaged background was not a weakness. I turned it into a competitive advantage.

I know that many of you, just like my parents, may be first-generation graduates. I know that many of you, just like me, are immigrants, or children of immigrants.

And I know this: You are all warriors. You have something inside you. A fire. The drive to be better. That is why you are here today.

So, do not let anyone ever doubt you. And most of all, never doubt yourself. Because only you know the effort it took to get here. And the fact that you made it makes you truly special. And I am incredibly proud of you.

We are living through complex and uncertain times. And for some of you graduating today, sometimes it may be easy to feel discouraged. Especially when the challenges around us can feel so visible.

But as human beings, we have been given something truly powerful: The ability to think critically. The ability to ask meaningful questions. And the ability to determine, for ourselves, what we believe to be true. All privileges that we should never forget.

Today, I want to remind you of something: No matter your background, no matter where you come from, no matter your personal beliefs, no matter your faith, we all share something in common.

We are part of a global community that is connected by learning, purpose, and possibility.

Today, as you graduate, you are not just receiving a degree. You are opening a door. A door that your grandparents may have never had. A door that your parents dreamed about. A door that you fought for. And now it is in your hands.

Because make no mistake:

The future does not belong to the most privileged. It belongs to those who show up, every single day, and do the work.

People like you — the ones who are committed to personal growth and creating a brighter future for themselves. The ones who sacrificed. The ones who stayed up late. The ones who kept going when it was hard. The ones who did not quit. The ones who do the right thing when no one else is looking.

And if there is one thing I hope you remember from today, it is this:

Where you come from does not define you. What you choose to do next does.

So go out there and build something meaningful.

Build a career. Build a life. Build a family. Build opportunities for others. Make your parents proud. Make your children proud. Honor the sacrifices that got you here.

Treat people with dignity and fairness. Choose humility over ego. Choose service over status. Spend less time judging others and more time examining yourselves. Stand with those who are

struggling, not because it is easy, but because it is right. Live with integrity, not for show, but for truth. And choose love over hate, even toward those we feel distant from or disagree with most.

And one day, when someone asks you where your story began, you will smile ... and you will say: It began the day I decided to truly believe in myself, and to take responsibility for my life.

Class of 2026, you are ready. This is your moment, and I am incredibly proud of you.

Go all in. Congratulations!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mr. [unclear]". The signature is written in a cursive style with several horizontal strokes underneath.