**Penn State Berks  
Commencement Ceremony – May 9, 2015**

**Commencement address delivered by:**

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Thank you for inviting me to address you today on this very special occasion. I add my heartfelt congratulations to our graduates for achieving this milestone in life—a major milestone at that.

Graduates, this is your moment, and we are all gathered in celebration and in recognition of your good work, your diligence, talent and perseverance. We applaud you.

Our graduates tell me their various reasons for pursuing a Penn State degree. There are many, but the top reasons are these: acquisition of knowledge to apply to their personal and career advancement, and to prepare them for a changing world, a changing marketplace.

Some of you started your college career immediately upon your high school graduation. Others of you started your college career after years of working, raising families, or serving in the military. No matter the path you took to us, we are pleased that you selected Penn State Berks.

Today, we have 233 graduates. This is the largest single graduating class of Penn State Berks College. Upon graduation, some of you will enter the world of work and begin your careers. Some of you will pursue graduate education to further your credentials. Regardless of the path you choose, all of you will bring tremendous capability and an entrepreneurial spirt and know-how to the organizations, institutions and ventures you will join or undertake.

Finally, most graduates tell me that they were helped along the way by family and friends, who encouraged and supported them. Our students must often balance the demands of work and family while they pursued their degrees.

Today is a shared victory with family members and friends. We have them to thank as well. Therefore, I ask that the friends, family and loved-ones present here today in support of our graduates to stand so that we can recognize your generous support. We applaud you in gratitude.

There are others to thank as well, important others.

Our talented faculty taught you disciplinary content. They also inspired and mentored you, challenged you as learners, opened your minds to multiple viewpoints and perspectives, helped you find your voices and express yourselves and encouraged you to aim high and higher still.

Our dedicated staff and administrators assisted you in your journey, supported your learning, directed you to needed resources, and engaged you in co-curricular activities and leadership opportunities that helped you to maximize your college experience.

They too share in your triumph. Your success is the truest measure of their good work. I ask therefore our excellent faculty, staff and administrators with us today to stand so that our graduates can applaud you in grateful recognition.

Graduates, you have joined the ranks of the higher educated. Your degree is a credential of distinction–it is both a privilege and a responsibility.

The world—the global society—looks to its educated for answers and solutions for enhancing humanity, the human condition, and health and wellbeing. Our society looks to its educated to sustain our communities, our businesses and organizations on behalf of the people who live and work in them. Our society looks to its educated to employ best practices guided by strong ethics and integrity. Society holds the highest expectations for its higher educated, as well it should.

Today I want to draw two analogies that I hope will resonate with you as you go forward—ones that I encourage you to take away from my brief talk.

The first analogy is from Collins and Porras in their seminal book, *Built to Last*. Collins and Porras introduce the construct of the genius of the “and” versus the tyranny of the “or”.

They make the critical point that when we make choices, when we set goals, we could easily assume that there is only one choice to make—either this one or that one. The genius of the “and” extends our reach, our choices, and our imaginations, and enables us to approach life and learning boldly.

As educated people, we challenge ourselves to do more, setting personal and professional goals that may seem on the surface as unattainable. We challenge ourselves to set goals that are seemingly at opposing ends of a continuum. There are valuable lessons to be from Collins and Porras in this regard.

Collins and Porras studied visionary companies. They studied organizations that have endured even tumultuous economic times and fierce competition. What distinguishes these companies that manage to prevail?

Collins and Porras submit that these organizations are steadfast in holding on to their core values and ideologies at the same time they engage in change. i.e., as they engage in experimenting, innovating, accepting failures on occasions, adapting, adjusting to changing demands of a crowded marketplace.

Collins and Porras assert that visionary organizations endure because they never lose sight of who they are and what defines them while they adapt, adjust and change. This is the genius of the “and.”

Another analogy comes from the late Bartlett Giamatti. Giamatti was the former president of Yale and commissioner of major league baseball—dual devotions met in a single lifetime. How very extraordinary he was. I admired him greatly.

Giamatti talks about the university in much the same way that Collins and Porras talk about enduring companies. Giamatti refers to the university as a “free AND ordered space.”

We have order in our traditions and conventions. This commencement proceeding and our academic regalia are prime examples of long standing traditions and conventions, with roots dating back to medieval times. The conferring of degrees is a testimony that each graduate completed successfully a rigorous curriculum. These time-honored traditions bring order to the work of the university.

Giamatti encouraged his students and faculty at Yale to use their freedom to create new learning. He challenged them to disseminate their knowledge, to patent, to bring to the marketplace invention and new practices and protocols. In other words, he challenged them to bring order to the creative processes so that the products of their creativity can be unleashed to private enterprise or to the public domain to stimulate economic prosperity and advance the public good.

Take this wonderful university as an example. At Penn State, your alma mater, we embrace quality and access—not one or the other. We embrace both and provide both quality and access and our students achieve. We live the genius of the “and” in a free and ordered space.

Many of our students are first generation college students. In fact, 46 percent of this graduating class represents the first in their families to attend college. I, too, was a first generation college student and the first in my family to go to graduate school to complete a master’s and a Ph.D.

Education is a great equalizer. No matter your background, education levels the playing field and opens doors for the college-educated to enter.

Like many of today’s graduates, my own story begins with family.

I could not have succeeded without the help of my family. Going to college, how to apply, what to expect, these were unchartered waters for us.

My parents worked extraordinarily hard to give my older sister and me a good life. Studying hard in school was my sister’s and my job, and going to college was an irrefutable expectation. We knew we could not disappoint.

My grandparents came to this country with their four young daughters, my mother the youngest, from Minsk, Russia. They always said they were from Minsk, but they were actually from a nearby village whose name has been lost to us. Minsk was the nearest city.

My grandparents were uneducated. They arrived in America knowing little to no English. I was the youngest in the family and their window into contemporary America. They learned about American life, American youth and American schooling from me. I gave them daily reports when I returned home from school at the end of each day. They were my champions and gave freely of their unconditional love and support.

Years later, after 25 years in this country, my grandfather attended night school. That was a huge undertaking and a bold one for him. He wrote his first essay in English to me, his youngest grandchild. The essay was six short sentences long. It took him a solid hour to compose. I carried the paper with me for a good while, until it wore thin and began to shred. I placed it away for safekeeping, but remember every word. He wrote:

“To Malka [my given name], I am the grandpapa and the family oldest. You are the grandchild and the youngest. Take care of yourself. Take care of your family. You are part of us. You make us proud. “

Each letter was carefully crafted in cursive. He wrote with a cartridge pen in blue ink. I could read every word no matter how it was spelled. He was so proud of this essay. For him it was a triumph. He was literate in a new language. Moments like these are not forgotten. I was every bit as proud of him as he was of himself. What courage it took for a father, a grandfather, an immigrant, to become a student of English. He had been my champion, but at that moment, he became my hero.

My grandmother, Rose, never learned to read or write English. She was nevertheless a great story teller and astute business women. My grandparents ran a small grocery store in New York.

Rose was generous with her affection and in giving advice. On the subject of my future she was adamant. She told me time and again to get an education, a college education, to be independent, make my own money, and always have some cash hidden away for emergencies. With respect to the latter, I assumed that these were “old country” ways of thinking. I listened intently nevertheless.

It was my grandmother who helped me convert our family den into my own bedroom when I was 14. I argued that I was old enough to be released from sharing a room with my older sister.

My grandmother was immediately supportive. She convincingly brought my being a good student into my defense. She argued that I needed a place to work without distraction. The argument won the day, and I made the move.

The den actually housed a large desk. My former room did not. Truth be told, however, it was my family’s only telephone that sat on that desk that I coveted. In my generation, telephones were hard-wired and stationary. It was a BIG deal in an immigrant family to not only have your own room if you had siblings, but to have unlimited access to a telephone.

My grandmother, perhaps unknowingly, perhaps quite deliberately, gave me freedom and independence. She set me on a trajectory that I may not otherwise have known. She made it possible for me to have a place to work, to think, to read, to write and create without interruption. It was my window into learning and I seized the opportunity with the greatest of enthusiasm.

I wrote my grandmother letters from college that my mother read to her. I had little time or patience for writing letters but I made an exception when it came to Rose. I wrote weekly.

Rose died at the age of ninety. She lived to see me graduate college, marry, start a family and a career. She had kept my letters in a large photo album that I found after she passed away. Also found was a tidy sum of cash. She had stuffed many bills, some of them of high denomination, in the shank of her walker. My mother and I made the find when one of the rubber handgrips came loose. We shook them free from their hiding place. Each bill was folded neatly into small squares. We could not imagine how Rose managed to save them. It had been years since she had done her own banking. Dollars collected over the years, we ultimately supposed, in case of emergencies. Rose took her own advice.

Rose lived in the US for over sixty years, raised her daughters in this country, ran a business with my grandfather, kept the books, and did the banking. Numbers she mastered, but she never read or wrote a single word in English. She was nonetheless eloquent in her advice. She was my hero.

I wish you all champions to sing your praises and heroes to inspire you. I hope that each of you in time will champion others and become heroes in their eyes. The education you received at Penn State and at this wonderful college, Berks College, has given you the wherewithal to be great champions and heroes.

Today’s graduates studied in such critical fields as business, hospitality, education, the natural and life sciences, psychology, the performing and technical arts, kinesiology, and information sciences and technology, and engineering technology. Most of our graduates also volunteered in community improvement efforts, conducted research with their faculty members, completed at least one internship with area companies, served in student government, and engaged in various clubs and organizations outside the classroom.

Today’s graduates maximized their time at Penn State Berks. While a majority of them worked part-time or full-time to help pay for their education. Truly remarkable, truly extraordinary. Graduates, you are an inspiration. Each of you has your own heroic stories to share.

In closing, I want to remind you that you have joined the ranks of over 600 thousand alumni around the globe. No matter where you go, there is likely to be a fellow Penn Stater nearby.

Congratulations graduates. Enjoy the day. It is yours to celebrate with friends and family.