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PRESIDENT KELLY'S WINTER COMMENCEMENT REMARKS

December 16, 2025

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President Kelly's remarks at Winter Commencement, Dec. 15, 2025 as prepared for delivery.

Good evening Captains, friends and family of Captains and all of those who made this wonderful evening possible. You all arrived right on time!

Thank you to Rector Morton for your gracious welcome and thank you to all of the members of our Board of Visitors for your leadership and guidance that is giving us momentum toward our goal of being the #1 regional public university in the nation.

Thank you to Provost Kidd for setting the tone for this evening. Thanks to Dr. Paul for investing the mace and upholding a meaningful university tradition. Thank you to Grace Farris, Dr. Reimer and the Wind Ensemble for inspiring us with your remarkable talent.

Let me welcome the families and friends that are here to cheer you on and those around the world who are watching the live stream. Congratulations - you made it, too!

And my thanks and gratitude to our faculty and staff. They have poured their knowledge into you. You learned from them, you have sought them out for advice or a friendly conversation, and they may have helped you make a connection or explore an avenue that has led you from this place to your next destination.

I want to let you in on a secret that you may already know. Our faculty and staff love working with you. It's what gets them up in the morning and...most days...what sends them home smiling at night. They would love it even

more if you kept them updated on all the good things that happen in your life in the years to come and I am confident, if you ever have a question or need someone to talk with - they will be there for you then as well.

You see our faculty on stage and seated at the front and to the right of the concert hall. They have been with you every step of the way, including your steps across the stage tonight. They are here to celebrate you ... let us take a moment to thank them.

Now I want to speak directly to the graduates who are receiving bachelor of science, bachelor of arts and graduate degrees.

To the class of 2025, each one of you has a unique story. Your path to this day may have taken a route you did not expect or plan for.

What you envisioned on your first day of college...may be very different from the reality you experienced. Here is what doesn't matter much - the initial vision you had for your college experience when you showed up as an 18 year old freshman, transferred from another college or a successful course of study at one of our wonderful community colleges, or if you chose to join us after your time in the military. Here is what does matter - that you arrived. That you arrived here tonight. You have completed this portion of your life's journey ... And let me be clear: you arrived right on time.

Tonight we gather for a true commencement ceremony for you because you arrived right on time - look around. The setting, the formality, the rituals...all send an unmistakable signal. This is commencement, a real commencement, even if it isn't done on a balmy spring day.

That brings me to my message to you tonight. Life is almost never a straight line. Sometimes the curves, twists and ninety degree turns are your choice. Just as often, they are thrust upon you.

My life has taught me that our journeys rarely go exactly as planned. We often use nautical metaphors here at CNU ... and we should we're Captains! So let me offer this one from my own personal experiences. When you set out on a journey at sea your plans can change in an instant ... in no time flat, the weather and the seas can significantly alter the best laid plans. Sometimes you have calm seas and a following current that allows you to accomplish the journey quicker than planned and sometimes you hit an angry ocean, unexpected detours, and an opposing current, but in the end you arrive ... you arrive at your destination stronger and better prepared for the next journey... whatever it may be.

That lesson stuck with me. I've had journeys in my career take twice as long as I thought they would, and others that wrapped up in half the time. What mattered wasn't the schedule — it was the lessons learned, the relationships fortified, and the sense of accomplishment we all shared together when we arrived at the finish line, knowing we had done the right things right and we did it together.

Most of you earning undergraduate degrees tonight did not take the standard four year path from high school graduation to college graduation. If I may take the analogy a bit further ... some of your journeys to earn a cherished CNU diploma were possibly slowed by a challenging current or difficult weather, while others had a following current and calm seas and completed their degree in 3 1/2 years ... or maybe even quicker.

What matters, in the end, is the end - you are here. You arrived right on time. Your time. And for that ... we all say - Congratulations!

How you arrived here matters and it will matter for years to come. As you tell the story of your college years, I suggest you frame your journey as a strength, as the bedrock of who you are as a person. You are the embodiment of resilience and adaptability. Draw on those reserves in good times and bad and know that you earned the right to be called a Captain for Life!

Before we move on to the conferral of degrees, I have two asks of you:

First, would you please join me as we salute Cadet Andrew Ross and Cadet Chunjing Neumann - they are two of our ROTC cadets and who are graduating from CNU and will receive their commissions on Wednesday and then will almost immediately continue their service to our country in the United States military. Let us thank them in advance for their service and congratulate them on the accomplishment of earning a college degree while fulfilling all of the responsibilities to earn a commission as an officer in the United States Army.

My second ask of you as soon to be Captains for Life - Please help us find more students just like you...and help us

build a foundation to thrive in the future.

Applications from high school seniors who would like to follow in your footsteps are on a record-setting pace for a second consecutive year. More and more people want to be like you - they want to be Captains. They know that you have a superb education founded in the liberal arts and they know your every action is guided by time tested values - honor, service, scholarship, and leadership. Our network of Captains for Life has never been larger, and you will help us grow that number as you cross the stage this evening. Our alumni appreciate the values we live here at CNU and they are eager to help you excel and they know you will do the same for those that follow you. I am grateful that our Alumni Society Board President, Nick Mirra is with us tonight - thank you Nick.

So what happens now? As you get settled in your new world, please consider giving back and coming back whenever you can. Come back for homecoming or a game or a concert or come back and share your journey with our dedicated faculty and staff. Any time is the right time. Come back and give back ... this is your home and you are part of our family.

We ask you to pay it forward with an investment of your time, your talent, and, yes, your treasure. This is your University and now ... your alma mater and every great University has engaged and passionate alumni.

Our goal is to share the CNU experience as far and wide as we possibly can ... and you are our newest ambassadors. Help us spread the word, help us guide and develop future Captains, and as you are able, assist us in making this university accessible and affordable for all who have the desire and the qualifications to be Captains ... just like you.

As you give back, I ask that you also look around. Look around your new community and discover a way to contribute and serve.

You have so many talents and abilities and Service is one of our Core Values...it is who you are as a Captain for Life and your community and our nation needs you now more than ever.

I also hope as you settle into your new career or into graduate school or whatever role that you take on next, that you do so honorably, with a desire to improve the lives around you.

Go forward from here knowing you are ready to be part of the solution. Your college journey has prepared you with the skills, the values and the knowledge you need to live a life of significance. You are resilient and adaptable. Congratulations.

Mrs. Kelly and I join with the entire faculty and staff in wishing you long, wonderful lives, full of significance. You arrived right on time. We are so proud of you. We will never forget you and as always ... Go Captains!
