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PRESIDENT KELLY'S WINTER COMMENCEMENT REMARKS

December 18, 2024

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Editor's note: President Kelly gave the following remarks as prepared for delivery at the 2024 Winter Commencement on December 18, 2024

Good evening Captains, friends and family of Captains and all of those who made this wonderful evening possible.

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 propelling our university to new heights.

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.

Tonight we gather for a true commencement ceremony. The first full-scale December graduation we have held since 2005. The pomp and circumstance of tonight is in honor of you and your families. It is the right thing to do. All of this is for you and because of you - Congratulations Captains!

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. The next step - starting a career, continuing your education, or seeking a place to serve...may be a step that just a few years ago, you never expected to take.

Amidst the uncertainty of college and of the times we live in, one thing has been unchanging for each of you. You have been supported during the journey.

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 been with you every step of the way. 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.

You see our faculty on stage and seated at the front and to the right of the concert hall. They are here to celebrate you ... let us take a moment to thank them for pouring their knowledge into you and doing it with a generosity of spirit.

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 that happens in your life in the years to come.

The same goes for Mrs. Kelly and I. We are all family. We won't forget you. Today we honor nearly 150 graduates who are receiving bachelor of science, bachelor of arts and graduate degrees.

Among our graduates are some who are what we call first-gens, the first in their family to attend and graduate from college. With our applause, let us congratulate these first generation graduates as they make family history. Congratulations!

This is also an historic day for the university. About six years ago, we first announced the launch of the Community Captains program. It is now a thriving and growing program that brings local high school students to campus for college preparatory workshops, classes and events.

The goal is to have as many Community Captains as possible enroll at CNU. Today, among our graduates, are the first four Community Captains to go the distance, two from An Achievable Dream Academy, and two from Heritage High School - they started the program when they were juniors in high school and look at them now!

They are graduating from CNU after only three and a half years. We are so proud of them, their teachers and counselors in high school, and their families and supporters. My thanks to everyone involved in the Community Captains program. Let's applaud these graduates and all who made this historic day possible.

So many of our graduates are distinctive and we congratulate them all but I do want to salute Theodore Russell, Mikayla Compere, and Jamil Koroma - they are our ROTC cadets who are graduating from CNU and then will almost immediately continue their service to our country in the United States military. Let us thank them for their service, their bravery, and the accomplishment of earning a college degree while fulfilling all of the responsibilities to earn a commission as an officer in the U.S. Army.

No matter how or when you arrived at Christopher Newport, you have been here and thrived here at a challenging time of transformation.

You started your college journey in the midst of a pandemic that changed...absolutely everything about college.

And there has been change here at Christopher Newport. When you arrived, President Tribble was the president and he did so much to build this university and shape what it is today. And then Adelia Thompson served as the interim president and kept our ship on course. You were here for my first year as President and Angie and I will be forever grateful for how you welcomed us and made us feel instantly at home.

Amid all that change, there has also been a change in how your university is perceived. If we were Virginia's best kept secret when you arrived, that's not the case now. We are proudly Virginia's number one regional public university and you are graduating from the #3 public regional Universities in the South!

Applications from High School seniors who would like to follow in your footsteps are on a record-setting pace. More and more people want to be like you - they want to be Captains.

And the value of a Christopher Newport degree has never been greater. Employers in this region - NASA, Newport News Shipbuilding, Canon, Ferguson and so many more - are hungry for our graduates.

They know that you have a superb education founded in the liberal arts and they know your every action is guided by stalwart values - honor, scholarship, service and leadership. Our network of Captains for Life has never been larger. They appreciate your values because they live them, too. And they are eager to help you excel and they know you will do the same for those that follow you.

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 just for a walk around. Come back and give back ... this is your home and we are 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.

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 an open heart and a desire to improve the lives around you.

Go forward from here knowing you are ready to be part of the solution. You have the skills, the values and the knowledge you need to live a life of significance. Congratulations. You are a Captain and now a Captain for Life. Mrs. Kelly and I join with the entire faculty and staff in wishing you long, wonderful lives, full of significance and full of love. We are so proud of you. We will never forget you and as always ... Go Captains!
