

James Madison College, Class of 2008: —Congratulations! We made it! Now it's time to go out into the world and...do what exactly? Some of us may not be entirely sure...but reflecting on what has brought us here together and considering what we are collectively taking forward can help to assure us in the face of uncertainty.

The feminist and environmentalist philosopher Starhawk once remarked:

“Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, and voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done.”

When I first read this quote, I immediately thought of James Madison College. And in that moment, I felt a surge of appreciation and gratitude for all that the Madison community has been for me, and us, in the past four years. It might be hard to describe the essence of JMC to those who are not students, but each of us graduates knows that Madison is much more than classrooms and academic requirements.

Life in the Madison community has taught us to find our own voices and use them with purpose and conviction. Of course we all failed that first MC 111 paper freshman year (mine was a 1.9), not because our voices were wrong, but because they weren't clear enough. And since that paper, our professors have continually pushed us to ask tough questions and to develop our individual interests. They've even been willing to chat over some green beer on St. Patrick's Day or stop by the senior bar crawl just for some extra quality time. Having professors with such a genuine interest in getting to know each of us and in assuring our success both in and out of the classroom has undoubtedly brought us to where we are today. Through their optimism and dedication, I hope that we graduates have all found some of our own.

The strength and knowledge we've gained from the Madison community has not only come from our professors, but from ourselves as well. I learned just as much from my peers as I did from my professors, if not more, in these last four years. We've all spent many a late night in a dorm room, a study lounge, or even a bar arguing about election results or international fiascos. And who could ever forget the “Dress as Your Favorite Madison Prof” parties? Slightly cult-ish, of course, but always a good opportunity to bring up some intellectual discussion. And even though everyone else on campus has learned to avoid large groups of Madisonians for this reason, my peers have been one of the biggest parts of my education. For this, I thank each of you.

Yet, the Madison community stretches beyond the walls of Case Hall, reaching far past the banks of the Red Cedar. We've brought our newfound knowledge and experiences home to our family and friends. Is there a parent here today who hasn't been completely educated on a new political or international topic by their Madison grad? My parents definitely know a lot more about international development than they ever thought they would. And even if you had to educate them through an argument, I guarantee that deep down they were smiling because their tuition dollars were well spent. To our parents and families: thank you for your patience, your support, and your love.

Perhaps the greatest lesson I have learned about community was on my study abroad trip to Nicaragua, where we spent a day with an extended family of 30 people in one of the poorest slums of a major city. In the face of great adversity, their dedication to one another was absolutely unparalleled to anything I'd ever seen. That experience impressed upon me the importance of community and the strength that individuals find in each other. I hope that each graduate here today has encountered such an awe-inspiring experience while at Michigan State.

As we receive our diplomas today and say goodbye to Case Hall, East Lansing, our beloved Sparty, and each other, we celebrate not only our experiences and accomplishments but also the foundation we have created for a successful future. Our diplomas are not merely awards for a job well done, but instead are a symbol of privilege and obligation. We have had the privilege of inclusion in the Madison community and the opportunity to find our own voices. We now have an obligation to use them.

But as Madison grads, I know the issues we care about and the problems we face are not small, they cannot be tackled alone. Action will thus come from the inspiration we instill in others and the dedication we find in ourselves. Whether you're interested in educational policy or international security, social justice or healthcare, whether you're headed to grad school or law school, Chicago or London, I urge each of you to work to build strong communities in your lives. Find a mentor. *Be* a mentor. Establish programs and initiatives. Create support systems for yourself and for others. Spread opportunities and encourage collaboration. Share your ideas and welcome the ideas of others. Work for change. If there is one thing Madison has taught us, it is that success will come from the relationships we build in our lives and in our ability to work with and learn from those around us.

And as we take this next step, always remember that the people here today, peers, professors, parents, and families- have put a great deal of faith in you. Your community has, and will always continue to, support you in your every endeavor.

Let us now enter the world and share the inspiration we have found here.

Thank you, and good luck!