Now What?
Commencement Address, May 9, 2009
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Trustees, Distinguished guests, President Galligan, Colleagues, and especially the class of 2009 – welcome to your graduation. In just a few minutes you will walk across this stage to collect your diploma and begin a new chapter in your life, but before you go I have been asked to deliver the final minutes of your ‘last class.’ Those last few minutes are typically a time to recap class and preview what is coming next, and your facial expressions right now are the same ones many of you exhibit at the end of most any class – some of you can’t wait to bolt out of the tent and get on to whatever you have planned next, and others of you will hang around after class to double-check your understanding or share your insight into the material, or ask for clarity on an upcoming assignment. And then there are those of you who will try to convince me to give you an extra credit assignment to make up for something you couldn’t possibly turn in on time… Today’s wrap up is different, because instead of telling you what happens next, I am going to ask you a question: Now what?

Your whole life you have been instructed what to do – first by your parents and then by your teachers, from grade school through last week. I know that at times that has felt confining and restrictive, but it has also been comforting. Here is how I know – many of you all across campus struggled this year with your capstone research projects, and the reason this project was so challenging was that this time the decisions were yours – your question, your research, your analysis, and your reporting. You thought you might crack under the pressure, but you got through it, and here you are. More than once during this time you asked yourself and us, “Now what?” You may not have recognized it at the time, but the practice you put into answering this question will serve you well because from here on you are in the driver’s seat. I’m afraid if you take a look in the glove compartment, there’s no road map to tell you where to go, nor is there a ‘life’s path’ button on the dashboard GPS unit. For some of you that is pretty scary, so I thought I would offer you some advice as you mull over my question.

Make a decision. A couple of weeks ago I asked my seniors in the capstone class to find a position description for a job they would be interested in and qualified for and write a cover letter applying for that position. The day before the assignment was due I received this e-mail from one
of my students: “Please look through these and tell me which I can do. The ones in Rhode Island are the most promising-looking financially and long term, but the second link looks awesome too. What do I do?!” My paraphrased answer to this student was: Make a decision.

In talking with several of you in the past month as I tried to imagine what I would say to you today, the career decision is looming large for you right now, understandably – you’ll probably be asked this question several times as you celebrate your graduation in the next few hours or days. Some of you have confided that you are not sure you want to go into the field you are about to receive your degree in – sorry Mom and Dad - and others of you can’t imagine choosing for fear of picking the wrong choice. But here is a little secret - you can change your course if it is not working for you or you discover new interests. My own circuitous route to becoming a college professor is testimony to that statement.

When I graduated from high school I had no idea what my career path would be, so I elected not to go to college right away. Instead I found a job working in retail in a mall. It didn’t take long for me to figure out that I couldn’t see myself working on the sales floor for minimum wage for the rest of my life, so I started going to school evenings pursuing a degree in business.

A couple of years later, circumstances led me to work at a local lumber manufacturer for six years, where the knowledge I gained about timber harvesting and the interactions I had with loggers I met there would influence my scholarship and teaching much later.

Following that job I went to work for a commercial construction company starting as an office administrator, but quickly transitioning into project management and later marketing. An economic downturn in the late-80’s seemed like a good time to get out of the construction industry, so I took advantage of an opportunity to explore international business opportunities back at the lumber company.

That project was abandoned after a year, and I took a summer position in the fitness center here on campus, having decided to pursue my interest in fitness. When the director’s position at the Hogan Sports Center opened up I applied for and was offered the job, and with it came the opportunity to finish my undergraduate education here at CSC. Yes, I too, took Marketing with Professor Quinn, Children in Sport with Professor Eckrich, and Intro to Art with Professor Keenan. Two things happened while I was earning my undergraduate degree in Exercise and Sports Science.
I fell for Colby-Sawyer students and developed a love of learning. You see my prior educational experience had been at a two-year setting where the focus was on job skills. The liberal arts environment here both required and provided opportunity for me to explore areas outside my major. Two of those choices, Professor Stecker’s New Hampshire history, and Professor Batalden’s Environmental Issues, would influence my next career move.

I finished my undergraduate degree two courses at a time in December of 1997, and on the way to the Adirondacks, to climb in the High Peaks region, Professor Malan asked me,

“**Now what?**” “**Some rest,**” I told him, “**I’m finished with my education, and looking forward to free weekends and evenings with reading whatever I want.**” “**I don’t think so,**” he said, and he revealed that some of his faculty colleagues were developing an Environmental Studies major here at the college. I distinctly remember thinking that if I had it to do over again; I might have pursued a career teaching in that major. I may have even said this out loud, because I heard a response – I can’t remember whether it was my own voice or Professor Malan’s who said, “**What do you mean IF you had it to do over? You do!**”

So I began graduate school in Environmental Studies and began teaching as soon as I finished my Master’s degree – hoping to transition from director of the Hogan Center to teaching full time as the major grew. I did in fact make that transition a few years ago and I **finally** finished my education last summer earning a Ph.D. in Environmental Studies. Now this isn’t the usual career trajectory for many professors, but it seems to me that none of my career choices followed a normal or usual path – which brings me to my second piece of advice.

**Live whole-heartedly and passionately.** I am convinced that one of the main reasons I have been able to navigate this career path is that I can’t do anything halfway – once I make a decision I jump in with both feet. ‘Go big or go home’ is how I live my life. Some of the career moves I just talked about were leaps – and if I had had to rely on only my resume, I may not have been able to make those leaps because sometimes I didn’t appear qualified on paper to do the job I was applying for. Granted the opportunity to interview or to get my foot in the door in an entry-level position, however, my enthusiasm and passion could take me to the next step.
Deciding to follow my passion rather than staying in a job where I was economically secure has introduced some risk into my life, but it also has allowed me to find my calling – a career teaching material that I care deeply about in a place that I am deeply attached to, surrounded by friends and family. Who could ask for anything more?

Passion is a deep personal commitment, and when you are passionate about a subject, people recognize it in you and it’s contagious.

Think for a moment about the classes you most enjoyed while you were here…you tried harder and did better work in those courses that you cared about – that you were passionate about, right? And even when you found yourself in a course that you weren’t particularly interested in, having a professor who was passionate about the material made it a whole lot more enjoyable, right?

As long as you have to work for a living, and most of us do, why not make it personally fulfilling? Which brings me to my next point -

*Enjoy the journey.* Even if you haven’t decided where you are headed in your immediate future, you may have in mind some long-term goals related to family, your financial future, your career, travel or even recreational accomplishments.

Whatever they are, goals can help to keep us focused or provide ways to measure progress toward those things we have identified as important. I encourage you to enjoy the journey on the way to your goals.

Many of you know that I have led a bunch of hiking trips for the Appalachian Mountain Club, mostly in the White Mountains. In doing that I have met a lot of people with a peakbagger mentality – those are hikers who collect summits but may not be able to recollect the experience of the hike to those summits. I see two problems with that – one is that they can become so focused on the peak they risk personal safety when conditions warrant abandoning a summit attempt, and the other is that they deem anything less than reaching the summit a failure.

Here is a different approach: This July I am going to climb Mt. Rainier in Washington. When offered a choice of routes, I chose one that is more remote and challenging than the route most people climb, and that means the summit will be harder to attain. I chose that route because I
love to be on a big mountain, especially on a glacier in the summer, and there is no place I would rather wake up than in my sleeping bag, above the trees, camping on a snowfield. I enjoy every minute of being in that environment, even though slogging up a 14,000 foot mountain with nearly half your body weight on your back is hard work.

I will aim for the summit, but it’s not my goal – in fact it’s only half way to my goal, which is to get back to my family safely – a family who doesn’t share my love of this activity, but who recognize it as a need in my life and trust that I will return safe and happy.

As you reflect on your time here at CSC, the journey – meaningful learning experiences, a glorious Mountain Day hiking with friends, winning the Commonwealth Coast Conference championship – those are the memories you will carry with you long after you’ve forgotten this speech and this ceremony – even though earning your diploma may have been the ‘summit ‘ you were aiming for.

Okay, you’ve heard me talk just about long enough; it’s time to get on to the reason we are here, but I suspect those of you who have been in my classes would be disappointed if I didn’t close with a flora analogy.

To recap, in the plant world there are generalists and specialists. Just like the name implies, generalists will thrive in many environments, whereas specialist species have specific requirements and will only thrive when certain conditions are present.

As you begin your career path you are generalists, prepared to enter the workforce, but without specialized knowledge or experience. You can thrive in any number of jobs that will give you professional experience and it is nearly impossible to choose wrong, so make a decision, jump in with both feet, and as you gain wisdom you will recognize the habitats that you are most comfortable in where you will flourish – you will become specialists.

Some of you will be happiest in the comfort of companions in ‘behind the scenes’ jobs – like a yellow birch living in a shady northern hardwood forest. Others of you will be happiest and most productive in the spotlight, like our sun-loving white pine, for instance. You may find your place in a relatively risk-free position like those species that thrive in lowlands region, and others of you will be drawn to the edge – living like alpine flora where the key is micro-habitats and adaptation to survive the harshest weather conditions.
For those of you who have no idea where you are headed, take heart – some seeds fall and germinate quickly while others have the ability to lie dormant for years waiting for the right conditions to take root and grow – I daresay this was my experience. There is a niche for each of you, and I am confident you will find it, so on your way to finding your place, live whole-heartedly and passionately, enjoying the journey to your ideal habitat.

My sincere congratulations on your graduation – I look forward to learning where it is that you will grow and thrive.