

Sen. Susan M. Collins
University of Maine Commencement - afternoon
May 12, 2018

Thank you, President Hunter. Trustees, faculty, staff, and alumni, families and friends, and, most of all, graduates, I am honored to join you all today.

This is a day of transition and gratitude. So, as President Hunter transitions to a new phase of a life of remarkable accomplishments, let me express the gratitude felt throughout Maine for her nearly three decades of service in higher education. Under her leadership, UMaine recruited its largest incoming class, the most out-of-state students ever, and had the biggest increase in private donors to the Annual Fund. Why did we wait so long to put a woman in charge? President Hunter, I am so honored to be a part of your final commencement. Your compass was always true, and we thank you.

At this morning's commencement, my nephew Adam received his diploma. One hundred-two years ago, his great-grandfather Sam was in his cap and gown, Class of 1916. In between came Adam's grandparents – that's my parents – then his parents, as well as an aunt, and his two sisters. That's four generations of University of Maine graduates.

My mother calls it “a proud Maine tradition.” I know there are other Maine families with similar traditions and pride in this school.

Knowing that I am one of the final things standing between you and your diplomas, I wanted to offer five thoughts for you to consider as you reflect upon this great occasion.

First, be proud of all you have accomplished. You did it! As a college graduate, you will be well positioned for success in a fast-changing world.

Second, be proud of this great institution and be loyal to it once you leave. Whether you come from a long line of Black Bears or you are a first-generation graduate, you are the heirs of a great tradition. From its founding in 1865 as one of America's early land-grant colleges, UMaine continues to remain true to its mission as a place that balances the natural and applied sciences – such as agriculture, forestry, and engineering – with the liberal arts.

While college costs across the nation continue to soar, Maine continues to present its students with a great value. The excellent facilities you enjoyed here have been paid for by generous donors and by taxpayers – many of whom will never set foot on this campus. The incredible faculty and staff who have advanced your education could very well be somewhere else and likely making more money. You have received a first-rate education for a very reasonable sum. Your support for your alma mater through your spirit, your loyalty and yes, your money, will help other students have this same opportunity.

My third message is to stay in touch with your friends. You'll discover that this can be challenging in the coming years when many of these people will no longer be a short walk away

from you. The special bonds you have made are ones that can last a lifetime, but you have to make the effort. Your parents may have told you that, although the days are sometimes long, the years fly by. It's true. Take the time to maintain the wonderful friendships you have built here within the campus community.

Fourth, become an active citizen. We need you to engage with your communities and with all levels of your government – local, state, and federal. It would seem, these days, that our ability to work together to solve problems is hitting modern lows. And similarly, our ability to have a civil debate – or even a civil conversation – is on the wane as well. As graduates of this great university, you have a key role to play in restoring the high ideals of civil discourse.

Courage, civility, principles, and even wit are increasingly rare commodities in our discourse today. We see this disturbing trend in Washington, and we see this in our own communities. Sitting down with those on the opposite side of an issue, figuring out which issues matter the most to each side, negotiating in good faith, and attempting to reach a solution are actions often vilified by hard-liners on both the left and the right.

It may seem woefully out of fashion, but I believe that choosing civility and pursuing compromise can yield tremendous results that strengthen our communities and sustain our democratic institutions.

Fixing problems instead of affixing blame does not happen by chance. It takes deliberate, thoughtful actions.

In this age of technology with instantaneous communications, the power to divide, to belittle and bully, and to cause misery is in everyone's hands. The sheer ugliness so commonly seen on social media is evidence of the anonymous tyrants who can ruin lives with crude insults and cruel gossip. Beware of assuming that what you read on the Internet is true, and fight back by questioning falsehoods, condemning cruelty, and elevating the debate.

Choose your words and actions carefully, take the time to listen thoughtfully, and aim to find opportunities for cooperation. I encourage you to get involved in your communities and to be open to new ideas and knowledge. You'll find that seeking common ground doesn't have to mean ceding all of the ground you're standing on. Rather, it can lead to discovering different ways of thinking, new friendships, and fruitful frontiers. You may even discover that the person with the opposing view has valid points!

Fifth and finally, whatever it is that you want to do, go for it! Be a risk taker. Step out of your comfort zone. Believe in yourself. I would never have had the honor of representing Maine in the United States Senate if I hadn't pursued my dream of serving the people of Maine. Sometimes you don't succeed, and sometimes, you will fall short as I did when I ran for Governor in 1994. But if you work hard, persevere, and believe in yourself, you will achieve your goals – just as you did in earning your diploma.

From the ancient fortunetellers to the horoscopes in today's newspapers, we humans have long been tempted by the illusion, the easy excuse for failure, that we are ruled by destiny in a

system that is rigged for a certain outcome. Well, as Stephen Hawking once said, “I have noticed that even those who assert that everything is predestined and that we can change nothing about it still look both ways before they cross the street.”

You control your own destiny. Your future will be affected by the decisions that you make. Graduates, a UMaine diploma represents a great many things, not the least of which is the personal responsibility you have chosen as your path. Let it be known that you are not ruled by the stars – rather, you aim for the stars.

Congratulations, Class of 2018, and good luck!