

FINAL

Commencement Speech May 2009
Chancellor Pam Shockley-Zalabak
"Choices"

President Benson, members of the regents, faculty, staff, distinguished guests, friends, and loving families and, most importantly, the members of the class of 2009, thank you for coming today to celebrate success.

In today's environment, it is often easier to be pessimistic than it is to celebrate accomplishment and the choices that have led to today.

Today is about success. It is about shaping lives, developing communities of learners, making choices, and indeed inventing futures.

Now, I want to focus on choices.

We are here to celebrate the choices that you – and your supporters – made. Choices that helped you become graduates.

Before I begin brief remarks, I ask that the graduates stand, find your supporters and give them a round of applause

(Lead applause)

The individuals you applauded chose to support you in your endeavors and to be with you today in celebration of your decision to take a path that is often less traveled.

Some of you are trailblazers, becoming the first in your family to earn a college degree.

Others followed the advice of one of my favorite philosopher s– New York Yankee great Yogi Berra -- who told us:

“When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”

My point is that you made choices.

You made the choice to invest in yourself.

You made the choice to forego material possessions to finance your education.

You made the choice to challenge yourself, and those around you in your quest to understand and to learn.

You chose study often over play, books over U-Tube, lectures -- but hopefully not always -- over laughter.

And you chose what I believe is one of the best universities in the Western United States!

I recognize that these are difficult times and that the headlines are full of news about unemployment, bankruptcies and foreclosures.

I recognize that our country remains at war and the importance of remembering those who have fallen and of prayer for the safety of those who remain.

Our lives are changed by these events, and many others, in the world.

Today, I wish to remind you that despite all of this seeming chaos, we each have choices.

To the graduates, you chose a path to pursue academic excellence.

Your choice was a good one, one that ultimately will increase your earnings power and reduce your chance for unemployment as you compete in a global marketplace.

Education – and its application – creates choices.

Dr. Seuss reminded us:

“You have brains in your head

You have feet in your shoes

You can steer yourself in any direction you choose”

Gabe Gates did just that.

Legally blind, Gabe could have chosen to accept a Social Security disability check and be satisfied.

He was not.

A former construction worker, this 30 year old father of five, is earning a degree in psychology today and doesn't plan to stop until he earns his Phd and a place at either a public or private institution where he can apply his skills to helping others who are visually impaired.

Politician William Jennings Bryan said:

“Destiny is no matter of chance.

It is a matter of choice: it is not a thing to be waited for

It is a thing to be achieved.”

Jim Rynning – the winner of this year's special chancellor's award -- has lived these words.

While enrolled as a college physics major, he was drafted into World War II.

One could argue that Jim didn't have a choice. I would argue that he did. He served his country with honor for more than 32 years, retiring as a United States Air Force colonel.

Many of you saw Jim and his white crew cut on campus as he engaged his passion for philosophy and physics, actually completing every upper-division course in physics offered at this university.

At 89, he has completed his quest for a physics major, though I understand he plans to return for more next fall!

Winston Churchill tells us:

“Success is not final

Failure is not fatal

It is the courage to continue that counts.”

Marie Bush who today, at age 50, is earning a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering showed courage when, after raising her family, she decided to return to school.

She started at UCCS in the late 1970s and finished today.

So much for the four-year plan ...

She returned after raising two daughters, one of whom graduated from Boulder this month, the other who plans to graduate in December.

Marie made the choice to pursue her life-long dream.

We each have choices in our careers and in our lives.

Few are easy choices.

Laura Lewis chose to join the Air Force and to be in the first class of UCCS students to earn the Doctorate of Nursing Practice Degree.

When deployed to Iraq, she could have quit. No one would have blamed her.

She did not, choosing to continue her studies on-line, usually after a 12 hour shift helping wounded soldiers, and applying classroom lessons to military life.

We can choose to put ourselves first or to think more broadly about the community that surrounds us and those who will follow us.

We can choose inclusiveness or to continue the bigotry and hatred of the past.

I urge you to consider the words of Shirley Chisolm, the first African-American woman elected to Congress and the first African-American candidate for president, who tells us

“Service to others is the rent you pay here for your room on earth.”

We can choose to recognize that we live in a world that is constantly changing and that we – not it – must change with it.

And that change can be exciting.

We can choose to continue learning.

Abigail Adams, our nation’s second First Lady and known for her letters and counsel to her husband, John Adams, during the Revolutionary War, tells us:

“Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence.”

Graduates, the choices you made yesterday brought you here today.

But there are new choices for your future.

I leave you with the words of Charles Kettering and Randy Pausch.

Kettering, a famous American innovator claims:

“Keep on going and the chances are that you will stumble on something, perhaps when you are least expecting it.

“I’ve never heard of anyone stumbling on something sitting down.”

Randy Pausch, author of “The Last Lecture” tells us:

“The brick walls are there to stop the people who don’t want it badly enough. They’re there to stop the other people.”

And I would add – not you.

In a few moments, you will walk across this stage and receive your diploma, beginning a new era in your lives.

I look at you and know despite the storm clouds of our world, the future is good.

Congratulations.