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Northfield Land Acknowledgement

Before my speech, I would like to take a moment to honor the lands on which we gather here today.

The rain that has fallen on the soils of Northfield is steadily filtering to Dog River, which drains into the Winooski, and terminates at Lake Champlain.

Standing here I think of these currents teeming with trout, invigorated with the coming heat of summer, that have fed heron, and bears, and the peoples of this land, the Abenaki and colonial descendants, and countless generations of peoples before. I think of the wild onions lining the banks of the Winooski for which it is was named, promising savory meals into winter. I have been held on the rocky ledges of the Winooski, as her waters roar, powering our comforts, and have found peace where the White River meets the Connecticut, her flow a tranquil juggernaut. Feeling these gifts I acknowledge the generations of the Winooskik, who have stewarded this land through many hardships.

I find it powerful that everyone here carries with us not only our own stories but the stories of the lands that have sheltered and nourished us on our journeys, stories from every corner of Vermont coalesced here in the center to celebrate a great transition. I invite you all, as you drive 89 through these verdant mountains to *listen* for your land story, *feel* how it has held you. It is with this gratitude, this honor, that we bring ourselves towards a reciprocal relationship with these lands we call home, to support them as they have *always* supported us.

During my time at CCV, I have had the unique opportunity to interact with students not only though the classroom, but also through the leadership work I became involved with. I have worked with other student leaders, peer mentors, welcomed hundreds of incoming students at orientations. I have spoken with resource managers, listened to student feedback, and sat with members of our BIPOC student body on committees and focus groups, learning about the needs and challenges of our population.

Meeting my peers and hearing their stories moved me each and every time, reminding me why I do this work.

We got here today through isolation and uncertainty, many working with unfamiliar technology during a global pandemic.

How many of us have children? There is never a pause in parenting.

How many of us were working, one, two or more more jobs? Those bills kept on coming.

With the average student age of 28, many of us hadn't stepped foot in a classroom in a decade or more

and oppositely, some were enrolled in both high school and college!

Some of us have had to care for sick family members or navigate personal illness or grieve the loss of a loved one.

My own story is about as atypical as any typical CCV student. Not called down a traditional college track, I was licensed in massage after high school, but ultimately decided it was not to be my career. The desire to help people, which had brought me to the healing arts, was still there, but I wasn't sure how to.

Love brought me to Vermont in 2014. Partnering with a socially aware activist who was well educated and short on patience for ignorance exposed me to social issues, racial justice and roots to systemic oppression. Along with a shifting political climate it became clear to me that more serious engagement in structural reform and dismantling was necessary for what I wanted to do. But I needed to understand society at a deeper level and college felt like the place to do that. CCV, with its flexibility and low cost, made perfect sense as a reintroduction.

In May 2017, I scheduled a visit with an advisor and enrolled in courses for the first time in six years. I paused after that summer because life happened and I had never intended on getting a degree. It wasn't until COVID struck, forcing me out of the service industry, that I returned. The timing was right to dive fully into my studies and now with the goal of gaining an Associate's and skills that could land me remote work. One semester later I got involved in leadership which paved the way to bring me to this podium .

But what I have gained goes beyond knowledge and a diploma. I have strengthened my communication and critical thinking. I have come to accept that real problems rarely have the neat solutions my 20 year old self liked to envision.

I have discovered interests and skills that allow me to imagine many futures for myself, and with that has come a sense of security that I will land well, where ever that is.

As a bonus, I now have the opportunity to continue onto programs that I would have never dreamed of getting into, and with 2 years of college completed basically for free, I can finish a bachelor's for half price! I mean, in today's economy it a no brainer!

While what each of us takes from this may differ, we all have showed up for ourselves and for our families, our communities. Whether we started to gain skills or a certificate to improve financial security, or credits to transfer, or just to keep enriching our lives, we all share this.

I remember one woman at an orientation who had enrolled with her daughter so that they could go through college together!

And you know what the most common thing new students expressed concern over? Whether they would be able to do it, to take on the work load and stick it out, to be able to keep up with assignments and navigate the new technology.

Feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, self-doubt? Oh, how very human...

Yet, here we are

Because, you know the cool thing about being human? It's having other humans beside us
I had my partner, my mom, my great aunt
we had our kids, friends and families, holding us, believing in us, fueling our determination the
whole way

We also had advisors, amazing professors, and mentors. We had an entire community of support to
bring us here

I am sure I can say this on behalf of the entire student body: **Thank you!**

It's probably cliché to talk about community at a community college graduation, but it is
significant. And it is something that has really brought me to love this state. Even though I did not
grow up here I have come to call the Green Mountains and valleys of Vermont home.

Because it truly does feel like a community, spread out but coming together to take on the tough
stuff, to help one another. Maybe it's our small size and big heart, but change feels possible.

No other area demonstrated this to me more than in the diversity, equity, and inclusion work I
became involved with.

This is not comfortable work. I mean Vermont, one of whitest state in the nation, we got a lot of
listening to do. I certainly have had to confront a lot within myself and check my privilege.

But I have seen what can happen when we invest in this work, when we empower BIPOC voices.
I have seen committees formed, new positions created, trainings offered, and curriculums
augmented. I helped bring the student led Anti-racism pledge to the state college board of trustees
and I witnessed its approval.

Are these all the answers? No, and we might to get some things wrong. But we keep showing up,
ready to listen and to act, to continue this invaluable work

Together we are building a culture of progress

And this goes beyond DEI, when we *invest* in ourselves, in education and empowerment, we are
investing in a better future for our children, a future with greater opportunity for success.

Vermont has an aging problem, right?

Let's keep building this.

Speaking of success,

We too often define it in such limited terms, that our lives and achievements need to look a certain
way to carry value, our “worth” relegated to assets holdings and productivity.

More and more I have come to view success through many lenses.

Success can be a deliciously cooked meal, or getting outside on a beautiful day, a hand lent to

your neighbor, a warm home for a sweet fur baby.

Success is showing up day in and day out for our kiddos, even when they drive us insane.

Success is hitting those due dates and pushing through course after course to get to this stage.

Because it matters how we look at this, how we view ourselves. Our brains are wired to fixate on the negative. Reminding ourselves all the successes that brought us to this moment builds a foundation we can fall upon, come undone upon, and trust that we are still held. It is the foundation of self-worth.

And no one, nothing can ever take this from us.

After we leave here and take all our pictures and wonder off into the Vermont wild,

We will always have this

You are successful, you are valuable, you are making difference, if for nothing else for yourself, and man that is so important, because you deserve it. And you know, so many of you have certainly made a difference in my life, I think y'all are incredible!

Thank you