

Hi Everyone, I'm Caitlin and today I have the privilege of addressing my fellow graduates about the remarkable journey of achieving a college degree with the support of both Early College and the Free Degree Promise. I am profoundly grateful to CCV for providing me with the opportunity to explore and achieve things that once seemed beyond my reach. Over the course of my two-year journey at CCV, I embarked on various stages of personal and academic growth. From my first ever internship with the McClure Foundation to my role as a student ambassador, I found myself immersed in a vibrant community of remarkable individuals with diverse backgrounds. Throughout these experiences, two fundamental themes emerged to me: courage and vulnerability. It takes an immense amount of courage for a high school senior to navigate the challenges of college coursework while still in the hardships of adolescence. And yet, it is in embracing vulnerability that I, and we, discover our true strength. For instance, walking through the front doors of CCV for the first time in my Early College year was intimidating and it filled me with uncertainty. But it's in confronting these unknowns that we find the courage to persevere. Today, as we celebrate this momentous occasion, I urge each of you to recognize and celebrate the journey of growth, resilience, and acceptance of vulnerability that has brought us to this moment.

During my sociology class at CCV, I came across a quote that resonated with me and reminded me of the power of vulnerability. The quote is from the renowned leadership speaker Brené Brown, who has published many books and given TED Talks and podcasts about shame, vulnerability, and leadership. The quote goes, "The most courageous thing we can do is be vulnerable." I know it might seem like I'm about to give a long motivational speech on vulnerability, but I won't. Instead, I want to remind you that you've already embodied this courage. Despite the challenges and obstacles you may have faced on your journey, it's important to celebrate your achievements. What we have all accomplished this year, over the past two years, or even longer is no small feat. Taking a chance on CCV or any other program in this amazing community might have been scary at first—I can attest to that. The intense workload and the challenge of balancing studies with other responsibilities was overwhelming. But it's through facing these fears

and pushing through the uncertainty that we have grown and succeeded. So, let's take a moment to acknowledge our bravery and the incredible progress we've all made.

As a student, I remember feeling nervous about starting something new without my parents or peers. It was my first step toward independence but it was also the hardest, as my future felt unsure. However, it wasn't just the young students who were starting anew. Many of us made the courageous decision to return to the educational environment, taking a chance to push ourselves in a setting that was often populated by those just beginning to learn life's lessons. This achievement reminds me of a dear friend and classmate of mine, who returned to education later in life, navigating her own fears and dedicating time to pursue further learning for herself. I think of those who have made significant career changes or sought new knowledge in different fields, your dedication and hard work is commendable. You all are role models for anyone considering pursuing education at any stage of life. I want you to recognize the diverse journeys that have brought all of us here to celebrate the courage it took to embrace change and continue growing.

Through this journey, we've gained invaluable skills and experiences that will serve us well in the future. As I mentioned, this speech is dedicated to congratulating us, the graduates, on overcoming our fears and vulnerabilities. It's rare to find individuals with the strength to confront those fears and navigate the obstacles our minds create when we're uncertain of what's to come. Today, we celebrate our academic achievements with resiliency and courage by facing the unknown. Taking a chance on our future, even when we are scared, is an incredibly courageous act. It's a vital life lesson to push ourselves beyond our comfort zones in order to understand how our passions can lead us to great adventures. By embracing the challenges and uncertainties, we have equipped ourselves with the resilience and adaptability needed to thrive in whatever paths we choose to pursue. We have proven that we can rise above our doubts and insecurities, and for that, we all should be incredibly proud.

Fellow classmates, as you sit here today, take a moment to feel proud of yourselves. You've faced your fears and vulnerabilities with remarkable courage and

strength. Each of us are at a unique point in our lives: some of us just out of high school, others balancing full-time jobs, some raising families, and some of us being the first in their families to earn a college degree. Despite these differences, we all share a common strength - the ability to confront our fears and pursue education and I'm beyond proud to be a part of such an amazing group of individuals. As Brene Brown wisely said, "You can choose courage, or you can choose comfort, but you cannot choose both." By embracing vulnerability, we've all chosen courage. Congratulations to all of you for your incredible achievements and relentless ability to overcome. And thank you for sharing this special day with all of us. Thank you!