

Commencement

June 6, 2026

Please be seated.

Good afternoon.

It is a pleasure to welcome you to the Community College of Vermont's 2026 commencement ceremony.

My name is Joyce Judy, and I serve as president of CCV.

I have the distinct honor of greeting you today as we celebrate the Class of 2026.

Congratulations, graduates.

<Applause>

[Platform Party]

We are privileged to be joined on the platform today
by:

- Vermont Governor Phil Scott
- Our keynote speaker, Will Eberle
- Vermont State Colleges Chancellor Elizabeth Mauch
- Vermont State Colleges Trustee:
 - Megan Cluver

Also joining us on the platform are:

- This year's community service award recipient, Dan Smith
- The student speakers for the Class of 2026, Darrell Martin and Briana Samaniego [Som-on-YAY-go]
- CCV staff members Laurie Cook and Jen Guarino
- CCV faculty members Patti Cook, Sylvia Puglisi, and April Zajko [ZI-ko]
- CCV dean of academic affairs Candace Lewis
- And former academic dean, Debby Stewart

[Acknowledgements]

I would like to acknowledge the state senators and representatives from districts throughout Vermont who are joining us in the audience. Thank you for being here to celebrate your constituents and CCV's Class of 2026.

This afternoon, graduates were led into the field house by two long-serving members of the CCV community who are both retiring this year. I would like to thank our marshals, Rutland faculty member Diana Sabatino and director of student advising Amy Stuart, for their service to CCV and for being here today.

I also want to thank the staff members at both CCV and Norwich University who did all of the behind-the-scenes work to prepare this special occasion. It takes a village, and we truly appreciate your efforts.

<Applause>

[Message to Graduates]

Graduates, you have traveled a long way to arrive here today, and I suspect that not one of you would say that you got here without the support of the people in this room, and many others, who have helped you on your journey.

- Your instructors offered their expertise and encouragement, challenging you to grow as learners and as people.
- CCV advisors and other staff guided you along the path to meeting your goals.
- And your families and friends gave you motivation, love, and support every step of the way.

Graduates, I invite you to stand, turn around, and join me in thanking all of them.

<Applause>

I'd like to share a bit about your graduating class.

- Altogether, there are almost 500 of you.

- You come from all walks of life, from across Vermont, and around the world.
 - You hail from all 14 Vermont counties.
 - From 11 different states in the nation.
 - And from 13 different countries, many of you adopting new languages and sharing your rich cultures as you pursued your educational goals here in Vermont.
- The oldest member of your graduating class is 79, and the youngest are 18.

Almost two-thirds of you are members of the first generation in your families to hold a college degree.

- Your families are incredibly proud of you, and we join them in celebrating you today.
- Will all first-generation college graduates please stand and be recognized?

<Applause>

Many of you are veterans and military personnel.

- You were called to something bigger than yourselves, and you served our nation with honor.
- Some of you took online classes during your deployment.
- Many of you came to CCV as a next step in returning to civilian life.
- And many of you have helped support your fellow veterans as they adapted to life as college students.
- I know I speak for everyone here when I say thank you to you and your families for your service to our country.
- I would like to ask our graduating veterans and active members of the military to stand and be recognized.
- Thank you.

<Applause>

I firmly believe that a CCV education changes lives. One of my frequent sayings about our work at CCV is that we build on our laurels, not rest on them. We challenge the status quo, strive for continuous improvement, and push ourselves to keep learning and growing. And it is you, our students and graduates, who embody that spirit.

- Whether you are 16 or 65,
- whether you started during high school or after two decades in the workforce,
- whether you took your classes online, in person, or both:
- You came to CCV to expand your skills and knowledge,
- to pursue a career, not just a job,
- or to finish something you had started years earlier.
- You came to CCV to build a better future for yourselves and your families.

I'd like to highlight just a few of your stories:

Tony Greenwood began his CCV journey as a single dad who was struggling to balance child care and work. He said, "I needed to make more money...I decided to pursue a degree at CCV to raise my earning potential and create stability for my family." Today, he earns a degree in business and a certificate in IT support, and plans to continue his education at Champlain College.

After first completing a degree in liberal studies, Liz Robinson successfully pivoted to a new career with the Central Vermont Council on Aging, supporting one of Vermont's most vulnerable populations. But she wanted to keep expanding her skills, so she returned to CCV to pursue a degree in business, which she says is already helping her grow with her current employer. Today she earns her second CCV degree as well as a certificate in bookkeeping.

Felix Ljosa [lyoo-so] was homeschooled growing up, and took his first ever in-person classes at CCV. He discovered a love of biology through labs and practical, hands-on learning. He said, "that got me really excited, and I [thought] 'this is what I want to do. I want to be a scientist.'" Thanks to the Early College program and the

Free Degree Promise, he graduates today with a debt-free degree in STEM studies, and will pursue a bachelor's degree in biology.

Isabel Frei [fry] started college elsewhere, with plans to pursue engineering, but life got in the way. At CCV, she discovered an interest in the field of mental health. She will transfer to a bachelor's program at UVM with the goal of becoming a clinical psychologist. She shared, "I really want to make a direct impact on people and make a difference in my community however I can."

You each followed your own path, but you shared common experiences during your time at CCV. Throughout your academic journey, you embraced growth and change. Most of you took Dimensions of Self & Society, the first-semester seminar that helped lay the groundwork for your time at CCV. You engaged with your peers, honed your academic skills, and reflected on your personal beliefs and values. During your final semester, you took Seminar in Educational Inquiry—and okay, maybe you groaned about this last required course, but it was a shared opportunity for critical thinking, inquiry,

and introspection as you completed your CCV program and prepared for your next chapter.

Graduates, your education has introduced you to new people and ideas, instilled confidence, and empowered you. We challenge you to keep building on your laurels to create positive change. As CCV graduates, you follow in the footsteps of alumni who are doing just that. I'd like to share a few stories of graduates who have come before you:

Ashley Andreas [Andrees] came to CCV as a single mom struggling to find her way. An internship launched her career in construction, and she is now the executive director of Habitat for Humanity of the Upper Valley, where she helps Vermonters access affordable housing. She said, "I grew up never even imagining that I would own a home, let alone that I would help other people to own homes...My husband and I were able to buy our home in 2020 and it's like a dream come true. I loved how much it changed my life, and I want to help give that gift to other people."

Zach Clay had a negative experience in high school. He said, "When I started at CCV I wasn't expecting to graduate—I didn't know what to expect." Yet his instructors were welcoming and accommodating, and he credits them with "making me feel like I matter." Zach completed bachelor's and master's degrees in business administration, and a doctorate in business administration and intelligence. He is now a CCV instructor and is excited to pay forward the power of education. "If I can teach, and make it better for someone so they don't have to go through [what I did], then that's worth it to me," he said.

In high school, Lisa Henry was told that she wasn't college material. She said, "That fueled me to challenge what was said to me, and fueled me to prove that person wrong." At CCV, she was able to explore her interest in psychology. She continued for a bachelor's degree and is now completing a master's in clinical mental health at VTSU. She works in the psychiatric services department at Rutland Regional Medical Center, doing what she loves. "I'm able to help," she said. "And that's all I've ever really wanted to do."

And last but not least, I would like to acknowledge a CCV graduate who is a very dear friend and a well-respected colleague across the Vermont State Colleges and beyond. Would Debby Stewart please join me at the podium?

Debby began her CCV education when she was 21 years old, and she eventually served as the student speaker at *her* CCV graduation. She went on to complete a bachelor of arts and a master of fine arts. Determined to give others the gift of transformation that her own education provided, she returned to CCV to teach, then became an advisor. She served as associate academic dean, dean of students, and academic dean. Debby retired nearly a year ago today, after 31 years of working to ensure that all Vermonters have the opportunity to pursue a college education.

Debby, I know I speak for the entire CCV community, including the Class of 2026, when I thank you for your dedication, compassion, and commitment to the mission of CCV. YOU have changed countless lives, and you inspire us all.

<Give gift; pause for photo>

Graduates, whatever your path, you take with you the skills and knowledge you gained at CCV, and also an indomitable spirit of growth. You don't rest on your laurels, you build on them. You are determined to build a brighter future for yourselves, for your families, and for your communities, and we look forward to hearing your stories as you make your mark on the world.

Congratulations, CCV Class of 2026.

<Applause>

[Governor Scott]

As we welcome Vermont Governor Phil Scott, I would like to take a moment to express our gratitude. Throughout his career as Governor, Phil Scott has recognized the key role CCV plays in connecting students with Vermont's most promising jobs, and has been an outspoken champion for making CCV more affordable and accessible. We thank him for his support.

And now I would like to invite Governor Phil Scott to the podium to greet and congratulate the Class of 2026. Governor Scott.

<Applause>

[Community Service Award]

I would like to invite Dan Smith to join me at the podium.

Helping Vermont build stronger communities is a major goal of our work at CCV. Each year at commencement, we present the Community Service Award in recognition of sustained and profound service to our state.

This year it is my distinct privilege to present this award to Dan Smith.

Dan has dedicated his career to uplifting Vermonters. His professional life has been spent working to ensure

that all Vermonters, and all people, have access to opportunity. As president of the Vermont Community Foundation, he has been a steadfast partner of CCV's, supporting some of our most meaningful efforts to make higher education more accessible: creating specialized services for veterans and military-connected students; providing opportunities for multilingual learners; supporting CCV's corrections education program; and collaborating to address barriers facing all students, including a recent focus on young males. Dan helped to craft Act 77, which created many different opportunities for students to finish high school and get a head start on college, including Dual Enrollment and Early College.

Dan leads with humility, integrity, and heart. We are grateful for his partnership, and I am so proud to call him a friend.

Dan, it is my privilege to present you with the 2026 Community Service Award.

<Give plaque; pause for photo>

[Student Leadership Award]

Will Greg Samuels and Samantha Smith please come forward and join me at the podium?

<Begin speaking while they are walking>

Many students become leaders in our academic centers during their time at CCV, helping create an engaged and supportive learning environment for others, and often serving as a resource for their fellow students.

Each year, we present the Student Leadership Award to two students from the graduating class in recognition of their many contributions to their classmates and to the CCV community.

It is my pleasure to present the 2026 Student Leadership Award to Greg Samuels and Samantha Smith.

Inspired by his mother, who went back to school while caring for her seven children, Greg Samuels has

always believed in the power of education. After moving to the U.S. from Jamaica in 2002, he worked in a variety of jobs but knew a college education would help him provide for his family. He has managed to work, raise his four children, and overcome numerous obstacles during his time at CCV. Greg is well known and loved at the Upper Valley academic center, and after more than 10 years as a CCV student, today Greg earns his associate degree in business.

Samantha Smith is a military veteran who served as an intelligence analyst in the U.S. Army. After being medically separated from the military, she wasn't sure if she would ever do normal physical activity again. Yet during her time at CCV, she regained 95% of her mobility. She participated in the Student Advisory and Leadership Council, the Phi Theta Kappa honor society and the SALUTE veterans honor society, and received a Leadership Scholarship. A first-generation student, Samantha graduates with a degree in liberal studies and a certificate in leadership skills.

Congratulations, Greg and Samantha, on receiving the 2026 Student Leadership Award.

<Give plaques; pause for photo>

[Alumni Scholarship]

Will Hannah Cleveland and Sarah Eastwood please come forward and join me at the podium?

<Begin speaking while they are walking>

Every year, with generous support from CCV alumni, we award the Alumni Scholarship to graduates who plan to continue their education at a four-year college.

This year, we are proud to award the alumni scholarship to Hannah Cleveland and Sarah Eastwood.

Hannah Cleveland grew up in an alternative society that believed women should not be educated, but she had a lifelong dream of going to college. After experiencing significant adversity, Hannah left the alternative society and moved her family to northern Vermont, where she was inspired to begin a career as an educator. CCV helped her broaden her horizons, and she reflected that "I have so much more potential than I ever believed." Hannah graduates today with a degree in early childhood education, and she is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in psychology with a concentration in

adolescent development at Southern New Hampshire University.

After starting her family and struggling to find high-quality, affordable care, Sarah Eastwood decided to become a child care provider herself. She worked in early childhood education for close to a decade before coming to CCV with the goal of becoming a program director. Motivated by a deep commitment to helping every child get a good start regardless of ability or family income, she is pursuing licensure to offer care for children with special needs and those in state custody. Sarah completed her degree in early childhood education and will transfer to Vermont State University, where she will pursue a bachelor's degree in the same field.

Congratulations to Hannah and Sarah on receiving the 2026 Alumni Scholarship.

<Applause>

[Teaching Excellence Awards]

Each year, we present the Teaching Excellence Award to three faculty members. The nominations for this award come primarily from CCV students.

The 2026 Teaching Excellence Award recipients are Patti Cook, Sylvia Puglisi, and April Zajko [ZI-ko].

Will Patti, Sylvia, and April please join me at the podium?

Patti Cook has described herself as “a teacher to [her] toes.” Her career in higher education spans more than four decades, including more than 15 years teaching positive psychology and human development at CCV. One student who nominated Patti wrote that “Dr. Cook is an excellent instructor, and she is also a kind, inspiring, and uplifting person. She encourages students to discover and cultivate their strengths...It is clear to me that she is passionate about what she teaches. Many of the valuable skills I learned [in her class] will be used to help improve the well-being of myself and others.”

<Applause>

Sylvia Puglisi says that they have “a very well-developed sense of wonder.” A student at heart, Sylvia shares their love of learning and discovery through their Anatomy & Physiology and Applied Math Concepts classes each semester. Sylvia’s impact is clear in the message from one student who nominated them, who wrote “I still get a little nervous when it comes to math problems, but Sylvia sparked a level of confidence in me.” Another student shared, “Sylvia is an incredible educator. They focus on making education accessible and comprehensive, offering so many different kinds of ways to learn. Their enthusiasm for the material makes class fun and leaves us all feeling curious about the next chapters in our learning.”

<Applause>

April Zajko [ZI-ko] uses her expertise as an early childhood educator to bring her CCV classes to life. A lover of the outdoors, her classes incorporate the natural world as a tool for learning. She even developed a new CCV course titled Nature-Based Approaches in Early

Childhood Education. In their nomination of April, one student wrote, “Early childhood educators are good at what they do; they love kids, families, art, and nature. Some lack self-esteem and confidence about their gifts. April has a way of breaking all that down with students and reminds them that they have experience to draw on... and can create a path to their future.”

<Applause>

Congratulations to Patti, Sylvia, and April. We honor you today for your commitment to teaching and learning excellence, and for the profound impact you have on your students.

<Give plaques; pause for photos>

[Student Speakers]

Graduates, I am pleased to share that two of your classmates will address you today. The student speakers for the Class of 2026 are Darrell Martin and Briana [Bri-ON-a] Samaniego [Som-on-YAY-go].

I would like to invite two staff members to introduce our student speakers. Academic advisor Laurie Cook will introduce Darrell Martin, and coordinator of teaching and learning Jen Guarino will introduce Briana Samaniego [Som-on-YAY-go]. Laurie.

<Laurie's Introduction>

<Darrell's Speech>

<Give plaque; pause for photos>

<Jen's Introduction>

<Briana's Speech>

<Give plaque; pause for photos>

[Keynote Address]

Now, it is my pleasure to introduce our keynote speaker, Will Eberle.

Will's north star is service. He is inspired by a deep desire to help others, and his leadership in the human services field spans more than two decades of working to support vulnerable Vermonters. He trains and speaks on economic empowerment, mental health and addiction recovery, and supported employment. Will's higher education journey began at CCV, and he went on to earn a bachelor's degree at Johnson State College and a

master's degree here at Norwich. He has overcome significant adversity in his own life, and now strives to pay forward the opportunities he's been given by extending a hand to others. Will is the executive director of Alyssum, a peer support-based mental health respite center, and the former executive director of the Vermont Association for Mental Health and Addiction Recovery. He served as a field director for the Vermont Agency of Human Services and executive director and peer support counselor at Another Way, a mental health drop-in center.

Will strives to honor the humanity of every person he works with. He is a true visionary who imagines a Vermont where everyone is entitled to realize their potential.

We are so pleased to have him with us today to address the CCV Class of 2026.

Please join me in welcoming Will Eberle.

<Applause>

[PTK]

2026 marks the 11th year of CCV's chapter of Phi Theta Kappa, an international honor society for community college students.

Phi Theta Kappa recognizes students who demonstrate academic integrity and excellence. As graduates entered the field house this afternoon, you likely noticed that some are wearing gold and blue stoles around their necks. These represent their membership in PTK and their high level of academic achievement at CCV.

I would like to ask our Phi Theta Kappa graduates to stand at this time to be recognized.

<Applause>

[Leadership Scholarship]

CCV has a proud tradition of awarding scholarships to student leaders each year.

Determined to recognize the wealth of experiences and skills students bring to their academic centers, classrooms, and communities, CCV established the Leadership Scholarship in 2012. The scholarship recognizes students who demonstrate significant leadership abilities through service learning, volunteer work, and involvement in student life at CCV.

I would like to ask graduates who received the Leadership Scholarship during their time at CCV to stand and be recognized.

<Applause>

[Presentation of Class]

Graduates, it is now time to turn our attention to the moment you have been waiting for: the awarding of your degrees.

CCV has a long-standing tradition that you will share in today. As you leave the platform after receiving your

diplomas, CCV staff members will present you with a red carnation. This flower serves as a symbol of the many people in your lives who have helped you reach this day.

At this time, I invite Academic Dean Candace Lewis to join me at the podium to present the Class of 2026.

<Applause>

Candace:

President Judy, it is my pleasure to present the CCV graduating class of 2026—all of whom have successfully completed the requirements for the Associate Degree or the Associate of Applied Science Degree.

By the authority vested in the Community College of Vermont by the Board of Trustees of the Vermont State Colleges, I confer upon you, the Class of 2026, the associate degree.

Will the graduates from BENNINGTON please stand and come to this end of the stage [POINT LEFT].

I ask that graduates from all other centers stay seated until they are invited to come forward by the ushers.

<Marianne reads names from the lectern>

[Recessional]

Now, graduates, if you would please direct your attention to the front of the main aisle?

Your student speakers, Darrell and Briana, will lead you in moving their tassels from right to left, signifying your transition from student to graduate.

<Right to Left>

Congratulations, Class of 2026.

We are proud of all that you have accomplished, and we look forward to hearing about the impact you will have as you go forward, empowered by the knowledge and confidence that you have gained in your time at CCV.

The group on the platform will lead the graduates out. I ask the audience to remain seated until the graduates have completed their recessional.

Thank you.