

# FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell's Penn State Commencement Speech

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Thank you, Dean Sears and the Distinguished faculty of the Pennsylvania State University College of Information Sciences and Technology.

It is an honor to be here to celebrate the Class of 2023.

I can only imagine how you are feeling right now.

Today is such an important milestone in your lives.

Throughout your education, you have learned from the best minds and dared to dream about this day.

And as I look across this graduating class of 450 students from 11 different countries, I see nothing but limitless potential.

And now, it is time to take the next step.

It is time to take this momentum to exercise your potential and make our world a better place.

In fact, being here today reminds me of a group of young people just like you who pushed boundaries to do just that.

Through their actions, these eager young adults were able to change the way FEMA did business.

They demonstrated “fearless leadership” when many were slow to act.

As I look across this room, I am also reminded of something late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg once said.



She said, "Fight for the things that you care about but do it in a way that will lead others to join you."

And being leaders is something you already are.

You have organized movements around social justice and climate action.

You have spoken up about inequities and devised solutions for a sustainable future.

You designed applications – protected critical data and infrastructure -- researched new technologies – analyzed intelligence – improved information flows – and studied the social and ethical implications of emerging technologies.

You have interned with global leaders in Big Tech, small businesses, community organizations, schools, and even government.

And, by the way if you are interested, FEMA is hiring.

As you navigate this next stage of your life, I challenge you to find your North Star and let it guide you.

My North Star is public service.

I built my life and career around it. To me, there is no greater calling.

My passion is to help people

and I know I am in the right place when I can help solve wicked problems to help communities heal and thrive after disasters.

Regardless of the career you choose, I challenge you to give back to the places you call home.

Use your skills to make a difference, change a life, and perhaps save one, too.

Just think of COVID-19.

Technology helped fast-track the development of COVID vaccines, but it took people to get the shots in arms.



Technology enabled virtual medical appointments, but it took people to work through the complex process of protecting patient information.

And when it came to your college education, technology brought you into virtual classrooms, but it took your professors and administrators to maintain the experience of a world-class education.

We can never forget that it is the people behind the technology that has helped us get here today.

Technology is only one part of the solution – you are the other.

During such a challenging and unprecedented chapter of our nation's history,

It was people who found ways to use technology to keep us connected when we were told to stay six feet apart.

In my role as the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, I lead over 20,000 emergency managers who are on a mission to help people before, during, and after disasters.

And the rapid advancement of technology has certainly helped us do that.

For example, during Hurricane Ian, we used technology to enable a strong whole of government response.

We saw the first multi-agency deployment of geospatial resources to the field which provided first responders with drone video and images, and most importantly actionable intelligence to aid in their search for survivors.

We also utilized GIS mapping to identify the hardest hit communities and quickly send help to those who needed it most.

Whether it was COVID-19 or a catastrophic hurricane, it was the people behind the technology that helped save lives and keep communities connected.

As you move through this next part of your journey – I challenge you to push boundaries, ask tough questions, and challenge yourself and your peers to do better.



Find the workaround if you encounter a roadblock.

Be the simplifier when problems are magnified.

Take risks, even if they propel you out of your comfort zone.

Be the person who stands up and says, “let me try.”

But before you take over the world, look at your classmate sitting next to you.

Look at the faculty who taught you.

Look at your friends and family who love you.

They all took this journey with you.

I hope you thank them later today for their never-ending support.

And just as all of them do -- I too, see you as our future leaders.

I see risk takers and change makers who are ready to make this a better world.

And the truth is we need you.

Not tomorrow but now.

We need your creativity.

We need your interdisciplinary problem-solving – your critical thinking – your convictions

and most importantly, your ability to inspire others to join you.

I challenge you to speak up, act on your convictions, and overcome adversity.

I challenge you to leave here today and use your knowledge and skills to start a career and create the life you want to lead.

Most importantly, make it one you are proud of.

Class of 2023, congratulations and best of luck.



Opportunity is before you, now go take it.



**FEMA**