

Administrator Criswell Remarks at Dickinson College Commencement

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Thank you, President Jones and Provost Weissman.

I am deeply humbled by the honorary degree you have just bestowed upon me.

It is a privilege to join my fellow honorees, faculty, Dickinson trustees, alumni, friends, family, and, most importantly, the Class of 2023.

Graduates, you did it! Today represents such an incredible accomplishment!

All 371 of you, during what may seem like a lifetime ago, converged upon Carlisle, Pennsylvania, from across the United States and 26 foreign countries to pursue a world class education.

You left home with unique life experiences, perspectives, cultures, hopes and dreams, ready to join a community of likeminded peers.

A community of peers who just like you, were ready to commit to a core set of tenets to be decisive, useful, curious, and unafraid to take risks.

You walked onto campus and made friends that you now call family.

You learned from professors who you now consider trusted mentors.

You embraced your differences and have emerged with unbreakable bonds.

You came to Dickinson College because you share a passion that cannot be taught but is rather something that you were born with a passion to help people.

As the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, I proudly lead over 20,000 emergency managers who share that passion and have committed to helping people before, during, and after disasters.



If you have ever met an emergency manager, or have the pleasure of calling one a friend, you know that for them, there is no problem that is too big to solve, and there are no barriers that will stand between them and someone who needs help.

Because wherever and whenever we are needed, we go.

No matter the challenge, no matter the risk, we go.

It is a call that we are ready to answer, and as our threat landscape continues to grow, it is a call that is only growing louder.

Floods are in our backyards. Fires are in our forests. Drought is in our fields.

And on my list of “never saw that one coming,” Sargassum Seaweed is impacting water treatment facilities. You will have to google that one later.

These events prove that climate change is on our front steps.

Serving as the greatest disruptor of our lifetime, right up there with COVID-19, climate change has catapulted the world into a race against time.

We are in a race to save our homes and our neighborhoods.

A race to find cures to climate-driven disease.

A race to stave off the extinction of endangered species and habitats.

And at times, a race to save people’s lives.

The latest report from the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns that without immediate action, these kinds of events will continue to get worse.

However, hope is not lost. As one of the core writers of the IPCC report said:

“It is not that we are depending on something that still needs to be invented. We actually have all the knowledge we need. All the tools we need. We just need to implement it.”



Now, considering Dickinson College was one of the first 10 schools in the nation to achieve carbon neutrality; and that the college hosted an international climate change symposium in partnership with the IPCC earlier this year; and that your graduating class alone has collectively taken over 1,500 sustainability courses, perhaps the solutions to our problems are right here in front of me.

And we need you now more than ever.

We need your energy and your boldness.

We need your tenacity and your resilience.

We need your fresh perspectives to solve really wicked problems.

You may be asking yourself, what exactly is a wicked problem?

Well, I can tell you that the ones we deal with as emergency managers are not always driven by a bad storm.

I will give you an example, in New York City during the height of the pandemic, COVID-19 was not the only public health emergency we were facing.

Some of you may know that during warmer months in the city, cooling centers are a lifeline for vulnerable individuals who lack access to air conditioning.

Especially older adults who are at a higher risk of dying from heat exposure.

But due to social distancing, the city had to close cooling centers.

And at that time, I served as New York City's Commissioner of Emergency Management.

I called together the city's best emergency management, public health, energy, environmental, financial, and logistical experts to come up with a solution.

We had a lot of really smart people working really fast to solve a really big problem. And through patience, collaboration, and creativity, the team delivered.

The "Get Cool New York City" program was born.



The team decided that with no safe way to bring people to a cool space, we brought the cool space to them.

In a few short months, 74,000 air conditioners were delivered to older adults across the city.

And to help alleviate the financial burden, an energy subsidy was also provided so people could afford to use the units during the peak heat months.

This was a solution driven by urgency, rooted in practicality, and inspired by equity.

For many of the people who worked on the “Get Cool New York City” program, they consider it the highlight of their careers.

And even as one of the most populated cities in the world was in the throes of responding to a global pandemic, and it often felt like an impossible battle to win, they still managed to come together as a team to deliver a different kind of lifesaving resource to people in need.

So, when it comes to wicked problems, these are the kinds of solutions that we need. These are the solutions that the nation is counting on you to bring forward.

So, when you have the opportunity to speak up and lead, bring the lessons you learned in the classroom, or studying abroad, or working and attending school, to the table.

And if someone tells you that it will never work, say, “I believe we will succeed.”

If someone says it is impossible, say “only if we fail to try.”

And if you find that your light begins to dim because of someone else’s doubt, remember when I said on this day, “yes you can.”

Because there will be days where the only person who believes in you, is you.

I had one of those days early on in my career.

So now I charge you to take adversity and turn it into opportunity.



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I charge you to take words of doubt and let them fuel your fire to succeed.

Because you will simply never know until you try.

You just have to believe in yourself, and you will find yourself in the place you are meant to be.

Yes you can!

In fact, in a short time from now, you will return to where you started this journey in the fall of 2019.

As first-years, you ascended the stone steps of Memorial Hall to sign into college.

And today, as graduates, you will descend those same steps to receive your diploma.

Those stone steps were put in place by the one person who brought all of us together today, and who will forever be a part of our lives, Dickinson College's founder, Benjamin Rush.

A physician who believed in the power of science and medicine.

A bold and respected voice who spoke out against slavery.

A signer of the Declaration of Independence who believed in the power of democracy.

And the founder of Dickinson college who believed in the power of education.

Benjamin Rush was a man who pushed boundaries to propel his beloved nation toward a path of prosperity and innovation.

And if he were to stand here today and look across this group of graduates, I believe he would say, "well done."

I believe he would also say that no matter how big the challenge, how heavy the burden, it is the Dickinsonian spirit that will help carry you through.

Dickinson College Class of 2023, you are the stewards of our future.



It will be your minds that inspire us, your voices that rally us, and your hands that will guide us toward a future that is safe, sustainable, and equitable for all.

Congratulations!



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