Good morning. President Ripich, Provost Carter, guests, and graduates, thank you for inviting me to join you today.

It’s an honor to be here to congratulate you on your outstanding achievement.

Just a few minutes ago, President Ripich spoke about the anniversary of the Peace Corps. Whether you choose to join the Peace Corps, volunteer for a community organization, or simply give your neighbor a helping hand, service for the greater good in any form is always a noble cause.

I encourage all of you to make it a part of your life in one form or another as you transition from college life. But I know many of you already have, since the University of New England provides opportunities to enter a number of critical professions that give back so much to the community.

As we gather here this morning, I believe that it’s important to take a moment to reflect upon how you got here today.

Some of you might not be here if it wasn’t for a teacher’s inspiration, a friend’s encouragement, or a family member’s support. Please join me in giving a big round of applause to everyone that played a part in getting you to this point in your life.

Many of you have probably heard the story about a tourist who makes a wrong turn and asks a local Mainer for directions to his destination. If you recall, the Mainer tells the tourist, “sorry, you can’t get there from here.”

Some of you may have been told the same thing in life. The class you want to take? Too difficult. That dream career you want to chase? Good luck. Getting Mike Michaud to deliver your commencement address? Impossible!

But I’ve learned that you can get there from here. However, it does take a little work.

I’ve received some sound advice over the years, and I’d like to share just a bit of it with you today in hopes that it’s helpful as you take the next steps in your lives.

First, find that thing that drives you and let it guide you.

Where I grew up in the Katahdin Region, many went to work in one of the two local paper mills right after high school. I went to work for Great Northern Paper in East Millinocket, where my father and grandfather had worked before me.
Things were pretty good back then -- I loved my job and it was steady work.

But I also came to realize that the very mill I worked in was polluting the Penobscot River near my home. There was a cove in front of my house that was so polluted that you could literally walk across the sludge. For some, it represented a dilemma -- a choice between good jobs and a clean river.

I disagreed, because I didn’t see it in those terms. I felt that there must be a way to strike a balance between the need to promote a healthy economy and protect the air we breathe and the water we drink.

At 25 – when I was only a few years older than a lot of you – I decided to run for the Maine Legislature to do something about it. But it wasn’t easy and it wasn’t without challenges.

I’m sure some of you want to pursue a path that some have discouraged. People may have called what you want to do a stretch. They may have said it’s too competitive, or that many people have tried but failed.

This is true for a lot of things in life, but it’s not a reason to give up.

I understand this, because many of the same things were said to me.

They said I’ve never held a public office before. People told me that I was too young to run for the Legislature. Thankfully, I ended up winning that first election.

And, later in life when I ran for Congress, some people said the same kinds of things – “You’re not a lawyer,” “You’re not a millionaire,” “You’re from the wrong part of the state.” They said a millworker could never get elected.

But, like before, I went for it anyway, despite the long odds.

These decisions were some of the most difficult, but rewarding ones I’ve ever made. I saw that I could make a difference working with people in my community and my state. This is what drove me to public service in the first place and it’s what has kept me involved with it ever since.

So find what drives you and let it guide you. If you do that, I’m confident that you’ll be satisfied with the path you’ve chosen. It won’t just be a job and a paycheck, but something that is truly fulfilling to you as well.

Before I let you go today, I want to pass along one other piece of wisdom that I’ve found particularly helpful: be willing to seek common ground and compromise.

This doesn’t mean that you have to discard your principles. In fact, it’s the opposite.
To me, compromise is not about abandoning your principles. It’s about achieving balance with them in a way that doesn’t ask others to sacrifice theirs.

And why do I bring this up?

As soon to be college graduates, this message may seem obvious. But as you enter the professional world you will confront all types of people. Some share your perspective and others will not.

This is what’s great about our country. Diversity makes us strong. But it also presents challenges in schools, our businesses, and in our politics.

Many of us are set in our ways. And I know none of you need me to tell you that many in Congress certainly are!

You’ve all seen it on TV – Washington is this place where two sides constantly battle. It’s partisan and it’s gridlocked. To be fair, there is some truth to this right now, and it’s very discouraging to me.

But what many don’t see is what’s beyond the talking heads on TV and radio. It’s the stuff that goes on behind the scenes that helps me keep the faith.

Unfortunately, much of it goes underreported. It’s probably because cooperation doesn’t always make a good headline or for the most exciting television.

Over the years I’ve been lucky to work with some great members of Congress of all political stripes – Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. We’ve been able to pass bills on everything from honoring our veterans to providing communities the resources they need to repair their roads and bridges.

But looking back, none of it would have been possible if I didn’t approach the other side to work with them. Did I always get everything I wanted? No, I didn’t. But the other side didn’t get everything they wanted either. By compromising we were able to work out some of our differences and forge positive, commonsense solutions.

In college, I’m sure you’ve been in a similar situation. You may have had to work with someone of a different background or viewpoint. Maybe it was that partner you didn’t want on a group project, or a randomly assigned roommate you got who was a Yankees fan.

Whatever the situation, you found a way to get through what was before you and succeed.

Once you accept that others have beliefs and principles that they hold dear, you can begin to understand differences, bridge gaps, and build important and long lasting relationships. This will help you succeed in whatever challenge you choose to take on in life.

I am confident in this approach because it’s served me and many others very well.
You are where you are today because of your school, your instructors, and your friends. They have provided you with the support and the skills you need to go out and take that next step in life.

But you’re here because of your dedication and the tremendous amount of work you put into your studies. It’s you who will determine what that next step is, how you will handle it, and what it will mean to your life.

But as you do, just remember -- find that thing that drives you and let it guide you. Stand by your principles. But also be willing to compromise and find common ground.

These principles took me from a mill in East Millinocket, Maine to the halls of Congress, and I am confident that they will take you where you want to go too.

Thank you again for having me here today. It’s an honor to join you for such a momentous celebration. Congratulations once again on all your achievements.

And always remember – you can get there from here.