

Rounding up the 2016 commencements

By Tabitha Whissemore, Published May 25, 2016

While numerous reports offer data on community college enrollments, persistence, completions and other information, commencement ceremonies put faces and names to those numbers.

All across the country, two-year college students this spring are walking across stages to accept degrees and certificates and preparing for the next stage in their lives. CC Daily has put together a sampling of the various speakers and students who have participated in the celebrations, from the White House to local law enforcement.

Offering reflections, advice

Second lady Jill Biden, a strong national advocate for community colleges, spoke at the 50th commencement ceremony at [Northern Virginia Community College](#), where she teaches English.

“When I started teaching 30 years ago, community college students were typically seen as ‘non-traditional,’” Biden told graduates. “But today, with more than half of our nation’s college students attending community colleges, with so many of you working full time, supporting families and still attending school, non-traditional has become the new traditional.”

Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh delivered the keynote address at [Bunker Hill Community College](#).

“Each of you may have taken a unique path to this degree, but what you have in common is that you earned it,” Walsh said, adding that graduates “have shown the grit and determination we need to succeed as a city and as a country.”

[Tri-County Technical College](#) graduates were advised to have “an attitude of gratitude” by speaker David Wilkins, former U.S. Ambassador to Canada and longtime speaker of the South Carolina House of Representatives.

“More than hard work, more than book sense and common sense, your tenacity, your degree, even your humility, your gratitude is the most important tool in your tool box—because it is a multiplier,” Wilkins said.

[Salt Lake Community College](#) in Utah welcomed Gretchen McClain, global business leader and former NASA chief director of the International Space Station, as its commencement keynote speaker. She talked about perseverance.

“It’s about having a deep-gut belief in everything you are capable of and the courage not to let any naysayers or your nerves get in the way,” McClain said. “It’s about knowing the difference between confidence and overconfidence and understanding that being open to learning at every phase of your life is a strength.”

Norma Hardy addressed the 2,000 graduates of [Brookdale Community College](#) in New Jersey. Hardy is assistant police chief with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey Police Department (PAPD), where she is the highest ranking female officer in department history.

“Be brave but not reckless, be proud yet humble, and as you walk your path, reach out your hand and bring someone along with you,” Hardy said. “Be a beacon in your community and an inspiration to your family.”

Gail Mellow, president of [LaGuardia Community College](#), delivered the commencement address [Finger Lakes Community College](#) (FLCC). Mellow attended New York’s FLCC in 1974. Houston Texans President Jamey Rootes was the keynote speaker at [Houston Community College](#)’s ceremony. In Michigan, [Lansing Community College](#) (LCC) graduates heard from Phillip Gannon, the college’s founding president. Gannon was appointed president of LCC in 1964 and served until his retirement in 1989.

Students shine

Seventeen-year-old Jayda Manning became the youngest person to receive an associate degree from [Midlands Technical College](#) (MTC) in South Carolina. Manning attended Richland One Middle College, located on an MTC campus and was able to take MTC classes for free.

In Illinois, [Oakton Community College](#)’s oldest graduate this year was Fred Seidel, who will turn 90 in June. He earned a certificate in facilities energy systems technology. Seidel joined the electricians union nearly 70 years ago.

“As electricians, we were always responsible for upgrading systems, so as technology changed, I kept going to school and kept learning. I guess it’s become a habit,” he said.

At [Big Sandy Community and Technical College](#)’s (BSCTC) graduation in Kentucky, Matthew Ray and his son, Jacob Ray, both graduated with high distinction through the welding technology program.

“This is something special, and something you don’t see every day,” BSCTC President Devin Stephenson said. “This is what makes community and technical college special: you have the capability to touch every segment of the population.”

[Norwalk Community College](#) (Connecticut) students Ingrid Magalhaes and Mackenzie Raub, both liberal arts and science majors, provided the commencement speeches at their graduation ceremony. Magalhaes, a native of Brazil, is the first in her family to attend college. She was awarded an Ada Comstock transfer scholarship and will attend Smith College in the fall. Raub is the first of six siblings to graduate from college. He’ll be attending the University of Connecticut this fall and hopes to become a mathematics professor.

“I have a dream that the world can be changed by you all,” Magalhaes said in her commencement address. “Persist, insist, fight till you have no strength, and then fight a little more.”

[San Diego Mesa College’s](#) commencement included a [proposal](#). Associated Student Government president and student trustee Igor Burgos Maron asked girlfriend and Mesa alumna Sarah Ann Farmer to marry him. She said yes.

Milestones

Several colleges held their 50th annual commencement ceremonies, including Ohio’s [Owens Community College](#), Florida’s [Tallahassee Community College](#), Pennsylvania’s [Bucks County Community College](#) and [Kirkwood Community College](#) in Iowa.

[Piedmont Technical College](#) (PTC) is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. The South Carolina college honored more than 300 graduates at its ceremony.

“We’re into our third generation, and sometimes our fourth generation, of students who have come through the doors of this college seeking a better life for themselves and their families,” PTC President Ray Brooks said.

Eight [Austin Community College](#) (Texas) students were the first graduates of the college’s veterinary technology program. Among the 1,200 students graduating from South Carolina’s [Horry Georgetown Technical College](#) was the first class from the college’s sports tourism program.

By the numbers

[Suffolk County Community College](#) graduated nearly 4,400 students across three campuses. It was the largest graduating class in the New York college’s history. West Virginia’s [Pierpont Community and Technical College](#) also graduated its largest class, with just under 200.

[Arizona Western College](#) awarded 1,091 degrees and 1,549 occupational certificates. In California, 1,487 students were part of the [Fresno City College](#) class of 2016. More than 20,300 credentials were awarded by Indiana’s [Ivy Tech Community College](#) at 14 sites.

[Montgomery County Community College](#) in Pennsylvania celebrated more than 1,500 graduating students. They ranged in age from 18 to 70 and were from 11 countries.

At Florida’s [Miami Dade College](#) (MDC), nearly 14,000 students took part in five commencement ceremonies on April 30. Speakers included U.S. Secretary for Housing and Urban Development Julian Castro, U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Javier Palomarez and MDC alumnus, entrepreneur and e-Merge founder Manny Medina.

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