

*NINA SULLIVAN:* Hello, President Johnson, Board of Trustees, faculty and staff, family, friends, and guests — and most importantly, hello, graduating Class of 2024!

My name is Nina Sullivan, and it is an absolute honor to stand in front of you today, reminiscing about the past four years.

Today is the day that we couldn't wait for since we first set foot on Western New England's campus. Today marks a new beginning for all of us, the end of one chapter in our lives and the start of another. This day marks a great accomplishment in our academic careers, one we couldn't wait to achieve. We did it! We have all worked so hard to be here today, spending countless hours on papers and projects, toiling in the lab or library, and presenting our insights, inventions, and research in front of our peers and colleagues. Today is the day that all our hard work pays off, the day that we graduate from Western New England University.

Today, we reflect on this lengthy chapter coming to a close — several years' worth of stories compressed into what seems like a brief blip in time. Each of us has our own story in this chapter, and though the details may not all be the same, some pieces should ring true to every soon-to-be-graduate sitting before me.

Our chapter started in our first days of making new friends and living in homes away from home. We ate in the dining hall with the same people and rejoiced in not having to do dishes afterward. We settled into our academic groove, figuring out when to do homework and when to have fun — though we may not have always achieved a 50-50 split between productivity and fun. Yet clearly we all successfully struck some sort of balance; we all ended up here today.

Our chapter includes memories of the clubs and activities we took part in, the changes we have made on campus, the events we planned, and the adventures we had. Athletes endured 6 a.m. wake-up calls and celebrated CCC championships, actors performed everything from *Chicago's* "Cell Block Tango" to *Rocky Horror's* "Time Warp," and everyone had a chance to pet Bear. In these parts of our chapter, we became individuals — not just students, but leaders, mentors, athletes, artists, and more.

Our chapter includes tales of times when we weren't sure that we would make it here today. There were days when we needed to work harder and stay up later to finish assignments on time. Remember those times when you doubted yourself or questioned your abilities. Times when you were certain that you could not do it anymore, when the assignments became too much, when being homesick was taking over, and when you just wanted to give up. But you saw yourself through all those doubts and hardships, and now you sit here today, dressed in your caps and gowns, waiting patiently for me to finish this speech.

For me, every day at Western New England University since the first semester of freshman year contained an “I can’t wait” moment. Everything was so new, and I couldn’t wait to do it all. After every accomplishment, each “I can’t wait” moment became an “I did it” moment; each experience became a memory that I can look back on forever.

One semester of “I can’t wait” moments turning into “I did it” moments became another, and another, until only one anticipatory moment remained. And though at some point we probably all said, “I can’t wait to graduate” ... as I stand here now looking out at all of you, I most certainly can wait. And you can, too. We can wait to give up Sunday breakfast runs with friends in our pajamas. We can wait to give up having our best friends live next door or in the same room. We can wait to be done cramming for exams. We can wait to stop playing in or attending sporting events. Above all else, we can most certainly wait to graduate from Western New England University.

I couldn’t wait to graduate and become a real adult. But now, about to graduate ... I want four more years of “I can’t wait” moments. And maybe you do, too. As much as I can’t wait to find out what all of us accomplish in the years to come, I can wait to end our chapter together.

In our chapter, we are always the same freshmen who sat in the quad listening to music and playing outside like little kids until the sun went down. We are always the same freshmen who made new friends during a worldwide pandemic, and — to a fault — got really good at bending rules. We are always the students who balanced jobs with classes, who played sports while fulfilling our academic responsibilities, who took on new roles as peer advisors, life skills mentors, presidents and vice presidents of clubs and councils, and so much more. We are always the same freshmen who accepted our admission to Western New England University and successfully followed the path to Commencement today.

Class of 2024: we can’t wait any longer. We did it. The time has come, and our chapter together as students is at an end. We can’t wait to graduate. We can’t wait to start our careers, to go to graduate school, to start our own families, to become coaches, musicians, homeowners, inventors, to do whatever we dream of doing.

But we can wait to let go – because we are now, and will always be, the Golden Bears we became in our time at Western New England University.

Thank you. And — congratulations.