

*PRESIDENT JOHNSON:* Ladies and gentlemen, trustees, esteemed guests, faculty, families, friends, and most importantly, the phenomenal graduating class of 2024, today is a day of immense significance — a celebration of your remarkable achievements, resilience, and the transformative power of change.

Before we begin, I think it is imperative that we pause, take a step back, and remember where we all were four years ago. Let us take a moment to reflect on where we stood four years ago. It was the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time fraught with uncertainty.

Let's be honest: it was a time of heightened fear and anxiety. We were grappling with the unknowns, uncertain of how the disease spread or if vaccines were on the horizon. Aside from first responders and essential personnel, we were all homebound and trying to make sense of it all. Amidst it all, you, our graduates, were completing your senior year of high school.

Unlike your predecessors, your proms were canceled, senior week activities curtailed, and the milestones you had long awaited — award ceremonies, athletic competitions — were all wiped off the calendar. And to add to the disappointment, the pandemic robbed you of the chance to celebrate your high school graduation in the traditional manner.

While we cannot go back and change the course of history, it was so incredibly important to us here at Western New England University that when planning this ceremony, we did so with a little extra attention. So, here we stand, four years later, ensuring that your commencement is nothing short of unforgettable.

This achievement, this moment, is a tribute to your resilience, adaptability, and unwavering commitment to making a difference. Please give yourselves a round of applause.

To the faculty and staff who have nurtured and supported these graduates, I extend my heartfelt gratitude. Your guidance and mentorship have played an invaluable role in shaping the leaders of tomorrow.

And to the families and friends who have stood by these graduates through thick and thin, thank you for your unwavering love and support. Your belief in their dreams has been the driving force behind their success.

Graduates, please stand and give your family, friends, and faculty a round of applause!

As we stand here in the heart of Downtown Springfield, I am profoundly moved by the significance of this gathering in this new space, recognizing it as a testament to your ability to ignite change.

Our presence in this expansive arena, situated nearly four miles from our campus, underscores your voices. Your advocacy was heard, and we responded with unwavering attention.

You wanted a commencement that accommodated all of your loved ones, regardless of how many tickets you requested, so we made sure to have 4,856 seats for your guests. You wanted your family and friends to be able to get to the site easily and safely, so in addition to outlining free local parking options, we provided a shuttle from campus. You wanted a seamless celebration irrespective of weather. And while we cannot influence Mother Nature, this roof has us covered! And finally, you wanted to ensure that everyone here today could witness your triumphant walk across the stage. Think that jumbotron is big enough?

Today's commencement isn't just about marking the end of your academic journey; it's a testament to your ability to affect change. As you go out into the world, do not just affect change, but be the change. Be the change that transforms our society. Be the change brings calm to a tumultuous world. Continue your academic journey with an undaunting spirit and unmovable faith.

As you step into the next chapter of your lives, I implore you to continue being the catalysts of change. The power to influence, shape, and redefine norms lies within each and every one of you. Never underestimate the impact of your voices, actions, and dreams. You have already demonstrated your capacity to affect change, not just within the confines of our University, but in the broader world.

As you navigate the uncertainties and opportunities that lie ahead, remember that you possess the influence to inspire, innovate, and transform our global society. Embrace every challenge as an opportunity for growth. Stand firm in your convictions and never waver in your pursuit of excellence.

In closing, let me express my deepest pride in each and every one of you. The graduating class of 2024 embodies the essence of resilience, determination, and change. Your journey has been nothing short of extraordinary, and I have every confidence that you will continue to achieve greatness in the years to come. You have the skillset and the mindset to make your dreams a reality.

Remember to be agile — to learn, unlearn, and relearn as the world changes around you. We have prepared you to adapt and succeed in a dynamic future — one where jobs as we know them may no longer exist and career mobility is the norm. In the world we live in today, you may have upwards of 15 jobs in five different industries — three of which do not yet exist.

You must be innovators responsible for your own brand and business model, equipped to reinvent yourself throughout your professional careers. As the world changes, you must change. Over these four years, you have been challenged to explore your “why,” to animate and articulate your unique value proposition. Lean into that as you go out into the world and remember to continuously create value in all that you do.

Learning does not and cannot end here. Learning must be lifelong so that you continually adapt to new ways of work. Remember that you possess essential human skills that cannot be replicated by machines, AI, algorithms, or a robot.

Congratulations, Class of 2024. The world awaits your brilliance, your passion, and your unwavering commitment to change. Embrace the journey ahead, and never stop being the best version of yourself. I now charge you as a global citizen to go out and transform the world.