

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery
Jay Timmons, President and CEO
National Association of Manufacturers
Western Governors University Commencement
April 27, 2019

Congratulations Night Owls! Are you ready to get rowdy?!

This is your day. It's the culmination of years of hard work, overcoming doubts and plowing through roadblocks. You've earned the right to be proud today.

I love that name, Night Owls, by the way. It sums you up perfectly. While everyone else was asleep, dreaming...you were hard at work, making dreams a reality.

So, President Pulsipher, Chancellor Watts, WGU leadership, and family and friends gathered here, thank you for the chance to celebrate with you.

Most of all, thank you for the opportunity to be home in Ohio. I was born and raised in Chillicothe and Circleville, about 100 miles from here. I know we have graduates from across the country. But I'm an Ohio boy, so who's from Ohio?

President Pulsipher gave a very kind introduction. But some of you are still wondering, "Who the heck's this guy?"

That's a fair question.

As President Pulsipher said, I lead the National Association of Manufacturers. Our job is making sure the people in Washington, D.C., are focused on helping manufacturers here in Ohio and across America create new jobs, raise wages and benefits and invest in communities. We're the voice for the more than 12.8 million men and women who make things in America.

Part of our mission is helping more people join the modern manufacturing workforce. These jobs are high-tech, high-paying, and there are almost half a million open today. We will have about 4.6 million manufacturing jobs to fill over the next decade.

A few months ago, the White House and the U.S. Department of Commerce formed the American Workforce Policy Advisory Board. It's a task force to help educate people for the jobs of tomorrow.

CEOs of some of America's top brands are on it. So are some of the most innovative thinkers in education, including your own President Pulsipher, as am I. That's how I know him and ended up here today.

It says a lot about the stature of your school that when the White House and Secretary of Commerce assembled this team that they tapped the president of WGU.

This institution commands respect at the highest levels of government. By receiving a WGU degree, you will command respect in the job market.

WGU is not your traditional college. And that's what makes it great. Other schools force you to adapt to their demands. This school adapts to your needs.

This is a trailblazing institution, and you are trailblazing graduates. Nearly 40 percent of you are the first in your family to go to college. I was, too.

Angie and Rayna are going to share their inspiring journeys to this day. But each of you has your own story. Maybe you were told that you'd never make it: "You're working full time. You have kids. How could you possibly get a degree?" Maybe you heard it from a coworker. Maybe even a friend.

Well, you proved them wrong! And many of you set a powerful example for your kids along the way—and I love hearing the voices of all of your beautiful children throughout the crowd.

It wasn't easy for you. Life has a way of interrupting our plans. I should know. I attended The Ohio State University. Then life interrupted. I never finished my degree. And back then, there was no internet, and I didn't have the opportunity to participate in this type of nontraditional academic setting.

So, there's another accomplishment: you're more credentialed than your commencement speaker.

Any employer will be lucky to have you. And you are fortunate to be graduating into one of the strongest job markets in generations.

Do you realize that right now there are more job openings in America than people looking for jobs?

If you're looking, I hope you look at manufacturing. We need people. We need IT experts, and I think we have some IT grads here today? With robotics and artificial intelligence, modern manufacturing is synonymous with connected technology.

We need business minds because we're growing, hiring and expanding. And we need young people educated in STEM. Do we have future STEM educators here today?

When you're teaching science and math, the future of manufacturing, the backbone of the American economy, is in your hands. So, thank you. And thank you, WGU, for being a top producer of STEM teachers.

Whatever your career path, you are positioned for success. I know that because you've proven you don't let others put limits on you.

Keep it up. Don't let anyone put you in a box. Break the mold. Neither your past, nor other people, determine your future.

I mean, I'm an Ohio farm boy. Now I go to policy meetings at the White House. And shoveling manure in a barn and working in Washington, D.C., don't have much in common. Well, actually...come to think of it...

Today, I lead meetings with CEOs in board rooms. But if you asked a classmate what I was like in high school, you'd probably hear "dork" or "nerd." In fact, I was so cool that I actually carried a briefcase through the halls when I was only 15.

Trust me, in high school that doesn't make people picture you sitting in a board room. That makes people picture you jammed into a locker.

My point is, I don't fit into anyone's box. And for the record, I didn't fit into the locker, either.

When I was 31, the governor of Virginia asked me to be his chief of staff, which meant leading people more than twice my age. Cabinet officials were walking into the office wondering if I was the chief or if it was Bring Your Kid to Work Day. I didn't fit the mold.

Today, I'm married to a great guy named Rick. We have three beautiful kids. But some people still look twice at our family. Because, again, we don't fit into their box.

In life and work, there will always be doubters—and self-doubt. But you are already mold-breaking leaders. You've defied the naysayers. So, keep celebrating your own story. Own it. Use it for good. And be your authentic selves.

Commencement speakers are supposed to offer inspiration for the graduates. But the truth is, I'm inspired by all of you—by the parents who are taking care of their kids and working, sometimes two jobs, while completing your education. By the men and women who are serving, or who have served, in our military. By the amazing young lady who adopted America as her home and belted out our national anthem so beautifully this morning. Her family came here from El Salvador 17 years ago to escape violence.

I'm finding inspiration from every single one of you. All I can say is, keep it up. I will, however, ask you to do three things after you leave here today....

First, remember this feeling of accomplishment. The future will bring more challenges. Don't let fear or self-doubt hold you back. You've seen what you're capable of.

Remember what success feels like and let it power you through the tough times.

Second, be the difference-maker for someone else. Pay it forward. There was someone in your life who encouraged you along this journey. A parent, a spouse, a friend, your WGU mentor. Or maybe that "still small voice" that Scripture speaks of. Thank them today—and be a source of support when they need it, or when someone else needs it.

And finally, channel your talents for the good of this country. We live in an exceptional nation, a nation founded by people who also dared to think differently.

But our nation will only have a bright future if leaders like you make it so.

Today, we're being tested from the outside and from within. Other countries are challenging our leadership. At home, there are forces dividing us. And there are Americans who feel that no matter what, they just can't get ahead.

We must do better. Businesses, government and engaged leaders like you. You affect what happens in Washington with your voice and your votes, and America needs you to stand strong

for the values that make America exceptional: free enterprise, competitiveness, individual liberty and equal opportunity.

From public corporations to private citizens, we can't just be in it for ourselves. Our society is stronger when it's about more than bottom lines and bank accounts.

America needs all of us to heal the divisions in our society and uphold those core values.

This country is at its best when we think innovatively. Who better than students of this trailblazing institution to lead the way?

So, ladies and gentlemen, I leave you with those three simple requests: Remember what success feels like. Be a difference-maker for someone. Be engaged citizens.

And if you maintain the work ethic that brought you this far, you will have rewarding careers. You will keep making your friends and family proud. And, Night Owls, you will soar above the competition.

The saying goes, the early bird catches the worm. But you know who catches the early bird?

Yep...it's the Night Owl.

Congratulations, graduates! Thank you so much.