

June 16, 2017
SESP Convocation
Dean Penelope Peterson Remarks

During my 20 years as Dean of SESP, the highlight of my year has always been graduation. And today is no different. This is truly the highlight of my year, but today is particularly significant because today's graduation will be my last SESP graduation because I plan to step down as dean at the end of the summer.

So as I address you -- my final class of graduates -- I feel proud, nostalgic, and excited all at the same time. Indeed, you—our graduates—are probably feeling much the same way.

I feel proud because we have achieved a lot as a SESP community over the last 20 years. Similarly, each of you should feel proud to be graduating today from SESP and from Northwestern. That in itself is a terrific achievement, and I congratulate you on your graduation. We also thank and congratulate you for all you have done as a student here to contribute to our SESP community because it's all of us together—students, faculty, staff, and alumni—that make SESP the special place that it is.

Yet I am also nostalgic. Defined as “a sentimental yearning for the happiness of a former place or time.” You are undoubtedly now remembering with fondness the amazing times with your Northwestern friends, the challenging times when a SESP professor said something in class that lit a spark in you and made you want to know more, and the difficult times when you needed support, a big hug, or simply a piece of candy, and SESP was there!

Indeed, nostalgia often sweeps over us in times of transition. This is surely a time of transition for me and for our School and for each of you. Each of you who are graduating will be starting a new chapter of your life just as I will. The trick is to embrace these transitions as you move to the next stage of your life.

And finally, I am excited as you must be too. You must be excited by the wonderful opportunities that you have ahead of you. Many of you are off to take new jobs as teachers, leaders, consultants, and administrators. Others of you are

off to pursue fellowships or further educational ventures, such graduate school, law school, medical school, or business school.

Others are going to travel abroad and continue to learn while some of you will stay closer to home. Some of you might still be pursuing opportunities and are not yet sure of your next step.

No matter whether you have a job lined up or have been accepted into your next adventure in further learning or are still pursuing options, all of you are likely experiencing some degree of uncertainty and trepidation as a result. I urge you to embrace uncertainty as the same time as you embrace transitions.

As Bob Goff, a guy who gave up his law practice of 25 years to become Honorary Consul to Uganda one wisely intoned, "Some of the most beautiful chapters in our lives won't have a title until much later."

So I know why all of you are excited, but why am I excited, you might ask? I am excited because after I step down as Dean on August 31, I will move to Seattle where my two grandsons live with their mother and father--my second son who graduated from Northwestern. I hope to spend lots of time with them. I also plan to write a young adult novel with my daughter who is the Poet Laureate of San Miguel County in Colorado.

You can expect the adventurous heroine of our story to be feisty, athletic, and fearless, but also to come out with some eloquent and pointed bursts of spoken word poetry that devastate her enemies!

Finally, as a member of the "Great Old Broads for Wilderness," I plan to do a lot of hiking and campaigning to preserve our environment, national parks, and the wilderness that restores our spirits and reminds us that we are part of the circle of life. If you travel to Seattle and want to look me up, you will find me living in Madrona, walking the shores of Lake Washington in the mornings, writing my novel in the afternoons, and reading to Benji and Augie in the evenings.

Until then, let me say to you that it's OK today if you are proud and excited, but also nostalgic at the same time. Enjoy these emotions and bask them today.

And to you family and friends, congratulations to you as you burst with pride in celebrating the achievement of your graduate. And thank you for supporting the outstanding achievement of our graduates. You deserve of credit. And to our graduates--good luck as each of you begin the next chapter of your life! I know you will do good, and I hope you will also do well.