

Secretary Anthony Foxx
USMMA Convocation
Kings Point, NY – July 24, 2015

Hello, Kings Point. It is great to be with all of you and a great day for the U.S. Department of Transportation and for the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. Let me thank at the outset your Superintendent Admiral Helis, Maritime Administrator Jaenichen, Admiral Dunlap and Dean Kumar. Let's give them all a round of applause for the great work they do.

I also want to thank all the faculty, administrators and staff, the folks who day in and day out are doing everything they can to put you in a position to succeed in the 21st century. They are doing extraordinary work. As a testament to that I understand that more than 80 percent of the Class of 2015 passed the examination license for the U.S. Coast Guard on the first try. This is the highest percentage in five years and it's an outstanding result. Let's give your faculty and staff a big round of applause for that, too.

So you all have a heavy responsibility, collectively. We do together. We do everything we can to make sure we have the most exceptional, most well-trained mariners in the world.

Now, to the students. I do want to acknowledge all of our Midshipmen. And while the upperclassmen might not like this, I want to also acknowledge all the plebes out there, too – your friends otherwise known as the Class of 2019.

To our plebes, let me say that I do dig all your haircuts. But I want to encourage you to relax a little bit and enjoy this convocation. It's a moment of reflection to think about what lies ahead. You know I had this idea to make all of you do pushups every time I say the word "leadership" but I decided you've already been through enough already. I'm just going to trust that after INDOC you've got those snap-pop drills down, as well.

I was thinking about what I would say today as you all kick off a new year. I was thinking about how I might connect to what you are experiencing here at Kings Point and to the different stages of your lives here. I'm sure the plebes right now are kind of wondering what they've gotten themselves into. Hopefully they're figuring out life at Kings Point can only improve. And I'm sure some of you might be looking out towards your year at sea or are now reflecting on what it meant to you just having come back. I'm sure our First Class Midshipmen are looking out towards the end of the school year and wondering what's next.

Well, you know, my experience in higher education was a little different from all of yours. I went to a liberal arts college called Davidson College. (Just parenthetically, if you know Stephen Curry, you know Davidson.) It was located pretty close to where I grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina.

And in Charlotte I had grown up in a community called Lincoln Heights. You might describe it as the other side of the tracks. But it was a community that lifted me up. I had great neighbors. I had great friends, a great community around me. And I was especially lucky to have a mom and

grandparents who were both educators and who really sacrificed for me and always made sure I was doing things I could to expand my mind and lift my sights.

There's no way for me to know all of your backstories as far as what brought you here. But what I can tell you is that my own decision to go Davidson wasn't really my decision. It was my mom's. You see, she and grandparents did all they could to put a premium on education. But Davidson wasn't an option for them when they were coming along. The door wasn't open to them. And so, for them, my attending Davidson was a leap forward for my generation.

So I went. And I was not entirely sure what to expect – just as many of you are not entirely sure what to expect. Obviously INDOC wasn't a requirement for incoming freshman at Davidson but I did experience some new things. You know one of the first things I remember was the very first night I got to Davidson. They had a big event that everybody was supposed to attend. So I went not knowing exactly what it was. Turns out it was a square dance. I hadn't been to a square dance before. And I attended the square dance ... but I didn't participate. But I was there.

And that entire first year, I remember trying to keep up with all the voluminous reading and trying to find my place in the social arena. And you know, in those first couple years – I'll be honest – I struggled. In my sophomore year, though, I had something like the equivalent of year at sea year: something that changed my life when I went and studied in South Africa.

This was in 1991. Nelson Mandela had just been released from prison and the country was transitioning out of apartheid into a democratic government. And seeing that country gave me a new perspective on my own country. It made me realize I had opportunities I hadn't recognized before. It made me realize I had the ability to succeed based on my ability to perform in a way that folks in South Africa didn't have. And it made me a lot more determined.

So when I went back to Davidson, I struggled, but in a different way. Instead of struggling to keep up, I struggled to absorb as much as I could. Two-hour study sessions turned into four-hour sessions. I would go into study halls at night until I got everything I needed to get the next day in class. I did that over and over and over again. And slowly things got better.

Telling you this story reminds me how in-the-moment you are at this time in your life. You are focused on all of these challenges that are directly in front of you. Trying to do well in your classes. Trying to gain experience. Trying to add to the fabric of the new community you're in. But you know, one day you are going to look back on this experience and realize why you put yourself through the rigors of this wonderful institution. And I think you will see how back then you were trying to memorize every answer and master every detail of your training. But what you were really doing by leaving home and coming here was gaining access to a new set of experiences and to a challenge that few young people could endure.

Let me just say this. A lot of people will give you a perspective on what leadership is. One of the best explanations I've heard is: *management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things*. Think about those times in our country's history ... when the moral compass of our country was at stake and folks found a way to move forward. What you are going to be called to do in your life is going to go beyond the rote college map. The job of this institution is to test you

in every way: to test your mind, to test your body, to test your spirit. And it's testing you to forge in you the confidence so what when you're confronted with situations you haven't been confronted with before that you will know what to do.

I don't mean to say that you shouldn't immerse yourself fully in your textbooks and your training courses. I mean that you absolutely should do that, except that one of the most important values of it all lies in mastering those things in which you struggle. The value is in how, by going through this, you're able to expand and alter your frame of reference regarding who you are and what your purpose is and what your potential is.

No one would have predicted when I was born in 1971 to a 19-year-old single mother that I would be standing here today as Secretary of Transportation. But the very fact of that is evidence that no matter where you come from, no matter what brought you here, no matter what challenges you've had to overcome to be in the seat you're in, you're all on the same plane now. And the challenge is to take what God has given you and to do the best you can to build on it.

My question to all of you is: What's your story going to be? How will you lead and what will your contributions be – not only to this great institution, but to our country?

The Kings Point life is a life of regiment. Toughness is so much of a requirement that some people don't even make it to the first day of classes. Then, after INDOC most of you have to take more credit hours to get your degree than any other federal service academy. There is discipline. There is zero-dark-thirty. There are room inspections. And all of this would break a lot of people down. It might even have broken me down at your age. But for all of you – *all* of you – it's having the opposite effect. It's making you stronger. It's giving you a stronger foundation.

This great education you have opened the doors to is designed this way for a reason. It is designed this way because the charge of this academy is not just to produce individuals who have impressive degrees and licenses, although that is important. Its charge is to produce folks who will lead. Its charge is to cultivate men and women who can advance the work of previous generations who've designed and built and operated the greatest systems of transportation and defense the world has ever seen. That is why I've tasked the Superintendent to evaluate the curriculum to ensure leadership development is at the forefront. Because we want to do everything possible to prepare you for your role as leaders in this young century.

You are the people who will develop technological breakthroughs, who will supply our armed forces with the supplies they need, who will answer the call of disaster relief, who will move our economy, and who will serve as officers in our Armed Forces. Your experiences here are going to guide you through every step of your service and professional life. You always will stand out from the crowd because of your discipline and technical skills and because your ability to solve problems are second to none.

So I know Kings Point graduates believe in deeds, not words, but promise me today that those deeds will speak loudly, and speak volumes. And to the entire Merchant Marine Academy, know that the U.S. Department of Transportation is proud to support you, and that we are even more proud of what you do.

I want to thank you all so much. Best wishes to everyone on this new school year, and let's go get'em.

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