Good evening. It is my honor to take this opportunity to offer a few words to our graduates and their honored guests. Tonight’s events are not the end of a journey – commencement is a point of departure for the next phase of your life. Dan Wilson of the band Semisonic wrote that “every new beginning comes from some other beginning’s end.” Tonight you are at the end of a journey that is also the beginning of a new adventure – an adventure that you get to direct as you take on a new career or head off to a university.

To our friends and family in the audience, you are looking at a cohort of individuals who are the future of our community. Compared to their peers with a high school diploma, the graduates sitting before you tonight are more likely to vote, will see their lifetime earnings more than double and will engage in civic activity at a higher rate. They are less likely to be unemployed, more likely to have stable family lives and will have the opportunity to enjoy a higher standard of living. Anyone who doubts the future of our community, our state or our nation need only to look at this event to be reassured that the future of California is bright.

The graduates tonight have earned their diplomas and credentials. Allow me to explain to you what this means – this does not mean that you have jumped through a prescribed number of hoops or checked off enough boxes to obtain your diploma. When you receive your diploma you will notice that it tells you that the faculty of Las Positas College have observed your work, measured your talent and deemed you worthy of a degree or certificate. Our goal is not to have you memorize a certain number of facts or complete a defined amount of equations. Our goal is to give you the tools to continue to learn and grow throughout your lives. Tonight your professors, instructors and administrators are proudly affirming that you possess the inherent qualities of an educated person, worthy of a degree or credential.

Tonight’s event is a celebration of accomplishment, and the embodiment of what it means to be a community college graduate. The students before you are prepared to take the next step in their lives as public servants, medical professionals, educators, welders, technicians or business owners. And against our best advice, a few of them might even become lawyers or politicians.

What does it mean to be a community college graduate? Community college graduates are often the first line of defense in our communities. In just the past few weeks we have seen horrific acts of violence, industrial explosions and natural disasters. The visuals are frightening at first look – but I urge you to take another view of the videos associated with these events. I watched a video of a bomb exploding in Boston – and saw two police officers turn and run toward the explosion. In the Texas city of West, firefighters rushed to the scene of a fertilizer plant that was engulfed in flames – some losing their lives in an effort to protect their community. After a massive tornado wreaked destruction on Moore, Oklahoma, paramedics moved into the danger zone to transport the injured. Community college graduates are there when we need them most – during times of chaos, it is the community college graduate that is running toward the danger.

The college graduates before you are poised for greatness. For every graduate seated before you, there are stories of hard work, sacrifice, turmoil and probably times of panic. What does it mean for these students to graduate? For
Alaina Scofield it means a $30,000 per year scholarship through the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. She is one of only 73 students nationally to receive this award. For Kris Adhikari it means going to UC Berkeley as a USA Today All American, one of only 20 in the nation. For Javonte Evans it means being the first person in his family to not only attend college but also to earn a college degree. When he transfers to San Jose State in the fall, he will become the first in his family to attend a four-year college. Javonte – we expect to hear from you in a couple of years that you are the first in your family to earn a bachelor’s degree. For Maria and Neelofar Zargi it means realizing an American Dream, only a few years after arriving in California after a childhood in war-ravaged Afghanistan. Julian Alvarez also returned from Afghanistan – and Iraq – to work on his degree following his honorable service in the military. As one of ten “Bright Minds Scholars” he will have the financial support he needs to complete his degree in communications. For Christine Mikkleson, one of our co-valedictorians, it means finding a calling in life and having the chance to pursue a career in nursing. For our other co-valedictorian, Kyle Suchland, it means having a chance to compete athletically, to serve his community, and to complete his business degree.

These graduates represent the greatness of Las Positas College, the California Community College System and the State of California. We are proud of your accomplishments. However, you did not get here on your own. You have been served by an unwavering faculty and staff that are committed to putting Students First. Our community has committed its own personal resources to construct one of the most beautiful and advanced campuses in the entire state to ensure your success. Most of all, your family and friends have supported you financially and emotionally throughout your academic career. We have invested in your education – and now we ask you to pay that investment forward for the next generation.

I leave you with two parting thoughts: First, remember that this is the beginning of a new chapter in your life – one that should be filled with a commitment to lifelong learning. Wesley Schultz of the The Lumineers wrote in the song Flowers In Your Hair that “it’s a long road to wisdom, but it’s a short one to being ignored.”

Second, take what you have learned at Las Positas College and be an advocate for the greater good. This year’s Grammy award for Album of the Year went to the band Fun. for its Some Nights album. In the title song – played ubiquitously in commercials, at award events, on the radio and behind sports highlights – lead singer Nate Ruess asks, “What do I stand for? What do I stand for?” and answers his own question with “Most nights I don’t know.”

Tonight I encourage you to take what you have learned at Las Positas College and use your knowledge to be confident in knowing what you stand for. You will be faced with difficult decisions in your career and in your personal life. Stand up for what you know to be right, even when there are those who would seek to silence you. I can’t promise that the “right” will always prevail, but you will take comfort in what you stand for. To paraphrase the anthem Sing by the band My Chemical Romance:

Sing it out,
You've got to see what tomorrow brings,
You've got to be what tomorrow needs,
For every time that they want to count you out,
Use your voice every single time you open up your mouth, and,
Sing it for the world.

Congratulations, graduates. I can’t wait to hear you sing.