

MxCC Commencement 2020

Good evening, everyone. I'm Steven Minkler, the Chief Executive Officer of Middlesex Community College. On behalf of our faculty grand marshal, Professor Steve Krevisky, I proudly declare that the 53rd Commencement Exercises of Middlesex Community College are now in session.

Please join me in thanking two people you saw in the video that opened tonight's ceremony. Marina Capezzone, Class of 2018: thank you for your beautiful rendition of our National Anthem. And Peter Galgano, Sgt. E-5 United States Marine Corps, and MxCC Veterans Outreach Coordinator: thank you for standing watch on our campus, for your service to our country, and for your mentorship to so many students – both veterans and non-veterans – over the years, and in the years to come.

As I stated, this is the 53rd Commencement at Middlesex Community College. It's also the first time we have presented Commencement in "virtual format" using Zoom, Facebook Live, and the college website. We're still adjusting to a "new normal" in the wake of a virus that in mid-March brought everyday life to a standstill and closed our campus. We wish to thank all of you for your patience and understanding.

I'd like to thank dozens of MxCC staff and faculty who were involved in planning and producing tonight's Class of 2020 Virtual Commencement Recognition – especially the technical wizards in our Center for New Media. Please know we've worked very hard to ensure this important milestone in your lives is

marked, recorded, and celebrated as publicly as possible, and on a date close to when we would have gathered together in person. If you think about it, since this ceremony is on the Internet, we have a **WORLDWIDE** audience for your graduation! But I do promise that as soon as conditions permit, we will reunite in person to celebrate your accomplishments.

Whether you're a faculty or staff member... friend or family member of a graduate... community supporter, donor, or friend of the college... Tonight, we gather as one. We are a united community that believes in this college... believes in our mission to put students at the center of all that we do... and believes in each and every member of the Class of 2020.

Our belief in you – and your belief in each other – is so strong, that many of us have participated in the “Count Me In” fundraising campaign of the Middlesex Community College Foundation. All you need to do is make a donation of \$20.20 to honor the class of 2020. To be part of “Count Me In,” simply go online to mxcc-dot-edu-slash-commencement. Below my picture, you'll see a link where you can donate \$20.20. You will receive a custom Class of 2020 pin as our thanks. Wear it proudly!

Speaking of the Class of 2020 -- Tonight, we celebrate your accomplishments, and graduate you in the formal, time honored tradition of conferring academic degrees and certificates.

All 364 of you will soon join nearly 10,000 people, from all over Connecticut and beyond, as alumni of our wonderful institution.

Here are few “fun facts” about the Class of 2020:

There are 150 men, and 214 women.

The Early Childhood Education program, now in its 16th year, celebrates its first male graduate!

The youngest graduate is 15 years old, while the “least youngest” is 66.

One graduate began taking classes at MxCC in the year 1987. This member of the Class of 2020 attended on and off again – and tonight, that person has finished what they started 33 years ago. Congratulations!

This year’s class includes the very first graduates from new degree programs in Chemistry Studies, Manufacturing Engineering Technology, and Physics Studies. We also have the first graduates in the Audio & Music, and Digital Marketing certificates, and the first graduates in the Magnetic Resonance Imaging post-primary certification in diagnostic imaging.

Tonight’s graduates include two pairs of siblings: a brother & sister, and a sister & sister. And, a mother and daughter are graduating together!

20 graduates are international students. We are so honored to have you as members of our student body.

The Center for Prison Education is a unique partnership among Middlesex Community College, Wesleyan University, and the state Department of Correction. Two graduates completed their degrees while incarcerated at Cheshire Correctional Institution. They will receive their diplomas at ceremonies to be held inside Cheshire, on a date to be determined, once health and safety conditions permit.

And, this year, we have 18 graduates who are veterans of the United States armed forces.

We salute those graduates who are veterans and those who are in active military service. We honor the sacrifices you and your families have made to defend our country. We also honor those graduates who are first responders in our communities, those who volunteer in service to others, and those of you who work in health care, child care, grocery stores, and other essential services all of us need during this unprecedented pandemic.

Class of 2020: Everyone at the college is proud to have been with you on this portion of your life's journey. You inspired us to "work together as one team" to focus on student success and educational excellence. We celebrate the higher purpose we serve by creating the college you experienced.

We share in the joy and sense of accomplishment you feel tonight – emotions that cannot, and should not, be diminished.

But, sadly, Class of 2020, we gather in the shadow of events that cannot be ignored.

First is the novel coronavirus we know as COVID-19. COVID-19 is an infectious disease that was first discovered last December. It passes from person to person through airborne droplets. COVID-19 attacks the respiratory system, making it difficult if not impossible to breathe. It's a virus with no known cure or vaccine. It's put hundreds of thousands in hospital, and killed over 100,000 Americans... *in the last three months*. The most effective response so far has been to reduce exposure by closing schools and businesses, isolating yourself, washing your hands often, and when in public, wearing a face mask and practicing social distancing. We don't know how long the COVID-19 pandemic will last, or how it will end... if it ends. The economic and social disruption it has caused will be felt for many years.

Second is a much more dangerous and corrosive virus. Symptoms include the continuing oppression, exclusion, and murder of our African-American brothers and sisters – murder that happens openly in our streets and is recorded for the world to see. This virus, which we know as systemic racism, is highly infectious. It passes from person to person – and generation to generation. It has no known cure or vaccine, and we don't know whether, or if, it will ever end. The latest in a long line of victims from this virus is George Floyd, who was suffocated to death by white police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Chauvin pressed his knee against Floyd's neck for about as long as I have been speaking so far, tonight -- almost nine minutes.

Other symptoms of this virus can be categorized as “white privilege,” or generally speaking, the ability for a white person to go about their business without fear of being looked at suspiciously, fear of discrimination, fear of incarceration, or fear of being killed while jogging, stopped for a routine traffic violation, or sleeping in your own bed.

Systemic racism has been with us not for weeks or months, but *for centuries*. It has changed millions of lives for the worse. It has destroyed countless individuals in the prime of their lives, and robbed them of their humanity.

Hmmm. So what I am to do -- as a 55-year-old white man who happens to be the CEO of a community college?

First: I’ll say it loudly and I’ll say it proudly – Black Lives Matter. The lives of my friends, co-workers, students, people I go to church with, and people I’ve never met, matter. I need to speak up and ACT on what I believe. I need to speak up and ACT for my college. Enough is enough. If one of us can’t breathe, none of us can breathe.

Second: this summer, the College Cabinet will form a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Council made up of faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community members. The Council will be informed by the work we are already doing with the Achieving the Dream national network, to address racial disparities in enrollment patterns, student success metrics, and graduation rates. We will look for strategies to address cultural competence among our employees and improve our efforts to diversify the faculty and staff on campus.

Third: We will continue the good work we have been doing already, such as offering a wider variety of courses, hosting events that celebrate the richness of our human diversity, and having Courageous Conversations to explore topics such as “Why I March,” the New York Times 1619 project, Kingian Non-Violence, and community-oriented policing.

And, Fourth: we will continue to make Middlesex a place of inclusion, civility, and respect by doubling our efforts to listen to our students and our alumni. You’ve inspired us to be a compassionate college that believes in the value and dignity of every human being, and in working for the common good. Together, we need to call out racism and acts of intolerance against people based on skin color, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, or national origin.

And, finally, to the Class of 2020, I charge you to use all you have learned during your time at Middlesex to speak for those who have no voice, to fight for those who are too broken and exhausted to fight for themselves, to stand with those who protest injustice, inequality, and inequity, to exercise your rights to free speech, and to use your power to *vote*. Use your talents to make our communities better for all.

Thank you for choosing Middlesex Community College... your college, your future.