

Good morning!

Welcome to all distinguished guests, family and friends, and graduates.

I want to give a special thank you to Dr. Woodson—what an honor to be part of this moment as we celebrate not just our own commencement, but your 15 years of leadership at NC State.

Thank you for your service to this university and to every student who has passed through its bricks.

There are so many emotions that I—and all of us—are feeling today.

This is a day I've dreamed about for a long time.

And as I stand here, I can't help but reflect on the journey that brought me here... and everything I've learned along the way.

Eighteen years ago, I became a teen mom.

And while that may not be a traditional beginning to a college journey—let me be clear: I wear that title with pride.

It shaped my strength, deepened my purpose, and helped me discover the power of persistence.

Today, I stand here proudly as my family's first college graduate.

I also confess—I've been in a quiet race to this stage with my first-born, who graduates high school in two weeks.

It was close... but mama I made it.

Over the years, I've mastered the art of late-night studying, multitasking, and espresso extraction...

And yes, I became a collector of dreams deferred—never abandoned.

There were moments when I wanted to give up—but didn't.

When I didn't know how—I tried anyway.

When I failed—I kept going.

Because failure isn't the opposite of success—it's part of it.

One of my favorite authors, Napoleon Hill, once wrote:

“Every adversity, every failure, every heartache carries with it the seed of an equal or greater benefit.”

So today, I ask:

How many seeds of failure were planted in hardship and grew into something greater than we ever expected?

Life threw me curveballs—and more than a few brick walls.

And no, I didn't always leap over them.

Sometimes... I face-planted.

But the ground taught me lessons the mountaintop never could.

And perhaps the most important was this:

Failure is not a dead end—it's a detour.

And redirection can be protection.

Let me give you an example.

Week one of my online precalculus class... I was already lost.

I asked the chat, “Can anyone explain what is going on?”

A classmate responded: “We learned this last year in high school precalc.”

That was... a moment.

I did the math on how long it had been since high school—and that was about as mathematical as I could get.

Meanwhile, my son was breezing through his own precalculus course.

And let me tell you: asking your teenager for math help?

Humbling. Oh, how the tables turn.

I failed that class.

But I embraced the detour.

The next time, I chose a more... let's say, approachable math course.

Still challenging—but hey, a math credit is a math credit.

And I'm just grateful precalculus is no longer out to get me.

That class wasn't the end—it was just another turn on a very long road.

A road I now see as a marathon, not a sprint.

There were years I couldn't enroll.

Life came first.

But I always came back.

I couldn't always see the finish line—but I never stopped believing it was there.

Yes, I was the oldest in most of my classes.

Yes, I asked teenagers for homework help.

And yes, I sometimes thought, "This syllabus was not made for someone with a mortgage."

I wouldn't wish my path on anyone—but I'm proud of it.

Because it's mine.

To my fellow graduates who kept going—even through a global pandemic—

You inspired me.

You reminded me: obstacles aren't roadblocks.

They're opportunities.

Dreaming is vital. But doing... doing is what transforms those dreams into reality.

For 18 years, I carried the dream of this degree.

Thinking kept it alive.

Doing—one class at a time—made it real.

And today, standing here among you,

We are living proof of the NC State motto:

Think and Do.

We thought we could... and we did.

So wherever you go next, remember:

The dream begins in your mind,

But it's built with your actions.

And when you fail—and you will fail—

Fail forward.

We didn't just earn degrees today.

We proved no dream is too distant,

No failure too final,

And no age too old to learn.

Congratulations, Class of 2025—

Now let's go think and do something extraordinary!