

Mary Aldridge

Senior Oration

Afternoon Ceremony, May 17, 2014

Thank you (so much), President Long, and thank you to everyone gathered here today. I'm honored to stand before you on this special occasion, and I'm truly humbled by the opportunity to represent the class of 2014. I'm sure my classmates will agree that our years at Geneseo have gone by faster than we thought the laws of physics would allow. To me, it seems like yesterday that we were bright-eyed, enthusiastic freshmen with conspicuous Geneseo lanyards and dorm keys around our necks. And now, assuming that we've paid our parking tickets, returned our library books, and received passing grades for Humanities I AND II, we are about to take home official diplomas recognizing our college degrees. Congratulations guys, we made it.

Over the past few months, I often found myself reflecting on my time as a Geneseo student. The challenging academics, the NCAA competition, the smell of cow manure, the five distinct varieties of law enforcement officials—no, just kidding. Although I am extremely thankful for the wealth of practical knowledge that I have amassed from my coursework, I thought about how the education that I received on this scenic, and often frigid campus consists of so much more than that. As I stand here on graduation day, I can say with utmost certainty, that what I value most deeply about my college years, is what I have learned from all of you, through the relationships we have built. Today, each of us will walk the same stage and receive the same diploma to conclude journeys that could not be more different. Our lives before and during our time at Geneseo have been shaped by various experiences, which render each of us an individual with a unique perspective, that can be shared with fellow students. Our college culture

has guided us to view our diversity of thought not as a wedge between us, but rather as a means by which we can elevate each other beyond our personal limits. We have become masters of synergy, and our class has upheld Geneseo's tradition of excellence by opening ourselves to what others can offer, while never wavering from our individual characters.

When I was little, my siblings and I used to watch "Bill Nye the Science Guy" every night before dinner. What a great program. I still watch an episode on YouTube every once in a while—It's fine, I like being a dork. In addition to kid-friendly facts about ecology and gravity, Bill Nye left me with a bit of wisdom that will continue to guide me, even as a college graduate. According to the goofy guy in the blue lab coat, "Everyone you will ever meet knows something you don't" (repeat). This simple statement exemplifies the philosophy by which I have crafted my college career. Each person on this campus has experienced something I haven't. My mission, since the day I arrived at Geneseo, has been to learn as much as possible about the people I interact with every day. The bits of advice, words of wisdom, and new ideas that my peers, coaches, and professors have given me over the past four years are far more valuable than any fact or formula in a \$219 textbook from Pearson Publishing.

Now, I can guarantee that I did not reach commencement the way most students do. Please consider the following examples: I went to bed at approximately 9:30 pm every night, wrote my best papers between 7 and 9 am on weekdays, and did not eat a single package of Ramon Noodles. I was different, maybe even a little weird. But one thing that I learned in college, is that everyone is a little weird in their own way. But that's a good thing. Would you want to be surrounded by people who are trapped within the confines of social norms, and chronically plagued by a need for conformity? I wouldn't. And I wasn't during my four years at

Geneseo. I was never afraid to be an individual, and I created the college experience that was right for me, while respecting and supporting my peers when they chose something different.

The power of our individuality became even more apparent to me on one particular night last fall. I was working with a partner on a project for a business class. We agreed that we wanted to make our presentation creative and interactive, but I was at a loss for ideas. Then, right there in the library, my partner spontaneously performed an original skit that could serve as our project introduction. I was awestruck by his ability to create a hilarious and relevant sketch right there on the spot. I said to him: “Wow! Did you just come up with that?” And he was like, “Yeah...just some improv. It’s kind of my thing”. I thought to myself, “Improv. Wow. That is so cool. I do Cross Country—I run around in the woods!” The two of us were polar opposites, yet we had the ability to effectively synergize because we showed mutual respect, and valued what the other brought to the table. This attitude embodies the foundation of Geneseo’s culture. Our college community fosters acceptance and encouragement, which in turn drives students to embrace who they are, and collaborate with open minds.

So, my peers, my teammates, my friends: I challenge you. Today, tomorrow, and forever as Geneseo alumni, do things *your way*. Use the bits of wisdom that you have accumulated to craft the life that is right for you. And as you venture into the next chapter of your journey and beyond, empower yourself by feeding the insatiable curiosity that the Geneseo community has instilled in all of us. Cherish every first handshake as an opportunity and a resource to be tapped. Each person that you meet, no matter who it is, can offer you something, because he or she inevitably...knows something you don’t. Always remember to ask questions, listen carefully, and uphold your commitment to a lifetime of continued wonder. Only then, I’m convinced, will you realize your incredible potential as productive and happy individuals.

I have to thank my awesome family, who is here today. You guys are the best, and I'm really looking forward to that Graduation Day cookie cake that I wasn't allowed to touch last night. And to the SUNY Geneseo community, thank you for making me more whole as a person, and for sending me off as an educated and confident young woman. I am forever grateful for my time on this campus, and I will proudly wear my oversized Blue Knights track jacket whenever possible for years to come. Thanks.