

**University of Guelph**

**College of Social and Applied Human Sciences**

June 10, 2026

**Convocation Address: Margaret Biggs**

**Madame Chancellor**, President and Vice-Chancellor Van Acker, Associate Dean Haines, distinguished members of the University of Guelph community, honoured guests, families and friends, and most importantly the 2026 graduates of the College of Social and Applied Human Sciences.

**Thank you for** this tremendous honour and the privilege of being here with you today. I am grateful and I am humbled.

**Today is truly a joyous occasion.** We are here to celebrate the graduates – where you have been, what you have accomplished, and what you will do in the future. We are also here to honour your families, friends and mentors who have accompanied you along your path.

\* \* \*

**To the graduates** -- yours has not been an easy journey. You have overcome adversity along the way -- the impact and after-effects of covid, a historic shift to digital learning and generative AI., and more. You have persevered. You have made it. It was worth it.

- Your degree matters. It is a mark of intellectual rigour, sustained hard work, and resilience.
- Your university experience matters. You have been exposed to new ideas, new people, from different backgrounds, and new ways of doing things. You have been challenged, pushed outside your comfort zone. You have made lifelong friends and memories.
- And your decision to study at the University of Guelph matters, with its mission ‘Improve Life”, and the College of Social and Applied Human Sciences’ interdisciplinary approach to problem solving and human wellbeing.
- The most pressing challenges of our time – homelessness, climate change, global development, health inequities, to name just a few - require the kind of integrative thinking and collaboration that comes from working with and across multiple disciplines and sectors. I believe your education here at the College of Social and Applied Human Sciences will have prepared you for the complexities of real-world problems, and for leadership, in whatever field you choose to pursue.

\* \* \*

**Before going any further, I would like to share something with you.** This ceremony is extra special for me because it is the first convocation of which I have personally been a part. It’s not the first I have attended, as I have been blessed to attend my children and my husband’s university graduations.

- But I didn't show up for my own. And I don't really know why – perhaps I had to work – but probably I just took it for granted. I didn't appreciate what an important milestone it was, or how grateful I should be.
- And perhaps most regrettably, I didn't appreciate how much it would have meant to my parents to see me graduate, as neither of them had the opportunity to further their own education.
  - They were part of what we now call the Greatest Generation that grew up in the hardship of the Great Depression, went overseas in World War 2 to fight for our freedom, and then went on to lay the foundation for decades of growth, prosperity and social progress here in Canada.
  -

**I mention this little story for a couple of reasons:**

- First, because you showed up, so you are already way ahead of me.
- Second, to acknowledge that while my generation may have taken a lot of things for granted – economic opportunity, social cohesion, a more peaceful, a more democratic world – my parent's generation did not, and your generation cannot either. Indeed, in this current moment of disruption and uncertainty, none of us can be complacent, none of us can take our good fortune here in Canada for granted.
- Third, because the experience of the Greatest Generation that came of age during the depression and second world war gives us all a point of reference to judge ourselves, and to guide the way forward.

**So, if I may, I would like to mention some guideposts, some possible North Stars,** that sustained my parent's generation and have guided me throughout my life. They may be helpful as you set out on your journey and I also believe they can help make the world a better place.

\* \* \*

**Let me start with Conviction.**

You may not know exactly what you want to do next or what you want to do with your life. There are so many variables -- jobs, relationships, where you want to live, technology... It's impossible to know exactly what you will end up doing.

- But you can know what kind of a person you want to be; what kind of friend, colleague, family member you want to be.
- You can know what kind of world you want to live in, and what you are willing to fight for.
- You can know your purpose.
- Your convictions can serve as a North Star. They will stay true, and they will guide you wherever you go, whether you face calm or stormy waters.

\* \* \*

**Courage.**

**Have the courage to stand up for your convictions,** for what you believe in, even when it is hard; especially when it is hard.

Inevitably you will be tested.

- You may be tested in big ways, like my father's generation was, to stand up for Canada, for our democratic values, the rule of law, freedom.
- For sure you will be tested in other ways. To stand up for a friend. To speak truth to power. Not to give in to anger or hostility.
- Have the courage to do the right thing. The world is not short of clever people, but it can be short of courage.

**Have the courage to take risks**, to try something new, to take on new challenges, to start something without knowing exactly whether it will work out or where you will end up. You will learn more, get stretched in new and important ways, develop new skills that will carry you forward.

- I know these words may sound rather gratuitous coming from someone like me, who just told you that her generation, relatively speaking, didn't have a lot to fear or lose. But I would suggest that it is at times like these when having the courage to take risks can have the greatest reward and an outsized impact.

\* \* \*

**Now let me suggest a third and final North Star – Civility**

We live in a world that is often corrosive. Social media amplifies conflict, intolerance and incivility. Differences of opinion are attacked, often personally, often derisively.

- And incivility isn't just breeding in the digital world. It is on the rise in the workplace, in schools, on campus, in our communities. I am not telling you anything you don't know, probably much better than I do.
- Civility is much more than being nice or being polite. It doesn't mean avoiding disagreements or preserving the status quo or quelling dissent. What it does mean is for people to feel heard and treated with respect, even when there is disagreement... especially when there is disagreement.
- Civility matters because it allows views to be shared and understanding to be built. It levels the playing field, so it isn't just the loudest voices that get heard.

**In essence, civility matters because it is the foundation of a healthy democracy and a cohesive society.**

These days there are powerful forces fuelling intolerance and disrespect. What can any of us do? What can you do?

- I suggest making civility and respect one of your convictions, one of your North Stars. It will make you a great leader and team member, colleague and friend.
- It will fuel a virtuous circle. It will bring the best out in you and others. It will help build a better Canada and a better world.

\* \* \*

**Thank you for letting me share this momentous occasion with you, ...** to celebrate all that you have achieved and all the promise and potential you bring to the future. You made it here. You will make it anywhere you want to go.

**Keep showing up!** Go forward with conviction and courage. Lead with dignity and respect. Be guided in the months and years ahead by your North Stars.

**Congratulations to the Graduating Class of 2026.** I wish you the very best.