Thank you so much, Dr. DeLuca, for inviting me to this wonderful celebration of achievement and for that introduction. And to all of you I say Namaste, which very loosely translated means the greatness in me bows to the greatness in you. And, please know that there is real greatness in you. Today, we are all happy and excited about graduation. In a few minutes, this part of your life, your long hours of hard work and study to achieve these fabulous degrees, will be over. Some of you are finished with your formal education; others will continue for advanced degrees. I stopped my formal education after receiving a Bachelor’s of Science in Forest Management primarily because I had lost my Mom to throat cancer and my Grandmother had terminal breast cancer. My Mom and Grandmother raised me and I needed as much money as I could earn to help pay their medical bills. I needed a permanent, full-time job. I attended the University of Louisville for
one year then transferred to the University of Washington in 1976. This was the most influential decision of my career. My greatest passion in life is everything to do with animals, especially threatened and endangered species, and ecosystem health. I wanted to move from my home in Louisville, Kentucky, to Seattle, Washington, so that I could study martial arts under someone who had studied with, in my opinion, the world’s greatest martial artist, Bruce Lee. Learning that the UW had a wonderful wildlife management program, I decided to transfer and fell in love with the university, but not with the buffoon who professed to have studied under Bruce Lee.

I also met and worked for two of the greatest mentors I ever encountered. First, a man who hired me sight-unseen, who took me to buy my first pair of field boots, who took a chance on me when no one else would, Dr. Stewart Pickford. Next, there was a brilliant professor, Dr. Kristiina Vogt, who couldn’t be more different than me. She’s reserved and dignified. I hug everyone and am a gregarious Southern lady. Yet we couldn’t be closer still to this day. Dr. Vogt allowed me to contribute to her recent
award-winning book, *River of Life*, about sustainable natural resource management practices of Native Americans and Indigenous Peoples. Dr. Vogt accepted me just as I am and never tried to change me. To this day, I rely on her advice and counsel.

Then and now, it is incredibly tough to get good jobs in our preferred field in the exact location where we prefer to live. What I want to do today is share with you a few things that I know work so when you are not feeling on top of the world, like I hope you are all feeling now, you can tap into that greatness that I know is within each of us. I’ll be very brief but please try to really hear what I am sharing with you because these things really work and will help keep you sane when life and career decisions get tough.

I believe you know that I was the first American black woman to graduate in Forest Management from our College. I was also the first African-American woman, the preferred term over black woman these days, to be hired by the USDA Forest Service as a professional forester. I served 28 years in 7 field locations, on 2 staffs in our headquarters in Washington, DC, and completed international
assignments in Africa and South America. I also had a chance to work on executive loan with the Smithsonian Institution’s National Zoo and the World Wildlife Fund. So, to say I gained a wide range of experience in various ecoregions working with diverse people is an understatement. It is easy to be the first when you are the only one. Since there were no other African-American women foresters and very few men, everything I did was being done for the first time by an African-American woman forester.

I am going to use my own experience to briefly share a few ideas with you but the principles are sound and apply to everyone. The easiest one to start with is standing out. Now standing out from the crowd can be a great thing. Your work gets noticed. In fact, everything you do gets noticed. When I worked on the Ocala National Forest in Central Florida, my District Ranger would routinely call me into his office and chastise me about people gossiping about seeing cars parked at my house when I was off from work. Everyone knew where the new black lady forester lived. There’s no blending in in small towns. The point is it should have been only my business what I did on my own time. However,
perception for some people is truth. I was single and young and the ideas about my supposedly wild life ran rampant. It was not fair but if I wanted to be successful on that unit I had to modify my behavior even on my own time. If the ranger thought I was having wild orgies every night at my house, it would definitely reflect on his opinion of me, the assignments he gave me, the level of responsibility with which he trusted me; whether or not I would be allowed to travel to training session. Lesson 1: Life isn’t fair. Decide what’s most important to you and proceed accordingly. Choose your battles carefully because not everything is worth a fight. I found ways to have a pretty good social life that did not involve people parking at my home. When you are the unit leader will you allow your employees to bring gossip to you and then act on it? Are you willing to modify your social life in order to progress in your career?

You see my goal was to achieve a high-level position in Forest Service headquarters by the time I was in my low-to-mid 30s so that I could affect the agency’s policies nationwide. I was willing to change my social life, but it didn’t feel fair at all because it wasn’t. But, I achieved my goal. By the time I was in
my mid-30s, I was a GS-14, making $114,000 a year and managing forest health for the Timber Management Staff for the entire agency.

And, don’t take the critics too seriously, as our First Lady Michelle Obama recently said in a commencement address. Don’t let the criticism hold you back from what you can do. I had a National Staff Director, who happened to be a white male, once tell me that he could see me being a Director of Civil Rights or Personnel but never a Director of Timber Management or other science-based staff like he was at the time. In his mind, African-American women really didn’t belong on his staff unless they were in clerical positions, and he had a lot of control over my professional life. It wouldn’t have helped my career to have a big battle with him over his opinions. This man had a lot of experience in my agency, the USDA Forest Service, and a lot of power. People will judge us based on their own stereotypes and inclinations. Just don’t take it all to heart. Listen to advice from people in leadership positions say, but make your own decisions. Try to put together a diverse team of mentors early in your career and listen to their advice, but make your own
path and achieve your own dreams, never theirs. Remember, only you truly know how much effort you are willing to put into achieving your dreams.

In 1976, I met the man who would eventually hire me in the USDA Forest Service, Lyle Laverty, at a Society of American Foresters (SAF) meeting that I never planned to attend. Typically, I like to relax in the evenings and throw on some jeans and a t-shirt. After a long day of classes, the last thing I wanted was to get dressed in business clothes and go to a meeting were I would be the youngest, most inexperienced, and usually the only African-American person there, so I probably wouldn’t really be allowed to fully participate in discussions and I’d have to listen to a bunch of old codgers talk and argue. I had never been to a SAF meeting and had nothing but my preconceived notions to rely on. Two of my many mentors, who were also employees of Professor Stewart Pickford (retired), Al and D Becker, insisted that I go and, in fact, introduced me to Lyle Laverty, who decided that night to hire me.

Lesson 2: Take advantage of every opportunity that you can to network with people in your field, and dress appropriately. If I had showed up in shorts and
a halter top, I’m not sure if I would have impressed him so much that he would have decided to hire me. And, Part 2, you may not be able to fully participate in meetings like these when you are first getting started, but there are plenty of one-on-one networking opportunities that can have significant, positive effects on your career. Try to always take advantage of them. And, don’t ever be too shy or insecure to share your professional opinion.

I believe people were excited to hire me and about me being hired because I am an African-American woman, and there weren’t any in the professional forester series in the USDA Forest Service at that time, nor an equitable number of them now. Frankly, other agencies and organizations have offered to hire me, too, during my 28 year career based merely upon the fact that I have brown skin and I’m a woman. That may have gotten me in the door with the Forest Service but, believe me, I had to be 3 times as good as my counterparts, not 2 times but 3 times as good as others, in order to keep the job because the bottom line matters, targets matter, productivity matters. People like to work with those who they are most comfortable with and used
to in organizations, usually people who look, talk and behave similarly to themselves. If you are different in any way you are easily scrutinized. That’s not fair either but that’s the way it is in the real world.

Lesson 3: What makes you unique may get you into the door, but don’t ever try to completely skate by on merely being a unique gender, race, ethnicity or anything else. You must have the strongest work ethic, be the best and the brightest, take the initiative to do more than is expected of you, and always keep your agency or organizations mission, vision, and goals in mind and tie everything you do to them. It also helps to journal. I had some stressful times throughout my career when having good records of what I’d seen, heard or done were critical to, I’m sorry to say, protect myself. When you strive for and achieve excellence, which I know all of you will do, some colleagues and others will become resentful and jealous. Don’t let it bother you, just always focus on the work that needs to be done.

Lesson 4: Being able to think and communicate well—in writing and verbally-- are the most critical factors in succeeding, especially as you progress in your career, in my opinion. Many people have
technical knowledge or can gather data. Being able to establish relationships with others, especially those most different from you, can bring great creativity to problem solving, especially in sensitive or critical situations. Please don’t only work or socialize with people who look and think just like you. When we are building or implementing a plan, we need people with diverse disciplines and strengths to generate the best product we can, to achieve the most work in the most efficient manner. Obviously, the more diverse a group is, the more perspectives are available to be incorporated, and we can be our most creative if everyone is given an opportunity to contribute their ideas. With the difficult challenges in today’s world, we need the ideas from the best and brightest of every gender, race and ethnicity to generate the best solutions that benefit the most people. To me, it just makes sense. I hope you agree.

So, I’ll leave you now knowing that the future is very bright for you. It really is. I know you can achieve anything you are willing to work really hard for over a period of time. I really never wanted to be a forester at first. I began my studies in zoology then came to
the UW to study wildlife management, then switched to forestry and back through those disciplines time and again until I accepted that job with the USDA Forest Service. Even though I am a forester, twice I held positions where I managed wildlife programs. And, eventually I realized that working in forest health and managing ecoregions is critical to wildlife, and I had arrived at a national, policy-making level that was more effective for protecting animals than cleaning out cages in a zoo or playing with animals in a shelter. What I’m saying is that there are many ways to achieve your goals so try to be flexible and look at things over time.

I cannot leave you without one final thought. Please never avoid a person because they have a different skin color, gender or other characteristic that is different from you. In these days when global issues of climate change, massive habitat loss, increasing threatened and endangered species and other factors are severely challenging us, we need the ideas and input of the most diverse groups we can gather to build the best plans and have even a chance of overcoming these global issues. I always sought the ideas from people others would discount,
and I sincerely believe this gave me the greatest ability to accomplish what I did when I was still very young. Gather as much information as you can and then make your own decisions. And, choose your battles carefully. I found that these are the vital keys to real success.

I am so proud of you, and it has been my great pleasure, honor and privilege to spend this time with you. Thank you so very much. Namaste.