

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

**Commencement Address at Worcester Technical High School in Worcester,
Massachusetts**

June 11, 2014

The President. Thank you! Please, everybody, be seated. Well, good afternoon. It is great to be back in Massachusetts, and it is great to be here at Worcester Tech!

I want to thank Reggie for that outstanding introduction. I want to thank Naomi for those inspiring words. I want to thank your outstanding, fabulous principal, Sheila Harrity, who has done so much to make this school a success. Let me just say, when you're the National High School Principal of the Year, you're doing something right. There are a lot of principals out there, and we could not be prouder of what she's doing.

I want to thank your mayor, Joseph Petty; your outstanding Governor and a great friend of mine, Deval Patrick; wonderful Congressman, Jim McGovern. And most of all, I want to thank the class of 2014. Thank you for allowing me to be part of your special day. And you all look great. And I want to thank all the parents and all the grandparents and the family and the friends. This is your day too. Part of the reason I'm here is because I've got to practice, because Malia is graduating in 2 years. So I'm trying to get used to not choking up and crying and embarrassing her. So this is sort of my trial runs here.

I have to say, I do not remember my high school graduation speaker. I have no idea who it was. [*Laughter*] I'm sure I was thinking about the party after graduation. I don't remember the party either. [*Laughter*] I'm just telling the truth here. You will remember the speaker at this graduation because there's a lot of Secret Service around, not because of anything that I say that's so inspiring.

But I know this day has been long time coming. Together, you made it through freshman initiation. You survived Mr. O'Connor's English class, which I understand is pretty tough. Everybody has got to have, like, a Mr. O'Connor in their life just to, kind of, straighten you out. And now it's the big day, although I notice that none of you are wearing your IDs. Rumor has it, some of you haven't been wearing them for years. [*Laughter*] Today I'm exercising my power as President and granting an official pardon for all of you who did not follow the rules there. I consider it my graduation gift to you.

I know a lot of folks watching at home today will see all of you in your caps and your gowns. And you'll think, well, maybe this is just another class of graduates at another American high school. But I'm here today because there is nothing ordinary about Worcester Tech or the class of 2014. You have set yourselves apart. This high school has set itself apart.

Over the past 4 years, some of you have learned how to take apart an engine and put it back together again. Some of you have learned how to run a restaurant or build a house or fix a computer. And all of you are graduating today not just with a great education, but with the skills that will let you start your careers and skills that will make America stronger.

Together, you're an example of what's possible when we stop just talking about giving young people opportunity, when we don't just give lip service to helping you compete in the global economy, we actually start doing it. That's what's happening right here in Worcester. And that's why I'm here today. I mean, I like all of you, and I'm glad to be with you, but the

thing I really want to do is make sure that what we've learned here at this high school we can lift up for the entire Nation. I want the Nation to learn from Worcester Tech.

Of course, your journey is just beginning. Take a look around at all the smiles from the parents and the grandparents and all the family members. Everything your families have done has been so that you could pursue your dreams, so that you could fulfill your potential. Everybody here has a story of some sacrifice that's been made on your behalf. And whether you're heading to college or the military or starting your career, you're not going to be able to take them with you now. Some of your moms and dads probably wish they could hang onto you a little bit longer. *[Laughter]* Some of you, maybe they're ready to get rid of you. *[Laughter]* Regardless, though, you are now entering into a stage where it's up to you. And what you can do is remember some of the lessons that you've learned here and carry them with you, wherever you're going.

And I want to talk about three of those lessons, a couple of which have already been mentioned by the previous speakers.

First of all, I want you to remember that each of us is only here because somebody somewhere invested in our success. Somebody invested in us. I know that's true for me. I was raised by a single mom with the help of my grandparents. We didn't have a lot of money growing up. At times, we struggled. When my mom was going to school at the same time as she was raising my sister and me, we had to scrape to get by.

But we had a family who loved me and my sister. And I had teachers who cared about me. And ultimately, with the help of a community and a country that supported me, I was able to get a good education. And I was able to get grants and student loans, and opportunities opened up. And all of this happened because people saw something in me that I didn't always see in myself. And that's not just true for me, that's true for Michelle, who grew up the daughter of a blue-collar worker and a mom who stayed at home and then became a secretary, never went to college themselves.

That's true for Deval, who grew up initially on the South Side of Chicago and didn't have a lot, and somebody reached out and gave him a hand up.

It's true of this city. This is a town that's always been home to smart people with big ideas. The mayor mentioned Robert Goddard, the father of the modern rocket. He was born here, performed some of the earliest tests on rocketry.

But Worcester has also prepared its workers for the jobs that those big ideas would bring. And that's why they opened a technical school here more than a century ago, with a class of 29 ironworkers and 23 woodworkers. And that school became Worcester Tech.

Along the way, the economy changed. Innovation made it possible for businesses to do more with less. The Internet meant those companies could do it anywhere. Schools like this were finding it harder to prepare students with the skills that businesses were looking for.

And then a guy named Ted Coghlin came along. And Ted is known as the godfather of Worcester Tech, because about 10 years ago, he set out to make this school what he knew it could be: a place where businesses train new workers and young people get the keys to a brighter future.

And he put his heart and soul into it. And eventually, that's what happened. Ted helped raise money for a new building, and the State and Federal government chipped in as well. And businesses helped create everything from an auto service center to a bank right inside the

school. And top-notch teachers got on board, led by Principal Harrity and the assistant principals here and an outstanding superintendent. And before long, Worcester Tech was on its way to becoming one of the best schools in this city.

And today, so many students want to come to Worcester Tech that there's a waiting list more than 400 names long. The number of students scoring "proficient" or "advanced" in math has gone up 100 percent; in English more than 200 percent. Ninety-five percent of students now graduate in 4 years.

And just as impressive, many of you are leaving here with more than a diploma. You're already certified as nursing assistants and EMTs and home health aides and preparing to become IT associates. And with the credits that you've earned, some of you are already on your way to a college diploma. And as Ted said, "Our students deserve the best so we can help them become the best, for their future and ours."

The point is, a lot of people made an investment in you. I can't imagine a better investment. But as you experience your success and as you experience setbacks, you need to remember everything that's been put into making sure that you had opportunity. Which brings me to the second thing I hope you remember when you leave here: You're going to also have to give back. This community invested in you. You've got to make sure that you use those gifts.

When my Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, came to Worcester Tech earlier this year, he said he had never seen a school more open. If you live near the school, you can come in and get your car detailed for a fraction of what it would cost somebody someplace else. So I'm giving a little free advertising to the detailing operation here. [*Laughter*] You can eat a meal cooked by students in the culinary arts program. One teacher called the hair salon the "city's best kept secret." Your veterinary clinic cares for about 250 pets a month, so I could have brought Bo and Sunny here. [*Laughter*] You guys would have taken care of them.

So Worcester Tech isn't separate from the broader community. You're a vital part of the community. So part of what you've learned here is that we are at our best, we are strongest when we are working together and when we're looking out for one another and we have responsibilities towards each other and all of us have contributions to make. You're giving back to folks who gave you so much. And whatever you do next, I hope you keep giving back. That may mean staying in Worcester and working for one of the companies that helped train you. If it means going to college or the military or using your skills to help more students get the same opportunities that you've had here, no matter what it is that you do, no matter what path you take, I want to make sure that you understand the incredible leadership that we now expect from you.

I understand that every year at exam time, you hear from a motivational speaker. And one of them this year was Colin Powell, because when you're getting ready to take a test, it never hurts to get a pep talk from a general. [*Laughter*] But the best part is that you decide to do the same thing for younger kids. So this class—those of you in the National Honor Society—rolled out the red carpet for students at nearby Chandler Elementary. And so those younger kids left here feeling fired up, inspired by your example, looking up to you, imagining that they could do what you did. And they're going to keep on looking up to you.

And there are going to be people across the country who are watching you. And when they see you succeed, when they see you working hard, when they see you overcoming setbacks, that's going to inspire them as well.

And that brings me to my final point, which is, I hope you leave here today believing that if you can make it, then there shouldn't be any kid out here who can't make it. Every child in America, no matter what they look like or where they grow up, what their last name is, there's so much talent out there. And every single child—as Ted understood when he helped transform this school—every single child should have the opportunity like you have had to go as far as your talents and hard work will take you. I've seen you do it, so we know it's possible.

Now, it's a challenging time. I think sometimes, I worry that your generation has grown up in a cynical time: in the aftermath of a great recession, in the aftermath of two wars. We live in a culture that so often focuses on conflict and controversy and looks at the glass half empty instead of half full. And you're graduating at a time when you'll no longer be competing just with people across town for good jobs, you're going to be competing with the rest of the world.

But when I meet young people like you, I am absolutely certain, we are not just going to outcompete the rest of the world, we are going to win because of you. Because we are Americans, that's what we do. We don't settle. We outwork, we out innovate, we out hustle the competition. And when we do, nobody can beat us.

And that's what you've shown at this school, not just helping a few kids go as far as their hard work will take them. I want all of you to be part of the process of helping all our young people achieve their God-given potential. And as President, my job is to make sure every child in America gets that chance. And Deval Patrick's job is to make sure that everybody in the Commonwealth gets that chance. And the mayor, his focus is making sure everybody in this town gets that chance. Every community is different. But if Worcester can bring teachers and business and entire communities together for the sake of our young people, then other places can too.

And that's why I've challenged high schools all across the country to do what you're doing here: better prepare students for the demands of the global economy. We're getting started this year with a competition that pairs schools and employers and colleges to combine quality education with real-world skills.

As part of that initiative, I launched something called ConnectED, working with the private sector to connect America's students to high-speed broadband and advanced technology, just like you've got here at Worcester Tech. Already, companies have committed to donate \$2 billion to this effort. And starting later this week, schools and teachers and students will be able to go to whitehouse.gov and access resources in time for the new school year, because I want to encourage more schools to do what you are doing. You've set a standard. You've set a bar. More schools can do it across the country.

If you're going to college, I also want to make sure that when you graduate you don't have a mountain of debt. So we're not only working to make college more affordable, we're working to help more students pay back their loans that they take out when they go to college. It is not fair to students who do everything right to get saddled with debt that they have to pay off not just for years, but in some cases, decades. We can do better than that.

And I—even though they had votes and they couldn't make it, I want to give a plug to a couple people: Senator Elizabeth Warren and Congressman John Tierney, both from Massachusetts, who introduced bills that would make it easier for students to repay their student loans.

It's the same idea we used to make it easier for your parents to pay off their mortgages. Now today that idea was defeated by Republicans in Congress, which was frustrating, especially—

Audience members. Boo!

The President. Well, don't boo. Just remember to vote. [*Laughter*] But—so I know that it's frustrating for parents. It's frustrating for students who are working hard and doing everything right. There are too many politicians in Washington who don't have the right priorities. We need to straighten them out. And maybe they forgot where they came from and who invested in them along the way. And when a bill to help you pay off your college doesn't pass, it's a disservice not only to your generation, but to our history as a nation that strives to put quality education within the reach of every American. So we're going to have to keep on putting pressure on Congress.

But in the meantime, where Congress won't act, I'm going to do whatever I can on my own. So on Monday, I announced executive actions that are going to help students like you find the right options and give millions of Americans who are already making their loan payments a chance to cap those repayments at 10 percent of their income. Because a quality education shouldn't be something that other kids get, it should be something that every kid gets. And that has to be a priority for this country.

I tell you all this not just because you stand to benefit from changes in laws, but because you're going to have to be a part of helping to shape the law. You're going to have to shape public opinion. You're going to have to remember everybody who invested in you. You're going to have to remember the experience of being part of this incredible community. And then, when you go out into the world, whether you are a businessperson or you are in the military or you are an academic or a doctor or whatever it is that you're doing, you're also going to be a citizen. You're also going to be somebody who has a voice in how this country operates. And you've got to push so that others get the same chance you did.

And making sure that every young person has the same opportunities you've had, it won't be easy. Progress takes commitment. It takes hard work. We have to fight through the cynicism. It's going to take work from parents and from teachers and members of the community and from students. But I know we can do it, and I know it because of you.

If Melinda Blanchard can get so good at welding that a bunch of college kids ask her help building a solar-paneled house for a competition in China, I know that we can get more young people excited about learning. If Greg Carlson can help the robotics team at Worcester Tech win the world championship and still find time to mentor a robotics team at the middle school where he started out, then I know we can help guarantee every child in America a quality education. If Derek Murphy can start his own web development company and graduate with 18 college credits, I know we can help more students earn the skills that businesses are looking for.

You're already doing it. You're already blazing a trail. You're already leading. You're already giving back. You don't need to remember what I said today, because you're already doing it.

And if it can happen in Worcester, it can happen anyplace. And if it does—if more communities invest in young people like you, if you give back, if we all keep fighting to put opportunity within the reach of everybody who is willing to work for it—America will be stronger, your future will be brighter. There is no limit to what we can do together.

So congratulations, Class of 2014. You're going to do big things. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:44 p.m. in the DCU Center. In his remarks, he referred to Reginald O. Sarpong, senior class president, Naomi L. Desilets, valedictorian, Kevin O'Connor, English teacher, Edwin "Ted" Coghlin, Jr., chairman of the school board of trustees, Mary O'Malley, Brian Potter, and Siobhan Petrella, assistant principals, and Melinda M. Blanchard, Gregory M. Carlson, and Derek T. Murphy, graduating seniors, Worcester Technical High School; Melinda J. Boone, superintendent, Worcester Public Schools; and former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell. He also referred to his sister Maya Soetoro-Ng and mother-in-law Marian Robinson.

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Locations: Worcester, MA.

Names: Blanchard, Melinda M.; Boone, Melinda J.; Carlson, Gregory M.; Coghlin, Edwin "Ted," Jr.; Desilets, Naomi L.; Duncan, Arne; Harrity, Sheila M.; McGovern, James P.; Murphy, Derek T.; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; O'Connor, Kevin; O'Malley, Mary; Patrick, Deval L.; Petrella, Siobhan; Petty, Joseph M.; Potter, Brian; Powell, Colin L.; Robinson, Marian; Sarpong, Reginald O.; Soetoro-Ng, Maya; Tierney, John F.; Warren, Elizabeth.

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