

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

**Commencement Address at Lake Area Technical Institute in Watertown,
South Dakota**

May 8, 2015

Thank you so much. Thank you. Congratulations. Thank you so much. Thank you. Everybody, please have a seat. Well, hello, Watertown! It's good to be in South Dakota. I want to thank Governor Daugaard and the first lady. Apparently, Michelle and her, they're on the same wave length when it comes to keeping us straight. [*Laughter*] To Senator Thune, Senator Rounds, Congresswoman Noem, Mayor Thorson, Superintendent Dr. Lesli Jutting—all of you for your extraordinary hospitality.

I am thrilled to be here. I have now been to all 50 States as President, and I was saving the best for last. To the other 49, I hope you take no offense. [*Laughter*] I will say that your tourism secretary sent me a very impressive letter listing all the South Dakota sites that I still need to see. [*Laughter*] And they looked great, but I decided that the first one I needed to see was Lake Area Tech.

So, President Cartney, thank you and the people of Watertown for welcoming me. To the students, the faculty, the staff, I'm honored to be with you here today. And most of all, congratulations to the class of 2015!

I know some folks were a little surprised by me coming here. But there is no place I'd rather be on this Friday afternoon than celebrating with all of you. Although, I was told I should head home before any of my staff end up at the "gravel pit" tonight. [*Laughter*] That's what I was told.

I want to begin with a public service announcement. As long as you keep your school ID, you can still get your Sunday night student discount at B-Dubs. [*Laughter*] I had my staff check on that. And I think it may go down in history as one of my more popular executive actions. [*Laughter*]

So after a whole lot of work, you have a whole lot to celebrate this weekend. This is a proud moment, and not just for you wearing the funny hats, but for your friends and your family and your mentors, your instructors who helped you to reach this day. So let's give the family members and all the people who helped get you here, let's give them a big round of applause.

And I actually spend a lot of time with a community college professor whose name is Dr. Jill Biden. She happens to be Joe Biden's wife. She teaches English full time at a community college in Virginia. So I know how great your instructors can be. And I want to thank one of them in particular. So Dolores Stemwedel was scheduled to speak today. Where is she? I saw her earlier. There she is. She graciously agreed to wait until next year so that I could cut in. [*Laughter*] And I had a chance to meet her. She was completely charming. And I have to say, you guys missed out. She's really good.

Of course, Dolores was not the only one who was surprised to learn that I had asked to speak at your commencement. When President Cartney told his staff the news, apparently no one believed him. [*Laughter*] And Shane Ortmeier, your bookstore manager, said he blacked out for a minute. [*Laughter*] Alexis Stinton, an instructor in your Ag program, said her first

thought was: "That's the funniest joke in the world. We're just a tiny little school in this little tiny town." [Laughter]

And look, she's right. This is a small school in a small town, in a State that is wonderful, but not a huge population. There are schools out there with more students than this one. There are schools with more resources and more history and more name recognition. And frankly, there are schools with stadiums that could fit all of this county nearly four times over. [Laughter]

So the question is, why am I here? Well, you started to hear the answer earlier from the previous speakers. Why would I come to a 2-year college in the fifth-biggest city in South Dakota? Well, the reason is because I believe that in a fast-paced, hyperconnected, constantly changing world, there are few institutions that are more important to America's economic future than community colleges. And there are few community colleges that are as important as Lake Area Tech. This school is leading the way.

Compared with other community colleges, the graduation rate at Lake Area is more than three times the national average. Three times. Within 6 months, 98 percent of those graduates—you—are either employed or continuing your education. The average Lake Area graduate who enters the workforce earns nearly 50 percent more than other new hires in this region. And as has already been noted, since 2011, there's been an award for excellence called the "Aspen Prize." It's basically the Oscars for great community colleges. Only two community colleges in the country made the top 10 every year the prize has been awarded, and one of them is Lake Area Tech.

So this is not an accident. It's the result of a relentless focus on teaching real-world skills that lead directly to a job. In your time here, you've done hands-on work with companies across the upper Midwest. Employers even help design the curriculum. You work direct with the tools and the technology that you'll encounter in the workforce, from car engines to welding equipment to your new MakerSpace, with 3-D printers that were actually built by Lake Area students. And your instructors haven't just taught you new skills, they've helped place you in new careers.

You might think all this attention on job training comes at the expense of great teaching, but if anything, the opposite is true. This is the kind of place where students are on a first-name basis with their instructors. If you call at 10 p.m., they'll answer your call, although I hope you don't do that, because folks need their sleep. If you don't make it to morning classes, they'll check up on you and make sure you're okay. I heard one student who skipped school to go hunting found that out the hard way that somebody was going to check up on you. [Laughter] One of today's graduates, Colin Blume—where's Colin? Raise your hand. Stand up, Colin, just so you—hey, that's Colin. Colin is a big guy, by the way. So Colin—I'm going to quote Colin on this. He said, "You're family, and they'll do anything to help you along the way."

And that sense of mission has been part of Lake Area since this school was founded 50 years ago. And today, it matters even more, that sense that we're a family and that we'll do anything to help each other along the way.

Class of 2015, you're about to graduate into an economy that is fundamentally different than the one that faced the first class of Lake Area graduates over a half-century ago. You've seen a lot of the perils of this economy firsthand: how good jobs and entire industries can vanish or be shipped overseas; how a crisis, because of some of irresponsible folks on Wall

Street, can punish families on Main Street with one of the most vicious recessions in our country's history.

So it would be easy to just throw up your hands and say: "What hope does a place like Watertown have in a global economy? What place does somebody like me have in today's job market?" But instead of looking backwards, you looked forward. You saw doors of opportunity waiting to be opened. And you decided that community college would be your key to unlocking those doors.

Some of you came to Lake Area because you knew exactly what you wanted to do with your lives and you saw that education could earn your way to get started as quickly as possible. And Colin, the young man who said this school was like a family, turned a high school welding project into a business when he was 16 years old. At 18, he was awarded a patent for creating a new type of grain-handling cage. And today, at the ripe old age of 20—[laughter]—he's graduating with a degree in Ag production, a new contract to manufacture continuous fencing in the shop on his family farm, and who knows how many jobs he's going to end up creating. That's the kind of future-oriented focus that we're seeing in today's graduates. And the instructors here helped him make it happen. So we're really proud of you.

But Colin is not the only. From the time she was an infant, Maysa Hackens has been blind in her right eye, and she has only 75 percent vision in her left. Where—is she here? Maysa? Come on, stand up. There you go. There you go. So Maysa is not as tall as Colin. [Laughter] But in high school, she discovered a passion that most people might not expect somebody with her vision issues to be able to pursue photography. And she was really good at it. And she found that Lake Area would give her the chance to complete both a business degree and a photography degree in just 2 years. So now she's going back home, to New Underwood, to run her own business. It's called "How 'Eye' See It Photography." And she's got a website, and she's got a business plan. That's the kind of initiative that built this country. And a little free advertising from the President doesn't help—it doesn't hurt. [Laughter] Hopefully, folks were paying attention.

So community colleges like this one can be a great place for young people to launch a career. But they're also a great place for people who have already been in the workforce for a while and decide they need to change their careers and reach for something better.

So Leanna Waldner—where's Leanna? Come on, don't be shy. She's here somewhere. There she is. Wow. Leanna, you stood up and sat down before I could even see you. [Laughter] Where are you? Come on, stand up. There you are. There you go. So Leanna grew right—grew up right here in Watertown. She dropped out of high school. By age 20, she was working as a waitress, supporting two beautiful baby girls, Lizzie and Farrah, on her own. And that touches me, because I was raised by a single mom with the help of my grandparents.

So after years of low-paying jobs, Leanna decided she needed to go back to school. And it wasn't easy. Some nights, Lizzie would be doing her homework at one end of the kitchen table, and Mom would be doing her homework at the other end. And Leanna says, "I didn't think I'd ever be in that position to walk across that stage and get a diploma." But here she is, about to walk across this stage and earn her financial services degree. And I know there are two little girls here today that are really, really proud of their mom. Setting a great example.

And then, some of you came to Lake Area Tech because you'd already begun a great career, in the bravest way possible. And you figured with a few new skills, you could take the next step. Tech Sergeant Joe Wiskur joined the Navy right before 9/11. Where's Joe? In 2005,

he enlisted in the South Dakota Air National Guard. He helped organize air operations over four deployments overseas, earned two commendation medals for his service. But Joe's mentors told him that if he wanted to keep climbing the chain of command, he needed more than a high school degree. So he came to Lake Area to study aviation maintenance technology. Joe's next deployment is shortly after graduation. But this time, he's hoping to be training the airmen who used to do his old job.

And Sergeant Wiskur is one of 35 servicemembers and veterans graduating from Lake Area Tech today. And as your Commander in Chief, I could not be prouder of you. And I ask everyone to stand and recognize these men and women for their service. Thank you.

So stories like Joe's and Leanna's and Maysa's and Colin's, they are our proof that community colleges like this one are vital paths to the middle class for millions of Americans. In just 2 years, schools like this can change lives, change careers, grow our economy. They can change our country.

All of us are better off when our businesses have access to the best trained workers in the world. All of us are better off when entrepreneurs like Colin and Maysa can boost their hometown economies and make it more attractive for young people to stay. All of us are better off when a parent like Leanna can make ends meet and provide for her kids. All of us are better off when a patriot like Joe can keep serving his country.

So that's why I came here today, to this little tiny school in this little tiny town. I didn't come here to inspire you. I came here because you, the graduates, inspire me. That's why I came here. You have lived through some of the toughest economic times in your country's history, and you still chose to come here—come here and invest in yourself, because you still believe that America is a place where you can make it if you try. That's what hope is, the belief that even if today is hard, with a little hard work, there's something better around the bend.

And it is that promise that has always set this country apart. It's the idea that through hard work and through sacrifice, each of us can pursue our individual dreams, but we still come together as one American family to ensure that the next generation can pursue their dreams as well; that we take responsibility for looking after our own kids, but we're also thinking about somebody else's kids; that if we got a good break and did well, you know what, we're going to turn around and make sure that somebody else gets a break too. It's the idea, as Colin said, that we're a family and we'll do anything to help each other along. And we know that if we're helping somebody else, at some point we may need help too.

Now, I doubt all this was on your mind when you celebrated "Thirsty Thursday" last night. *[Laughter]* But as President, it's my job to think about this stuff. And I think the time you spent here was not only an investment in yourself, but a true act of faith in your country as well.

And that's why I think the country should return the favor. We should have faith in people like you. We should invest in people like you. Our budgets should reflect that we care about you.

That means giving everybody in America the same chance you have here, the chance to earn new skills that lead directly to a good job. And this is an idea that has united philanthropists and companies and educators around a common mission. And at a moment when our politics sometimes can seem really divided, this is an idea that actually has some bipartisan support. From the Republican Governor of Tennessee to the Democratic mayor of Chicago, leaders across our country are laying out plans to put a college education within reach for everybody.

And I'm proud of what we've done to expand Pell grants and the fact that so many young people here are recipients of Pell grants. Because when I came into office, not as many folks were getting them. And I'm proud of what we've done to try to keep interest rates low on student loans. But we can do more than what we're doing.

That's why this year, in my State of the Union Address, inspired by a letter I received from a hard-working mom like Leanna, I put forward a proposal of my own. I want to lower the cost of community college in America to zero. I want to make it as easy to go to community college as it is to graduate from high school, if you're willing to work hard.

Now, I know some of you graduates are wishing we could go back in time and make the last 2 years free. [*Laughter*] I get it. I do too. But if folks in Congress decide to make this a priority, we could do the next best thing and make community college free for an entire generation of young Americans, as long as they're willing to work: keep their grades up, be responsible, graduate on time. And we could pay for it by closing just one loophole for millionaires and billionaires. Just one. Just one tax loophole enjoyed almost entirely by very few at the top, we could offer a quality education to millions of middle class Americans. It's in everybody's interest.

We live in a 21st-century economy that rewards knowledge and innovation like never before. So as a country, we can't afford to let any striving American be priced out of the education they need to get ahead. For everybody willing to work for it, we need to make 2 years of community college as free and universal as high school is today. It's the right thing to do. [*Applause*] It's the right thing to do.

And you know, if that seems pie in the sky, just remember, 4 years of free high school was once hard to imagine, until we as a country decided to give every child that chance. Helping veterans go to college on the GI bill was hard to imagine, until we decided our returning heroes deserved nothing less. Pell grants for lower income students were hard to imagine, until we decided that by investing in their future, we were investing in our own.

That's part of what makes America exceptional. We are family, and we'll do anything to help each other along the way. That's what Colin said.

That brings me back to Alexis Stinton, your instructor who wondered why I would ask to come to this tiny little school, this little tiny town. Where's Alexis, by the way? There she is, over there. You see, back in 2007, Alexis owned a small dog-grooming business. And her husband Nathaniel worked construction. And one day, misfortune hit, and Nathaniel got injured, and he had to leave his job. And then the recession hit, and her small business struggled. "It was so overwhelming and such a low point for us," Alexis said, "I knew I was at a point where life needed to change." And this is the place where it did.

First, Nathaniel enrolled here. He earned a degree from the lab technician program. Today, he works in quality control at the Baby Bel Cheese factory over in Brookings. The next semester, Alexis enrolled here. And she was such a good student that even before she finished her Ag degree, she was asked to help teach classes. And "Lake Area Tech has turned both of our lives around," Alexis says. And today, her life work is to help other students make the same journey. "It's gratifying," she says, "when someone finds their path."

Graduates, I hope that's something you keep in mind as you walk across the stage today, that gratification that comes from helping someone find their path; for making yourself useful not just to yourself, but to others. For you haven't just earned new opportunities with this degree; you've also earned responsibilities along with it.

And, Colin and Maysa, as you open your small business, don't forget to be those entrepreneurs who give back to the communities that gave you so much. Leanna, as you build a better future for your kids, teach them that every child deserves the chance they had, even if they aren't lucky enough to have a mom like you. Joe and all the other graduates here today: Never settle. Keep climbing that ladder of success as you're doing it. Reach back to help other strive to be the best they can be.

That's who we are as Americans. We are rugged individuals. We haven't lost that pioneering spirit that brought many of our grandparents and great-grandparents to these plains. We ask for nothing more than the chance to blaze our own trail. And yet each of us is only here because somebody, somewhere, helped us find our path.

Which brings me to one last story. It's a story about a boy who was born more than a hundred years ago in Wallace, South Dakota, about 25 miles from here. His family didn't have much. But they were able to give him an education because he was part of that first generation of Americans to grow up in a country that believed high school should be available for everybody. And after high school, that boy went on to graduate college, and then he became a teacher, and then he became a mayor, and then he became a Senator. At the time Lake Area was founded, Hubert Humphrey was Vice President of the United States. But he never once forgot what made his American story possible. "The road to freedom," he said, "here and everywhere on Earth, begins in the classroom." The road to freedom begins in the classroom.

So, class of 2015, you have earned the chance to walk the road to freedom and to make of your lives what you will, to write that next great chapter in our American story. And your path will not always be easy, and your way forward will not always be clear. But you have worked hard for this moment. And if you hold fast to that faith in yourself and in your country and in our God, then the greatest moments of your journey are the ones that still lie ahead.

It's your world. Thank you, graduates. God bless you. Congratulations to the class of 2015. And good job, Lake Area Tech! We're proud of you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:36 p.m. in the Watertown Civic Arena. In his remarks, he referred to Linda Daugaard, wife Gov. Dennis Daugaard of South Dakota; Lesli Jutting, superintendent of schools, Watertown School District; Secretary of Tourism James D. Hagen of South Dakota; Shane Ortmeier, director of support operations, Lake Area Technical Institute; Gov. William E. Haslam of Tennessee; and Mayor Rahm I. Emanuel of Chicago, IL.

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