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“Climbing Mountains”

A common phrase you’ll hear from hikers is “making the hike your own” which is a unique way of saying your path is what you choose to make it, and the same can be said of the past four years of our lives and the new opportunities that await us. We all started this journey four years ago and each of us have found our own path to follow. I know that we have all faced our own obstacles and **climbed our own mountains**. While we all found our own paths and hiked our own hike, we have all made it to our next step on the path of life and the start to a new journey.

**Today**, I want to welcome the families, friends, faculty, staff, and trustees that have all helped each and every member of the class of 2020 to reach this point in their hike and **celebrate** the huge milestone we are here for today.

When I came to college, I had a very clear trek laid out before me that I had spent years planning. My path seemed so straightforward and simple, I never expected to encounter any mountains. I learned very quickly that the trek of life is neither flat nor easy. There are no shortcuts. I liken my path in life and in college to one of the best experiences of my life where I hiked 65 miles into the foothills of the Appalachian trail over four days.

My first day on the trail I hiked 12 miles of mostly flat trail making decent time and feeling pretty good about how the rest of the hike was going to go for me... **a lot** like how I felt our freshman year. I experienced some challenges like I am sure you all have at some point, but

mostly this was a straightforward path filled with **new and exciting experiences**. My freshman year I was introduced to a bunch of new friends, new clubs, and new places to explore in beautiful Marietta. I hadn't yet experienced my first mountain.

On the second day, as the trail wore on and I resumed my hike, the path became increasingly uphill until I was faced with my first major obstacle, a massive mountain that stood between me and the place I had planned on camping for the night to stay on track with my goal. **There were no other options**, I had to climb up that mountain. That day I ended up climbing the equivalent of **254 staircases**. In life there are no shortcuts, no easy way we can take to reach our goals faster. College, a lot like this first mountain, has put me up against challenges I could have never prepared for. Sophomore year helped show me that college and all the challenges that came with it were mountains that **I could overcome and conquer**. I know lots of us have experienced adversity, and whether it came sooner or later, we all had to learn how to climb our own mountains and dig deep within ourselves to push on to the path ahead, just like I had to push on to the third day of my hike.

The third day was the **most critical**, and challenging part of my hike and not just because I had been wearing the same clothes for three days; it would also end up being the hardest hike I have ever done to this point. That third day I hiked a total of **24 miles**, and not only did I encounter mountains, but I also was faced with dead-ends, switchbacks, and side paths. Going through college for me was a lot like this day. I have faced a lot of obstacles and changed my path along the way to become the individual I am now. A lot of self-reflection junior year taught me, and I'm sure many of you throughout the course of your college careers, that it is **okay** if our

plans change. I learned that taking those side paths and hiking those mountains can lead you to some of the most **beautiful**, rewarding views, just like **doing well in that difficult class, getting accepted to grad school, or securing your first post-graduate job**. Finding the path and making our hike our own during junior year, and all the time leading up to it, provided a critical turning point for all of us because it meant senior year and the real-world were fast approaching. Junior year may have felt never-ending just like those 24-miles but somehow with grit, will-power, and lots of long nights we made it to the final stage of our college journey.

Nearing the end of the trail, everything seems to pass by in a blur. You forget how heavy your pack is, how much your feet hurt, and that **weird smell** coming from your 4-day old clothes. I hiked 16 miles that day and the thought that kept me going was seeing that sign at the end of the trail saying I had done it! Just like my last day on the Foothills of the Appalachian Trail, senior year has passed like a blur. This year has been a flurry of job applications, graduate school applications, and overall preparation for all of us for what comes next. What **senior year has brought us** is preparation for the next mountain that we will climb, **and** while the year may not have ended the way we thought it would, we still have our cherished memories to look back on and new skills to carry into the next stage of our lives.

I learned from my backpacking trip that **no obstacle** is impossible to overcome and that it is okay when your plan changes because sometimes it leads you to somewhere even better. I have taken this lesson into my life and allowed it to guide me and bring me closer to finding my purpose. Michael Phelps once said “There will be obstacles. There will be doubters. There will be mistakes. But with hard work, there are no limits”, and I can’t help but marvel at how true this

is in both backpacking and as we enter into a new stage of our lives. I am certain that all of us at some point during college experienced easy times and hard times, what sets us apart is that we conquered these challenges, both together and individually, to get where we are today. While I may not have finished on the path I started, I found an even better one that has led me to new opportunities and personal growth. So, **my challenge** to the class of 2020 is to climb those mountains and take those chances even if they change your plans because you only get **one** shot at life to do it.

Now, as the class of 2020 we find ourselves embarking on an even longer, more arduous hike called “the rest of our lives”. What makes this hike different from the one we started in 2016 is that Marietta College and all the challenges and experiences we have pushed through along the way have helped us better pack and prepare ourselves for this new journey. The paths we follow may still be unknown to us and change from the initial trek we mapped out, but I know that we will all climb those mountains and find our purpose. **We may leave Marietta College as graduates, but we will forever be pioneers of our own paths.**