

CLOSING REMARKS, 2019

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Objective: Re-cap weekend conference thematically; connect to themes speakers will have touched upon; inspire students after a ten-hour day to have high spirits and energy; leave students with a sense of empowerment.

Audience: 30 female UMass Women into Leadership Fellows; 10 alumnae; 20 board members; miscellaneous elected officials.

Time: 10-15 minutes

Thank you all for a thoughtful and engaging weekend. Your energy throughout this weekend has been remarkable, and I know I speak for the whole board when I say that I hope you feel as excited and optimistic as I do.

I want to take this moment to thank our speakers and our board members for organizing and facilitating such an affirming weekend. Special thanks belong, of course, to Michelle Gonçalves, the architect of this program. Michelle, you do so much for all of us, and it's an honor to work with you and call you a mentor. It is hard to believe that UWIL – were it a child – would be a kindergartener, and we would not be at this point without everything you do for the program and for our fellows.

As we leave this workshop, I want to comment briefly on three words that I have been reflecting on this weekend. I've chosen these words carefully, as they have multiple meanings. One word can have multiple meanings and, moreover, these meanings are sometimes in tension. The dual meanings behind each idea have manifest themselves in each of you this weekend; my hope for you is that they will continue to do so throughout your careers.

First, I want to discuss with you the word “poise.” Poise connotes grace and elegance; more specifically, being “poised” refers to having composure and self-assuredness. Watching all of you navigate networking events and panels as confident, sophisticated individuals has been inspiring.

Your first panel yesterday was with me, discussing business etiquette. In other words, you got a lesson about how to be “poised” in the context of networking. While it feels ironic to me to be helping you along this path – I, too, am still figuring it all out – my hope is that you feel less mystified, intimidated, or anxious, and therefore ready to let your true selves shine through. That is the manifestation of composure.

But being “poised” also means to be *ready* to do something; to be in the process of preparing oneself for action. This room is full of women poised to take on the world. To roll your sleeves up, to stand up, to meet challenges, and to make change – however change looks to each of you.

Yesterday, you attended a panel of “First Women” in politics, and another on jumping in and identifying opportunities. These women dove in head first, ready, despite feeling nervous, facing

setbacks, and even being confused. It is my hope that you see yourselves in them, and find yourself just as ready – even if you too are nervous, facing setbacks, or are confused – to just go out there and get started.

Moreover, you are going to do all of these things not by stumbling through, but instead with poise. This isn't to say you will be perfect in every moment – you're human, after all – but you have excitement to prove yourself equal to these challenges. You therefore have the preparedness to handle such times – when they arise – with composure.

Second, I want to talk about “character.” Character refers to one's personality or nature, one's disposition or moral qualities, and perhaps one's very ethos. As you have demonstrated consistently this weekend, the caliber of woman in this room is outstanding. You are all so many positive things – articulate, engaging, intelligent, curious – but above all, you have outstanding character. You are, fundamentally, good people.

But the word “character” has a second meaning that almost contradicts its first. Character can also refer to a *persona*. While the definition of character I alluded to earlier connotes something genuine, this alternative definition refers to something constructed.

However, creating a character is not necessarily a bad thing. A number of you played a character this weekend. For some of you, that character was a woman unafraid to walk up and speak with anyone and everyone despite fundamental shyness. You challenged yourselves to move beyond your nature, and you alone created the space for yourselves to do so.

In the future, you will face circumstances where you may have to play a character again. You may struggle, occasionally, in a new situation. You heard many women today discuss the topic resilience amid a struggle and on the benefits and drawbacks of taking on risks. You have your eyes open, and know that you will inevitably face a challenge professionally or personally; you likely already have.

Yet you were encouraged to match those situations, proving yourselves equal to them. You were told to take risks, to rise above, and to show your unflappability despite your challenges. To do this, I encourage you to channel the poise you have, and create and assume for yourself a commanding and capable character, even when you feel like crumbling.

You have your own intensity, cogency, influence, and power. Never forget that all of this resides within you in times where you face challenges. You are all of the tools you will need. Because in the moment you are building yourself up, creating that character for yourself, you are actually tapping your true character – one of greatness, one worthy of every opportunity you will have.

I'll end with a brief conversation about community. A community is a group of people; a singular noun that refers to many people. That plural whole – a unified group working toward a common cause, toward supporting each other, to making a difference – nonetheless comprises individuals.

Each of you has different strengths and qualities – different skills, different talents, and different abilities – that have made themselves known this weekend. This diversity is essential for creating change, and thus an essential component of your community. Every individual has a strength – be that strength quiet or loud – to contribute to your group, including this UWIL community.

Yet the focus on the term “community” is almost exclusively on the number of people that comprise it, and the various qualities, goals, and ideas that draw them together. Community is inherently pluralistic. Community is coexistence and coordination. As individuals, you are all strong and ready. As individuals, you are powerful.

But as a community – as a collection of women, of colleagues, of peers, and of friends – you are a force of nature. Never forget the tremendous strength you will derive from each other, and remember that no one woman need always be an island.

Where do I go from here? How can I make a difference? How can I improve people’s lives? How can I gain them the rights I believe they deserve? Now is the time to figure it out, and you’ve got your people to help you down this path right here in this room.

It’s been my pleasure sharing this experience with you. Now, go get to work.