Good afternoon.

First, thank you President Huddleston, Provost MacFarlane, Chief Faculty Marshal Kinner and members of the platform party for allowing me to join you on the dais for this event.

It is a pleasure to be here with all of you this afternoon.

In fact, more than simply a pleasure, it is a privilege to have been invited to join all of you today to acknowledge the success of our honorees, the students, whose achievements are being celebrated at this Honors Convocation, and so I am genuinely grateful for the opportunity to be here with these outstanding students and with their proud families.

Although it is the students who will be celebrated and called by name—and deservedly so—I trust that they would be the first to note that their accomplishments were made both possible and, ultimately, more meaningful, because of those who surround them.

This includes family members whose encouragement and support brought them to the University of New Hampshire and whose presence today—whether physically here in this building or in thought and in spirit—bears testimony to the importance of this day in their lives and in the lives of their families.

It includes classmates who have been integral to this journey and whose friendship and good-natured competitive spirit also provided motivation...and the occasional, though always responsible, respite that allowed them to find balance in their lives and that permitted them to persevere amidst the rigors of their academic work.

And, of course, it includes the faculty who are assembled around you, who have not simply imparted knowledge, but who have engaged these students as the emerging scholars that they have shown themselves to be; who have not only modeled the processes of scholarship and discovery and artistic
creation, but who have invited these students to collaborate and to contribute as partners in the meaningful work of their respective disciplines, thus sowing the seeds for future harvests.

That such experiences occur as part of an undergraduate education should not be taken for granted as they do not occur at every—and perhaps not at most—institutions. These life-changing opportunities to work at the leading edge of inquiry, to be mentored and afforded the chance to succeed—and even sometimes to fail, which is equally important to learning—reflects a noteworthy commitment by the faculty—and by their staff colleagues—who have nurtured and challenged and inspired these students.

Thus, I begin by thanking all of you for the important roles that you have played in bringing these students to this moment in their lives. Your time and efforts have been well-invested with them and in future years, this should only become more apparent. So please, I would like to take a moment and afford the students an opportunity to join me in thanking all of you with a round of applause.

Now, I must confess that when Provost MacFarlane invited me to speak at this event, I was perplexed. I have attended the Honors Convocation for many years and have always found it to be—one of the most uplifting days of the year on the UNH campus. Still, my comfortable role during those proceedings had always been to announce the names of the honorees. Over the years, I took great pride in that role, because it gave me the chance to acknowledge the success of our students, shining a bright light on their exemplary records of achievement and affording them the recognition that their efforts deserve. In many cases, I was gratified by the fact that the names I called would be those of students with whom I had worked directly during their undergraduate careers. In fact, in one instance, it was a student whom my wife, Maria, and I had raised. Thus, I have a genuine appreciation for the pride that this days brings to the students, to their families and to the UNH community.
Still, in that role, all that was really required of me was to show up on time and to have been careful not to have strained my voice in the days leading up to the event.

But in this instance, rather than simply announce the names of our honored guests—the students—the Provost had actually invited me to speak!

What was she thinking? Perhaps more importantly, what was I thinking when I said “yes?”

In response to the question—“why me?”—Provost MacFarlane had suggested that my work with UNH students over the past 17 years might afford an interesting perspective that I could share with this audience.

An interesting perspective?

Really?

While I have to agree that my work with students at UNH was interesting, and there are probably a few stories—actually a lot of stories—that might fall into that “interesting” category... this probably would not be the place for many of them... and I don’t know if that comes as more of a relief to the students, to their families or to President Huddleston. Regardless, we’ll save those for another time.

Still, over the years that I spent at UNH—and the more than 35 years that I have been on college campuses, immersed in student life—I have worked hard to understand what the experience of college looks like from a student’s perspective with an eye toward improving that experience and to increasing the likelihood that students will find their paths and succeed in ways that are meaningful to them. It is inspiring work and, of course, if I have learned nothing else through this extended post-doctoral study in higher education, it is how unique each student is and so I don’t presume that there is a monolithic “student’s-eye-view” of the college experience.
Yet, I do think that there are some consistent and common themes about the college experience that virtually all students encounter as they progress toward and through college, many of which emerge in the form of questions.

At the outset, there are questions like “Am I ready for college?” or, perhaps for the returning adult students at Granite State College, “Am I ready to go back to college?”

“What should I go to school?”

“What major should I choose?”

“Will I fit in?” or, again, for the returning adult learners, “How can I fit this into my life?”

And for virtually all students, no matter how confident, “Will I be successful?”

Today, for this group of students, those questions have all been answered.

You chose the University of New Hampshire! Good call!

You majored in the discipline that most captured your interest and represented the best match between your passions and your strengths!

You found the place in this community where you fit just fine.

And, of course, by virtue of your presence here today, you have clearly succeeded! So congratulations!

But if you have learned anything from the Discovery Program, you know that there are always more questions to pursue.

For some of you, that next question might be “How can I stay another year? These have been the most incredible years of my life and I’m not ready to leave.” For those of you asking that question, one of the gentleman seated behind me wearing the regalia is the Dean of the Graduate School, Harry Richards,
and I am sure that he would be glad to speak with you after the program about opportunities to
continue your education at UNH. Likewise, Jordan Budd, Dean of the UNH School of Law, is always
ready to discuss opportunities for those with interests in that domain.

But for others among you, another question that might be percolating in your mind is “Was it worth it?”

I realize that this is a potentially uncomfortable question, particularly in this venue.

I also know that this is the wrong time to ask the question.

And the timing is wrong for a couple of reasons (beyond the discomfort that the Provost suddenly might
be feeling for having invited me to speak).

First, the timing is wrong, because you have just spent four—or more—incredibly important years of
your lives in this endeavor.

You and your families have made sacrifices to attend UNH.

And so you’re probably thinking, would this not have been a better question to have asked—and
answered—before that journey began? Perhaps.

Second, now is the wrong time to ask the question because you are probably too immersed in the
moment. Years of surveying soon-to-be-graduated seniors confirms what you, the students, might
already recognize—that this is an emotional time—and the response to questions like “what would you
change?” and “If you could do it all again, would you?” tend to produce answers that have to be
influenced, at least a tinge, by an impending sense of loss. That might be the separation from your
friends and faculty mentors, although between smart phones, skype and social media, perhaps that’s
somewhat mitigated; but technology still can’t fix everything, like missing the buffalo chicken bar at
HOCO, SCOPE concerts and broomball here at the Whit, and various other connections that represent
your respective ties to UNH will be harder to replicate.
So I accept that the timing is wrong for asking the question and expecting answers today from this group, but I still feel a need to raise the question.

And I do so, because in the past several years, the question of whether college is worth it—often asked with an implicit skepticism—has become something of a staple in the media, whether the New York Times, or the Union Leader, or, inevitably and eventually the Huffington Post. It has also become a central theme of the political discourse in this country and higher education has become a popular target for criticism. And most important to me, it has become a more common discussion within families, often juxtaposed with very legitimate concerns about cost. And as educators, I feel strongly that we have a responsibility to participate in the discussion to ensure that it is a factual one and a balanced one that pushes all of us to be accountable for the quality and the costs of higher education, but that also gives due consideration to the value of higher education.

As I said, in recent years, questions about the value of college have become more visible in the media and it has become increasingly popular to characterize the American college experience in some pretty unflattering terms. Books with titles like “Higher Education? (question mark);” and “The Five Year Party” and “Academically Adrift” seem to characterize—or in some cases, caricaturize—both college students and the educations that they are receiving as being only marginally useful. Juxtaposed with escalating costs and accompanying debt, the implication—and the inference that many will draw—is that college is no longer worthwhile.

To my mind, this is profoundly unfair to those students who have worked hard, and who have worked closely with faculty and others who shared a commitment to ensure that the college education they experienced was truly meaningful. And looking to the future, I think that it is also unfair to students and families who might choose to avoid college, predicated on a belief that it no longer has value, because
those students and families who are dissuaded will miss out on important opportunities that can move individuals and nations and the world to a better place.

So I return to the question that these students—and all of us—are asked to answer: “Was it worth it?”

As a story teller who wants to keep an audience’s attention, there is a temptation to withhold the answer and to maintain the suspense, but as a friend, I don’t want to see any of you suffer—least of all, Provost MacFarlane, the author of my invitation to speak with you today, who is now probably asking herself “why me?”

So before I go into a little more detail in support of my answer to the question of why I think that “it” was, in fact, “worth it,” let me tell you clearly that I believe that this story has great potential for turning out well for each of you, provided that you continue to demonstrate the same level of effort, and engagement, and intellect that has brought you to today’s Honors Convocation. More importantly, I believe that your success is vital, not only for you as individuals, but for all of us, because you demonstrate by example what is working in higher education.

I predicate this statement on a number of pieces of evidence. First, I base this view on the substantial respect that I have for this institution and for the colleagues—faculty and staff—who contribute to the substance of a UNH education. Please understand that this is not the product of simple collegial goodwill and glad-handing, but as a practitioner of the ethnographic method, it is the result of years of observation and engagement with faculty and staff—in their natural habitat—as they have supported and challenged and inspired thousands of UNH students (including three of my own) to grow, and to discover and to succeed. One drawback to ethnographic studies and other forms of qualitative analysis is that they don’t lend themselves to concise measurement, to a simple, efficiently communicated statistic, but I believe that the replicability of these findings—across successive cohorts of UNH students—bears out my conclusion.
Second, I look at the framework of a UNH education and I match this framework against the thoughtful structure proposed in the Boyer Commission’s report, titled *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America’s Research Universities*. The work of that Commission, sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation, emerged in response to concerns that research universities were increasingly likely to segregate and subordinate undergraduate education to the research component of institutional missions. The Boyer Commission’s report was intended to provide guidance on the constituent elements of an ideal undergraduate education at research universities in the 21st century. For UNH—where teaching and research have always been recognized as integrally-related—and equally valued for undergraduates as well as graduate students—this report did not require a change to institutional culture or values.

Interestingly, and important in the context of my belief about the quality and value of the UNH education in which these students have participated, among the recommendations from that report were that research universities should make research-based learning the standard, construct an inquiry-based first year, remove barriers to interdisciplinary education, link communication skills and course work, and have that undergraduate experience culminate with a capstone experience.

While this might not be fully familiar to all of our guests, virtually all of the students in the audience will recognize that most of these elements—inquiry courses, writing intensive courses, interdisciplinary capstone experiences—have been key components of their own educations at UNH; however, this is not simply a matter of curricular structure or the inputs made available to them.

If you have followed my words closely, I have tried to be precise, and you will note that I have not spoken about the education that these students have received, because that would imply a passive learning experience. Instead, these students have been active participants and they have made good and constructive use of the framework that has been provided at UNH and have availed themselves of
opportunities and engaged in active learning with their faculty and with their peers. In fact, their energy and efficacy in doing so are significant parts of the reason why they are being honored today.

To provide some additional context, within the past couple of weeks, many of the students we are recognizing today were also participants in the University’s Undergraduate Research Conference. This took place over the course of two weeks, because that’s how long it takes to showcase the original scholarship of more than 1300 UNH undergraduates, advised by more than 325 different UNH faculty members. This includes research and creative enterprises as disparate as that of Chloe Gaudissart’s *Variation in Discourse Markers in the Spanish-Speaking World*, Amanpreet Kaur’s work (with Dina El-Tahlawy) on *Applying the Mortalin Staining Pattern to Determine Whether Calcium-Treated SK-BR-3 Breast Cancer Cells Display Decreased Proliferation Due to the Calcium-Mediated Inactivation of the MAPK-ERK Signaling Pathway*, and Nathan Faro’s work on *Rediscovering Revolutions: The Use of Folk Song in Amy Beach’s Variations on Balkan Themes*. I could go on, of course, because these are just examples drawn from more than 1000 different areas of inquiry and creativity that many of these students—and others like them—pursued in the past year, and it matches what students—many in their very first year—pursue as part of a UNH education.

So, this brings me back to the question: “Was it worth it?”

For these students, based on everything I know about them and about the education in which they have actively engaged, I am leaning very heavily toward “yes,” provided they continue to invest the effort, the intellect, and the engagement that has brought them to this day.

And while this group is exceptional in any number of ways, their success causes me to believe that with the right set of circumstance that includes motivated learners, capable and dedicated faculty and staff, and relevant and engaging curricula, higher education, at UNH, across the University System of New Hampshire, and across this country is—and can continue to be—worth it. And this is critical, because if
we as individuals or a nation give up on education, we relinquish a pathway that has proven consistently over time to be an engine for problem-solving, improving the quality of life and our understanding of the world around us, and creating opportunities for individuals and societies to flourish.

So, for the students, I commend you on what you have accomplished to this point, but encourage you to recognize this not as the destination, because your journeys are continuing to unfold. Instead, take a moment to look back, briefly, at all that you have accomplished and then turn to face your respective horizons and continue on the paths that you are creating for yourselves.

And remember, please send pictures. We are anxious to see where your UNH education, your ideas, and your vision will take you and anxious to see where you, as the next generation of emerging scholars, leaders and citizens will lead all of us.

Thank you.