

Commencement Remarks Prepared for SBA Administrator Maria Contreras-Sweet  
California State University Los Angeles  
Los Angeles, CA  
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(As prepared for delivery)

Good morning class of 2016!

President Covino, Dean Goodrich, faculty, staff,  
platform party, honored guests.

What a joy it is to be here with you on this  
beautiful California morning.

I grew up not far from here in Baldwin Park.

Before President Obama tapped me to serve  
in his Cabinet as the voice for small business  
in Washington, I started several businesses here  
in L.A. ... including a community bank.

My bank was founded to help entrepreneurs...  
especially women and members of minority

communities...to create new jobs and opportunities in the places where they live.

I am who I am because of this place.

I became who I have become because of the lessons taught to me by my family and my community.

And let me tell you, it is great to be home.

When I was five years old, I immigrated to America with my mother and five siblings from Guadalajara Jalisco, Mexico.

I didn't speak a word of English.

My mother worked in a chicken processing plant to give her children opportunities that she would never have.

When I was a young girl, my grandmother back in Mexico would write me letters.

She said that if I worked hard and did right by others, America was a country where anything was possible.

She said, “Maria: You could even work in an office someday and become a secretary!”

Well the good Lord heard her, and her prayers were answered.

I do hold office and I became a Cabinet Secretary.

And so it is a special honor and privilege for me to share this day with you... here in a place that has been part of my own journey.

Family, friends, and you .... our graduates ... who stand here today, ready to launch.

Today, you are a few speeches away from holding that diploma in your hand.

Congratulations! Felicidades! Gong She Knee!  
Today is a new beginning.

A giant leap forward.

A wild jump into the unknown.

It's exhilarating, terrifying and bittersweet...  
all at the same time.

Remember the first time you fought for a parking  
spot or emerged from the Metrolink station...  
carried forward by the growing mob of students?

Remember the first time you were called  
a Golden Eagle?

Or the first time you tasted Eagle Spring water?

It's been quite a journey.

You've worked so hard.

You've sacrificed so much.

Through it all, you've been determined to stay the course...to show up...to do the work.

It pushed your limits.

And made you question yourself.

But you persevered.

When it felt like the earth was moving under your feet...  
and the pressures were too incredible to endure...  
you steadied yourself and found a way to keep going.

Some of you juggled family responsibilities.

Others overcame the challenge of transitioning to civilian life after serving our country.

Still others dealt with the challenges that come with being a student athlete.

Or a first-generation college student.

Or a student with disabilities.

It wasn't easy.

And, yet, here you are.

**The wind is at your back.**

Today, there are many who take great pride in your achievements.

Your family and your friends celebrate with you.

Today is their day too.

Your dream is their dream.

Graduates, please stand up and give your loved ones, those here today and those carried in your hearts... a big round of applause.

Thank you.

Today, you join the alumni of one of America's most diverse universities... a school that welcomes people of every race, ethnicity, creed and national origin.

And whether you're 1st generation or 7th generation or Native American...who were here long before the rest of us...you are part of this place.

You are one amoeba in the ultimate petri dish of the 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy.

And that, graduates, is why I say today...

**the wind is at your back.**

Los Angeles is home to people from 180 different countries who speak 140 different languages.

This city truly is the cultural hub of the Pacific Rim. And this school is a microcosm of that.

This graduating class includes 1,100 different stories that have converged here...  
filling each one of you with different perspectives, experiences and traditions...  
that have enabled you to reach beyond yourself...  
to question old assumptions...  
and discover new ways of being.

While you've worked so hard to master the fundamentals of accounting, marketing and finance...  
the lessons that have armed you with the skills you need to launch your business career...  
you're also walking away with lessons that were taught to you by the person three rows up



or two seats back ... or sitting right next to you. The incredible range of experience here... creates an incredible range of thought... which in turn, creates an incredible range of ideas and ways to solve problems.

Take your fellow graduate, Thomas Lawson, who used his experience as a veteran to start a small financial consulting firm for veterans and other underserved communities.

Or the 2016 Business Pitch winners... Atit Patel, Harsh Patel, Yash Patel and Kevin Shah... who devised an app to help solve a parking crisis in several major cities in India.

Or Andrew Aquino's Drew's List... a hyperlocal textbook marketplace for students by students.

Those ideas were born from shared experience... to solve shared problems.

Multiply that out on a grand scale and you can see how the power of so many different lives has made California the epicenter of our global economy.

Consider this:

California is now the sixth largest economy in the world.

Los Angeles County alone is the 20th largest economy.

In the world.

Our state far outranks the rest of the country in venture capital investment.

In fact, in 2015, we received more venture capital than all other 49 states combined.

We sit in the top five for entrepreneurial activity in the nation.

And we lead the nation in patents issued per capita.

California is the bellwether state.

This is where trends begin.

They flow over to Massachusetts and New York and eventually to the rest of the country.

And across the globe.

All that creativity and ingenuity and innovation?

That didn't just come from our glorious sunshine.

It came from people like you thinking outside the box...reflecting on the experiences of others... growing richer through our differences.

There's an abundance of data to support the fact that businesses do better when they embrace diversity.

Diverse companies are 70 percent more likely to engage a new market.

And companies with diverse leadership are 35 percent more likely to do better financially than the national average in their industries.

It's not just that diverse voices offer different perspectives. Research shows that having to diversity in a group causes everyone around the table to contribute in new ways.

As part of my job, I travel around the world talking about the American entrepreneurial spirit.

And let me tell you that wherever I go, people want to know about Southern California.

They want to hear about you.

The world is out there waiting.

**The wind is at your back.**

Your task tomorrow... when you wake up to your future... is to use that wind to enrich the community that has enriched you.

As my grandmother taught me, bring others along with you.

It's not enough to just do well.

You also must do good.

You all have faced so many challenges on your journey here.

Some of you spent hours commuting just to get here.

Some of you studied in between jobs, and childrearing and taking care of aging parents or grandparents.

Some of you wondered how you were going to make it day to day ... hour to hour.

Those challenges brought you here today.

And those challenges will sustain you as you encounter roadblocks on the journey ahead.

Those challenges will help you continue to overcome and keep moving forward.

The key is to use your experience in overcoming adversity to help others who are facing their own.

Reach back and pay it forward.

That means being an active part of the community you live in...

whether you're a small business owner who sponsors a Little League team or the CEO of a corporation who mentors young people struggling in school.

That means being a role model for others to follow.

That means speaking out ... raising your voice ... continuing to value and learn from the differences that make us stronger.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is --  
What are you doing for others?”

Graduates, remember those words.

It’s not enough to achieve your own success.

Your country, your state, your community are  
only as strong as you make them.

So go out there and seize your future.

Go out there and build great lives for yourselves  
and your communities.

Go out there and create, innovate, invent  
and change the world.

**The wind is at your back.**

This is your moment.

Go out there and soar.