President Massey, trustees, faculty, staff, families, friends, and our soon to be graduates, I am honored to be with you this morning to share in your collective successes and to celebrate your achievement of one of what will be many dreams. I say collective successes because: (1) the Class of 2017 is the largest graduating in the history of the college, with 3,720 degrees to be awarded today; 770 of those degrees are bachelor’s degrees; (2) because IRSC is truly a remarkable college with an outstanding faculty and staff and leadership, earning the Achieving the Dream Leader College national distinction and being recognized this year as an Aspen Prized Finalist and Finalist with Distinction Prized winner; and (3) because all of you represent the future success of this community as you will be (among many roles) this region’s educators, photonic engineers, emergency medical technicians, medical laboratory technicians, nurses, digital media professionals, bioinformatics technicians, environmental economists, film animators, biofuels production technicians, and even major league baseball players, including Steve Pearce, a two-time Baltimore Oriole who realized my childhood dream (until I was 12) to play for the Orioles.

IRSC’s ATD Leader College designation and the Aspen Prize recognition are well earned. IRSC set forth about a decade ago on a completion journey—that is, the college decided that your completion and the intentional design of your experience—from the time you entered the college, through your programs, to inside the classroom, to the design and the offering of academic and non-academic supports including curricular and extracurricular activities—would drive the college’s mission and values. IRSC knows that small details matter; that small steps can change the dance.

Carefully attending to small details is important to success of any type, at any level, for nearly every person and profession. Rock and roll legend Van Halen demanded, deep in his performance contracts, that he have M&M candies backstage, with a clear specification that no brown M&Ms be included. He did this as a safety precaution. He believed it was a way to quickly assess the quality of the staff and the technical quality of a performance venue by seeing whether the fine details of the contract—such as removing all brown M&Ms—had been read and implemented. He checked this by the presence or absence of the brown M&Ms. If the brown M&Ms were absent, he would skip the detailed pre-
performance technical check. He felt confident that the crew read the fine print and attended to every last detail, regardless how small.

Our leading Achieving the Dream colleges attend to the brown M&Ms. It is often the small things that get in the way of your success. This story of the importance of small details reminds me of a conversation I had with a student at Montgomery College who was describing the importance of planning, day to day, for her success at college. She said: “The College looks at retention of students from semester to semester. For me, retention means being here today and tomorrow, not next month or next semester.” She noted that small steps like arriving early to park, not skipping classes, pursuing tutorial assistance, securing child care, being aware of mass transportation options, building a week-to-week schedule of class requirements with time set aside to complete tasks, are essential to success. She was aware that small steps can change the dance.

Her remark, that retention to her is tomorrow, reminds me that although we focus as a sector on success metrics like retention rate, graduation rate, and the labor market value of your degree, it is sometimes not the numbers that matter. It reminds us that there are some things that we just can’t measure.

Albert Einstein said: “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted, counts.”

That’s because behind these numbers and small details are stories. Your stories.

Today, a mother and son will both earn their bachelor’s degrees. One of your oldest graduates, in her 60s, never stopped going back to school and achieves her dream today. It is not easy for a returning adult to walk onto a college campus to upgrade his or her skills after a devastating lay-off; for a single parent to find child care, manage the logistics of taking mass transportation day in and day out, and earn a nursing degree; for a veteran to assimilate to civilian life and pursue her dream of becoming an entrepreneur; for a student first in his family to go to college to navigate through the finance and jargon of college to move onto the stage today. You know these stories. Some of them may be your stories. Your steps—your accomplishments—can change the dance.

You may have gathered from hearing my background, that I’ve spent my life’s work as a fierce advocate for America’s community colleges and the unique role they play in our communities. At the center of our communities, community colleges are uniquely positioned to bring about change, not just in college completion and workforce preparation, but also in helping our communities address stubborn issues related to poverty, racial injustice, and economic stagnation. We know that degrees and credentials change students and their families’ lives. Small steps can change the dance.

As the institutions that prepare the majority of people of color, immigrants, low-income students, and adults for careers and jobs paying family supporting wages, community colleges are built to partner and have the responsibility and the opportunity to work collaboratively with K-12 schools, four-year institutions, employers, and community-based organizations to address rising inequality and persistent unemployment in the communities they serve. The three commencement ceremonies that will be held today puts all those strengths and all this potential on display, through you!

I remember my first commencement. I was in fourth grade. The moment is still etched in my mind. I remember the place, the pageantry, the pride, the energy and enthusiasm. I can still see my dad in his academic regalia. It was his graduation. And, sometimes, when I look back at pictures, I can feel his confidence, his sense of accomplishment exuding in his eyes. That day, I watched my father earn his bachelor’s degree after eight years of night school. He was a young father with three children. At the age
of 26, he enrolled in college, in search of the American Dream and staying enrolled because his GI bill benefits paid for his tuition and books, and what was left over went to put food on the table. I remember my parents arguing about the number of credits he would take, or not take. My mother wanted him enrolled for a simple reason: we needed that extra money each month. His continuous enrollment was most likely why he was able to persist, and graduate. Like my student at Montgomery told me, for many, retention is tomorrow. I know this was true for my father. It may seem like a small thing. Small steps can change the dance.

As I reflect on this moment, here with you today, I understand how transformational it is for all of you. This moment is an earned passage in life, one held in high regard for people who sacrifice and keep their goal front and center. Seeing how this passage transformed my father and our family ignited my passion later in my life to pursue a career in helping others access education and achieve their dreams, one small step at a time. I wanted to change the dance.

The GI Bill was transformational for my father and our family and is one of many transformational programs that our country has advanced over the last 50 years, to ensure that every one of us has access to a college degree, and a pathway to a living wage and a life well lived. Community colleges followed shortly after the introduction of the GI Bill, one opening every day in this country in the 1960s. And your institution was ahead of the rest; IRSC was founded in 1959. Pell grants were introduced in 1972. And in the 2000s, community colleges across the country, including here, started to offer bachelor’s degrees. Now, another movement is afoot and gaining momentum. America’s College Promise, an effort to make community college free, is catalyzing our conversations about how to make post-secondary access even more affordable and universal. Small steps—well, I would say these were and are big steps—are changing the dance. Forever.

And now, 58 years later, IRSC is thriving. Indian River is indeed, a special place. You know it. I know it. It was and is right in the middle of this transformation story, often leading it. Perhaps it is no coincidence that you are known as The River…there is symbolism in that…. and that your mascot is the Pioneer, even more symbolism. Think about it.

So here we are today. Your day.

Honestly, I don’t remember who the commencement speaker was at my father’s graduation. Or at many of the commencement ceremonies I have been part of since then…and there have been a lot! I realize that I am not in an enviable position this morning. However, I hope that I am able to give you one or two thoughts to take with you as you take the next step in your journey…your next step in the dance.

“Today, I dare you to do one thing, just one thing. I dare you to take a small step to change your dance. To change your dance to be present. To be present. I am asking you to focus on the now.”

Commencement speeches typically fall into time honored categories boasting themes of opportunity, possibility, dreams fulfilled, new beginnings, and difficult decisions about next steps. I don’t plan to pursue any of these themes today.

Today, I dare you to do one thing, just one thing. I dare you to take a small step to change your dance. To change your dance to be present. To be present. I am asking you to focus on the now. In learning how to focus on the now, I am confident you will find your way forward, and change your dance.
This is the simple message I hope you will remember from today. Be fully here. Observe your surroundings. Remember who you are sitting next to. Create a picture of this day in your mind that will stay with you. Be intentional about being present. Take a powerful and purposeful pause. Three deep breaths. Think about what inspires you about this moment. What are you most proud of? Who are you most grateful to and for?

Let’s pause a moment to think about that.

You see, my hypothesis is that in being present, especially in powerful moments like today, you will experience joy and happiness, and that presence and happiness lead to success. Presence allows you to live into the answers. Presence builds your self-awareness; your ability to be objective about your context.

I am reminded of the advice of author Annie Dillard, paraphrased a bit for today. She says “How we spend our days (moments) is how we spend our lives.”

Think about that: how we spend our moments, our days, is how we spend our lives. Being present in each moment, each day, will help you change your dance.

Presence is a simple concept. Simple, except that we appear to have lost the ability to be alone with our thoughts.

Today’s college students own an average of seven high-tech devices, and most students have at least three in the classroom—smartphone, laptop, and tablet. I assume you have at least one of these with you now.

Interestingly, one recent study found that students who used phones and texted more often in class showed more anxiety, had lower GPAs, and were less satisfied with life than students who used phones and texted less frequently. A case for this simple concept of presence.


I have another to add: identify your red button or buttons and surround yourself with them. Sheryl Sandberg, in her book Option B, speaks to the classic experiment where people performed tasks that required concentration while being blasted at random intervals by uncomfortable levels of noise. The participants became frustrated and anxious. Many gave up. But researchers gave part of the group a button to push to stop the noise if the noise became too unpleasant. The button allowed them to stay calm, make fewer mistakes. What is surprising is that none of the participants pressed the button. “Stopping the noise didn’t make the difference…knowing they could stop the noise did.”

IRSC surrounded you with buttons. Your faculty and the staff here are red buttons. Perhaps your family is a red button. Or a friend. The red buttons, while rarely used, help you to stay calm and present just because they are there.

And another tip: use being present to build your listening, engagement, and self-awareness soft skills, skills that employers seek and say they can’t find in employees. Now, I know this is a conundrum. Being present, which builds listening, engagement, and self-awareness is the antithesis of multi-tasking. Yet, employers love multi-taskers.

A recent U.S. News and World Report article points out that recruiters scout for talent at community colleges because they know that community college students like all of you are highly motivated and
good… at multi-tasking. You juggle a lot of responsibilities. Most of you work at least part time, many of you have families to care for, and homework doesn’t do itself. Am I right?

“If you can juggle family, working, homework, school, internships—I want you. It’s just as simple as that,” says Maureen Crawford Hentz, director of talent management for A.W. Chesterton Co., a global manufacturing corporation headquartered in Massachusetts. In fact, when given the choice between two equally qualified applicants, Ms. Hentz leans toward the applicant with community college on his or her resume, she says, comparing that student to dancers Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. “Both were great dances, but Rogers did it backwards in heels,” she says, reciting a famous quote. “Community college students do it backwards in heels.” (November 2014 U.S. News and World Report)

Successfully multitasking—keeping all those balls in the air—requires focus, determination and maturity and, I am adding, presence. Presence is a small step that can change the dance.

My final tip, in this era of big data technology distractions, multi-tasking, etc., is that it is important to be in touch with your heart. Being present enables this. I am reminded by a prayer offered at a recent event with Tribal college leaders. The prayer began with a phrase that is appropriate for today: “let me make heart decisions and let my mind catch up.”

In closing…

To this outstanding IRSC community of faculty and staff who have worked tirelessly with these graduates, thank you for all you do, each and every day, to prepare students for success. Your small steps have changed their dance.

To the graduates, focus today on your achievements. Take it all in and celebrate your accomplishments. Breathe in the moments. Be present.

And tomorrow, when you wake up after celebrating, dare to be present. Dare to take small steps to change your dance.

Best wishes.

Thank you.