

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESIDENT TED CARTER

# DECEMBER 2021 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS



UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA

Good morning and welcome to Baxter Arena and the University of Nebraska at Omaha. I'm well aware that you've had to listen to a lot of speeches today, and I'm the last thing between our students getting their undergraduate degrees, master's degrees and their Ph.D.s. I plan to only speak for about three and a half hours, so settle in!

Before I give my remarks, I want to give a few congratulations. Nate and Hannah, congratulations on receiving the Order of the Tower. Nate graduated from Omaha College—now UNO—58 years ago. He's probably the master Maverick in the room today. Travis, listening to your background, all I have to say is, "none of us are worthy." Your accomplishments as a 2005 graduate—and all that you've done from MIT to Google X—are amazing, and you're representing the university so well. Adib, you gave a beautiful speech as our student speaker today. I love the words that you ended with: love, perseverance and hope. We didn't coordinate at all, but I might talk about some of those things myself. I'm proud of all you've done and that you're representing Mavericks from South India.

I also want to say thank you to our regents. Regent Weitz, thank you for delivering the welcome. You and your husband Wally are amazing supporters of UNO, and I thank you for your continued, undying support for this great university. And thank you to our other regents here today, Tim Clare and Jack Stark. Our regents represent all 93 counties of the great state of Nebraska. Eight of them have been publicly elected and they do amazing work.

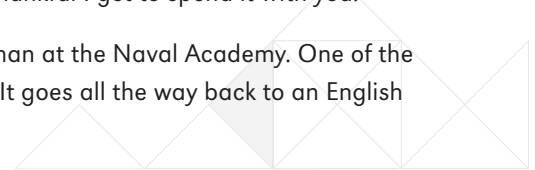
How about Dr. Joanne Li, UNO's 16th chancellor? I could not be prouder. Let's give Chancellor Li a big round of applause.

Dr. Li gave me a very generous introduction, and I'm thankful that she made mention of my time in aviation. I went to Top Gun in 1985, and for some of you of a certain age, you may know that's when they were filming the movie "Top Gun." Yes, I actually met Tom Cruise, whose call sign is "Maverick." How appropriate that after 36 years of going to Miramar, California and meeting the pop culture icon himself that I get to be here and be a Maverick like each and every one of you. It's really a special day.

This day is about a moment in time—and you've heard that referenced many times. Regent Weitz talked about taking in this special moment. Dr. Li gave you 30 seconds to help celebrate. This day is a moment in time that's a celebration for over 1,100 students—and your incredible achievements. I know that you won't remember much I say today, but what you must take away is that this is something you have done.

Today, I reflect on my own time. It was two years ago to this very day that I arrived in Nebraska and began my time as your University of Nebraska President. I was interim for a couple of days and started on the first of January. This is my two-year anniversary of being in this position and I'm thankful I get to spend it with you.

I also reflect on my time going back to 1977, when I was a young midshipman at the Naval Academy. One of the first things they taught us is that time, tide and formation wait for no one. It goes all the way back to an English



proverb in the year 1225, when it was “time waits for no one.” As I look backward, here’s what I’ve come to know: time is important. It’s important that we understand what’s happened in the past so that we can understand where we are—and where we might be going.

The great author and historian Nathaniel Hawthorne, born in 1804, wrote “The Scarlet Letter” and “Seven Gables.” He observed birds on the lakes in Massachusetts where he lived and said, “Time flies over us, but leaves a shadow.” We need to think about what that means—and what it means for us in this day and moment.

As we take a bigger, wider, open look at where we are today, I would argue that we are at a time that our community, state, nation, and world has never seen before. This is beyond just the two years that we’ve been in a global pandemic, one that we are still enduring. We’re also enduring an economic crisis that was born out of the global pandemic. And although unemployment has improved greatly, jobs are available. We’re now living with supply chain management issues, inflation, and costs—and that’s not likely to change anytime soon. We’re having more and more conversations around racial inequities as a nation and as a state—and realizing that we maybe haven’t moved as far forward as we’d like to. The intersection of all these things make us wonder what’s in the future. What will the Class of 2021 inherit? And how will the principles and ideals of love, perseverance and hope carry you forward through it?

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To answer those questions, I think about some of the greatest graduates that have ever been at UNO. Somebody that I’ve become good friends with over the years is Secretary Chuck Hagel, a UNO graduate. He was recently here for a leadership discussion and one of the things he said to the students is, “If you’re going to be successful going forward, you’ve got to get up every day and be about something—have a passion for something.”

That’s important because the challenges I just described are still going to be here. We’re going to have other challenges: We’re going to have to learn how to feed a world of a billion people by the year 2050. Food and water security are going to be challenges. We’re a more interconnected world than we’ve ever been before, which is great, but we’ve got to secure that network. Cybersecurity is a word that we probably didn’t talk about even 10 years ago, and now it’s something that’s on the forefront of our minds.

I got the chance to get to know some of you through the letters you wrote to your younger selves. There were two themes that came out and I want to highlight those as I conclude my remarks.

The first is that you aren’t afraid to ask for help. Many of you have earned a four-year undergraduate degree, and half of that time was spent during this global pandemic. Mental health and the challenges of isolation are your reality. You as students said to your younger selves, “Don’t be afraid to ask for help,” and you’ve done that—you wouldn’t be here had you not. Many of those people who have helped you are here in Baxter Arena, whether it be your loved ones in the stands or our faculty and staff. I applaud you for that. Don’t ever lose the ability to say, “I’m not sure what I need to do right here, but I’m going to ask for help.”

The other theme that struck me, maybe even more importantly, is that you believed in yourselves. Again, your class is unique. Even though we’ve had in-person classes—as much as we could make them happen—you were the class that probably spent the most time in isolation. You are the class that came to the realization that if you can’t believe and trust in yourself, you can’t move forward. That’s why the idea of trust is so important.

As we talk about this moment in time, there’s another phenomenon that’s happening that we should

acknowledge. Leaders and experts in almost every institution that we've held dear, taken belief in, and trusted in this country—from pharmacists and the medical community to elected leaders and the military—we now question. Why is that? Maybe it's because we're so interconnected. We get information through Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, or YikYak. We tend to want to believe what we see through a cell phone rather than listening to our experts. That could be troubling, and I don't have a solution for how we get that trust back—but I do believe the thread that matters the most is what you wrote to your younger selves. If you believe in yourself, that's the foundational beginning of trust.

Secretary Hagel made another statement when he was here speaking on leadership. He talked about the idea that we can have many ideas and don't always have to agree with each other. Let's face it, disagreement is a healthy thing. But because of the lack of trust in a lot of people, many feel entitled to show anger and rage. When they don't feel like anyone is listening, they want to yell a little bit louder. Secretary Hagel talked about the need for compromise. It's the very foundation of our nation and it's what makes our nation decent.

**“TRY TO BE MORE DECENT. ALL OF US HAVE THE JOB OF MAKING OURSELVES PURPOSEFUL FOR THE COMMON GOOD.”**

As you've had many challenges put before you today, I would challenge you to try to be more decent. All of us—the graduating class of 2021, our faculty, our staff, and everybody here in Baxter Arena—have the job of making ourselves purposeful for the common good. And that's about being decent. It's okay to disagree with people. It's okay to have meaningful dialogue. But we've got to do it in a way that we can find compromise and get things done.

Although some of the things I've talked about today sound a little bit doomy and gloomy, I will say this to the Class of 2021—and all students here at the University of Nebraska Omaha—the future is bright. This unique campus is the only one within our university system that serves our state's largest urban population. You are the innovators, the problem solvers, the critical thinkers. You are the ones that will understand these challenges. As you wrote to your younger selves, believe in yourself and know that you are the only reason that you will ever be successful.

I wish you continued success and I congratulate each and every one of you on your achievements. The hope and promises of the future of our nation, our state and the world are going to be brighter because of you.

*You are Mavericks forever.*

