Thank you Anne. It is an honor and a privilege to be Colby-Sawyer College’s eighth president and to follow in the footsteps of Presidents Leslie Sawyer, Eugene Austin, Everett Woodman, Louis Vaccaro, Nicholas Muller, Peggy Stock, and Anne Ponder, our wonderful interim presidents, Marjorie Bell Chambers and Philip Jordan and, my friend Doug Lyon, who served as Presiding Officer in 1995-1996. It is also a pleasure to work with a remarkable Board of Trustees and to be surrounded by dedicated and hard-working faculty and staff. It is also special to be joined today by my wonderful family and friends.

Of course, none of us would be here were it not for you, our fantastic students, who are the center of our academic mission. Thank you! Especially to my wife Susan and to my children, Patrick, Sarah, Aisling, and Jennifer. While it is a special day for us—today, you seniors are the stars. Today, you graduate from college.

It was important for me that this investiture occur at an academic event in which students would be involved and celebrated. It was also important that the college not incur significant additional expense to install the president. Why? Because we have many more student-centered uses for our limited resources and students are at the heart of everything we do. After all and before all, we make every decision by asking how will students benefit! So thank you for letting all of us do what we love. And thank you for letting me share my special day with you on your special day.

Now, I would like to fulfill my presidential duty at Commencement and charge the graduating class. Go out and do great things, great things that reflect well upon you as educated people and as graduates of this very special college. You have achieved much. Now, keep it up. Be bold; be good citizens; be good stewards of your communities, our nation, and our world; be intellectually engaged; and be happy!

All that seems like a pretty big charge; so let me tone it down a bit and tell you a story about a Galligan family member who is not here. I would like to tell you about my son, Patrick. He is now in Budapest, Hungary, as part of a Bates College overseas program; he will return in a week and then, on May 27, 2007, along with my friend Anne Black’s daughter, Windy, he will graduate from Bates College.
So, you, Patrick and Windy will all share 2007 as the year in which you achieved a great thing—you successfully completed your undergraduate studies and will now graduate from college. We all know how special graduation from college is. We all know how much more successful college graduates are today than those who do not attend college. Often that success is translated into how much more money college graduates earn over the course of their lifetimes. But more importantly, as an educated person you will be a well-informed citizen of our democracy, and able to appreciate your obligation to serve others less fortunate than you. With your education, you are better prepared to evaluate, dissect and think critically about all that you read, hear, and see.

You are more likely to attend concerts, art shows, films, and lectures. You are able to intelligently and critically read, write and speak and are equipped to enjoy learning and to continue to learn throughout your life. You are able to learn from others and to teach yourselves. As an educated person, you are prepared to thrive in a diverse community and to appreciate the many different people and cultures that make up our world. Your lives will be better in many ways, only some of which easily translate into dollars and cents. Yes, you and Patrick and Windy are lucky people, whose hard work has paid off. Each of you has worked hard to get where you are and you have overcome obstacles to reach this proud day in your lives.

But as Patrick’s parents, Susan and I were not always so sure we would be here, ready to celebrate his college graduation with him. Certainly, Patrick began life with many advantages. He had parents who loved him and read to him all the time. We told him stories, took him places and got him excited about the possibility of learning. He loved to hear those stories and remembered the details long after the stories ended.

Then came first grade and something changed in him. Patrick became less curious and enthusiastic about learning. He did not always enjoy school and seemed less intrigued by ideas and even books than in the past.

In March or April, Patrick’s first grade teacher summoned Susan and me to meet. She told us Patrick’s reading scores were slightly behind grade level. His teacher thought the issue was probably behavioral and that he would catch up with time. However, she did suggest that we have him tested to rule out learning differences.

The tests revealed Patrick had trouble decoding words and dealing with complex shapes, as well as some developmental differences in his fine motor coordination. To simplify
things—the psychologist said Patrick was dyslexic. We were surprised by the test results, and so were his teachers.

We didn’t know what to do. The teacher suggested that another year in first grade might help, but she was also quick to say the school was not equipped to accommodate students’ special needs. We went back to the psychologist, who told us about a school in Baton Rouge—where we lived at the time—for dyslexic children. The school, Brighton Academy, had a summer program and so we enrolled Patrick for summer school and another round of testing. Summer school and those tests indicated that he might well benefit from attending Brighton Academy, but we struggled with the decision of whether to move him in the fall to this special school or to have him repeat first grade or to just send him on to second grade.

We picked the special school, Brighton Academy, and it turned out to be one of the best decisions we have ever made for any of our children. Within one year Patrick was reading at fourth grade level, novels like The Hobbit and, later, The Lord of the Rings. He was curious; he was happy; and he was smart. He had found a place where he could grow and thrive. He was excited about ideas again and about stories. At the same time he was also getting into Nintendo in a serious fashion. He wanted to beat the games; he wanted to beat Mario and to figure out Zelda. To help him, his mother bought a subscription to Nintendo Power magazine—another incentive for him to read and develop his fine motor coordination. So when people decry video games—I have to tell them: Okay but they helped my son learn to read.

Three years later, at age ten, Patrick was doing magnificently well and I was on the board of the school. At the end of one of our board meetings, the principal asked if I had a moment to talk. Sure, I said. I wondered if I was in trouble—after all, she was the principal. Then, I realized I was not in trouble, but Patrick might be.

“Tom,” she said. “I wanted to let you and Susan know that we think Patrick is ready to return to a mainstream school. He has done very well here and it is time for him to go on. We want to present him with our butterfly award at graduation.”

“Butterfly award?” I asked.

“Yes, the butterfly award is our symbol that he is ready to move on; he is ready to fly on his own.”
I swallowed pretty hard. I am not a particularly emotional person but I was having a hard time there.

“That’s great,” I managed. “I’ll tell Susan.”

And a few weeks later at graduation, Patrick was given the Brighton Academy Butterfly Award, a little statue of a butterfly with its wings outstretched. He stood in front of the room—a ten-year-old boy—beaming. And let me tell you, his father, mother, grandfather, and sisters were beaming too. I don’t think I have ever been prouder of him.

And now he is about to graduate from college. I am proud again. Now he is about to fly on his own again. He is about to fly in a world for which his education has ably prepared him. He is about to soar because he is an educated person with intellectual curiosity and the skills and mind to be a meaningful part of this wonderful world.

Like Patrick, many of you have overcome great hurdles to reach this milestone in your lives. Some of you have also struggled with learning differences, while others have endured serious personal and family issues, the loss of family members or friends, financial setbacks, illnesses, and all kinds of challenges that at times may have seemed insurmountable. You have had long nights, difficult exams, challenging papers, and even compressed spring athletic seasons. Yet you have worked hard and persevered and become the successful and accomplished people that you were always meant to be. Well done!

Friends, you and I are about to fly on our own—you as graduates of our great college, and I, as its president. Today we get our butterfly awards. I know you are prepared and I know you will do great things. Our wings are powered by who we are, by those who have helped us get here, and by the education that will inform and inspire us forever. We are very lucky; now let’s go out and make this world a better place.