Jeff Larson was selected to deliver the graduate & professional studies Commencement address in 2026. His speech titled "What We Carry Forward" appears in full below.

My name is Jeff Larson, and I am a graduating Master of Social Work student. I have had nothing but great experiences here, and I hope you have experienced the same.

Before I begin, I want to briefly acknowledge and thank my wife and our sons. The past two years have been great, and challenging, and I would not be where I am today without their love and support.

The decision to enter Colby-Sawyer's MSW program, for me, was a leap into the unknown. What I initially expected was to gain new skills, insights and credentials, but what I didn't expect, and what may have shaped me most, was how welcomed I felt. This welcoming showed up consistently throughout my experience: Faculty who took the time to know us, and classmates who brought their curiosity and insight into class meetings and discussions.

And the very program itself recognized we were embarking on this educational and professional adventure with lives fully in motion. The value or importance of creating a sense of belonging was the first lesson I will carry forward.

Prior to pursuing my Master of Social Work, I worked in organizations built around structure, performance and outcomes. I learned a lot about how systems function and their effects on leadership and people. Social work taught me something even more important: Organizations have the most impact when they are built in a way that honors the dignity and worth of the person.

This understanding redefined what I thought success was. It is not just the efficiency of process or finances, but equity, inclusion and care. When the people involved in these systems feel welcomed, heard and valued, success can be fully realized.

In this vein, that initial welcoming became an open invitation to fully show up as we are. Not once were we asked to be someone we were not, allowing us to open ourselves to other perspectives, and collaborative learning.

Colby-Sawyer emphasizes interconnections and relationships, values that extend across disciplines and throughout our environments, whether on campus, in virtual classrooms or in our communities. These same ideas are central to the profession of social work, which

teaches us that people are shaped by their surroundings, relationships and the systems in which they participate.

These values came to life in our personal and holistic course of social work education. We had the chance to connect theory and other learnings with our lived experience and those we interact with. It highlighted the importance of critical self-reflection and turning insights into action, growing our base of knowledge and values.

Through this process, we not only grew academically, but also ethically, so that we can challenge our own assumptions, more fully understand how we interact within systems and recognize we have the power to enhance human well-being and work to empower those we interact with.

Education is a transformative process where what we learn changes what we know. The MSW program went beyond this and changed the way I see the world.

Whether through coursework, practicum experience or class discussions, we learned that it is possible, and often more impactful, to approach challenges through a wider lens by considering and acknowledging history, culture and structural inequity.

It is through our continued engagement with these driving forces, along with individuals, communities and systems that we can continue to effect meaningful change.

As graduates, we are stepping into a very complex, uncertain and divided world. Our degrees have prepared us for the realities we will face. This does not mean there will be easy answers and quick fixes, but by being grounded in purpose, values and ethics, we will be able to weather the storms. As Colby-Sawyer graduates, we can lead with integrity and courage and remain accountable to the communities we serve.

I intend to carry the welcome I experienced here forward in my actions as a social worker. I like to think that welcoming is part of the bedrock of social work. Welcoming allows us to build trust, to collaborate and to come together despite our differences, and this can truly help people realize they have a voice and they matter.

Think about a time you felt welcomed and how you may carry that forward as you enter the next stages of your life.

So, my fellow graduates, let us take what we have learned at Colby-Sawyer and leverage it to explore thoughtfully, ask the difficult questions, find our voice against injustice and genuinely connect with others so that we may make a difference in the places it is most needed.

Let us lead with compassion, grounded in values and ethics, and commit to positive change.

Congratulations to the Class of 2026.