Brandon Arvesen, assistant professor of creative & professional writing, is the 2026 recipient of the Jack Jensen Award for Excellence in Teaching. As is tradition for the honoree, Arvesen gave the Commencement address. His speech titled "What Comes Next" appears below in full.

What an honor to be on this stage and to receive this award. If I'm being honest, I'm a little nervous. It won't surprise any of the graduates who have taken a writing or literature class with me, but if you'd humor me for just a minute, I'd like to go off-topic and tell you an old-timey joke my grandfather taught me.

A teenage boy waits until the last minute to ask the girl of his dreams to prom. Much to his surprise, she responds with an enthusiastic "yes," and admits that she'd been waiting and hoping he would ask her. Due to the last-minute decision, each must scramble to get ready for prom.

Our young man sets about getting a tuxedo but is shocked to find a line out the door and around the block — made up (presumably) of other procrastinating young men in need of a last-minute tuxedo.

"Is this the line for a tux," he asks the kid in front of him. "Yeah. I think so." And just to check, they ask the person in front of them. He manages to get a tuxedo — perhaps not the nicest or coolest, but he's satisfied.

Next, he makes his way to the flower shop in town and is once again shocked to find a line out the door and around the block made up of those same procrastinating young men now in need of last-minute flowers.

"Is this the line for flowers," he asks the kid in front of him. "Yeah, I think so." And after a long wait, he gets to the counter and buys the last corsage and boutonniere.

Next, he heads across town hoping to rent a limo and is once again shocked to find a long line of last-minute prom-goers hoping to reserve a car for the big day. "Is this the line for a limo," he asks. "Yeah, I think so." And so on and so forth throughout the day.

It all works out. Our young man picks up his date in the limo, gives her a corsage and they head off to prom, sharing how each scrambled to get ready and how excited they are. They get there, they dance, they flirt, they have an absolute *blast* and after a few songs his date says she's thirsty and asks if our young man wouldn't mind getting her a drink.

Knowing there's a bowl of punch on the other side of the gymnasium, he walks along the perimeter of the prom and is delighted to see that there is no punchline.

I love that joke because of the subversion. It builds and builds toward an expected "punchline," and the anticipation *becomes* the joke. Thank you for humoring me. I feel much better.

I wanted to thank President McCurdy, Academic Vice President Williams, the Board of Trustees, fellow honorees, my faculty and staff colleagues, and (of course) the Class of 2026 for this award.

It has been an honor to teach at Colby-Sawyer College these last four years. My career started in the high school classroom 21years ago, and receiving this award is a culmination of effort and dedication to the craft of teaching. I am humbled.

I'd be remiss to not add my sincere thanks to my wife, Lisa Lance, who is a voracious reader and regularly emails or texts me articles and essays with one line attached, "You should use this in your class." I have followed those directions on nearly every occasion. I've certainly lost count of the times students *loved* Lisa's suggestions and were less enthusiastic about *my* favorite readings. I would not be up here without your support. I love you and thank you.

Commencement speeches are hard to write. There's a duality at play where the speaker, be it a famous actor, politician or the second-most gossiped-about faculty member on Yik Yak (shout out to Mike Stuanton for that No. 1 spot), is tasked to, in equal measure, *celebrate* the achievement of graduating and *offer advice* to the graduating class. In other words, I'm here to congratulate you and give you one last lesson.

Let's start with the former.

Congratulations, Class of 2026! There are over 200 of you in attendance today, and seated among you are Capstone award winners, honorees, graduate students balancing advanced degrees with personal and professional lives, and undergraduates who have journeyed through countless hours of reading, writing, discussing, studying, struggling and (as is evident today) succeeding at the rigorous academic requirements to receive an associate, bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree.

Commencement is a threshold moment. It's a springboard for what comes next, and we'll get to that in a minute, but it is worth pausing to understand just how unique your position is.

There are roughly 30 million college-aged people in America. Of those, only 10 million attend college of any kind. Of those 10 million, 6 million earn a bachelor's degree, less than 1 million do so from a small liberal arts college and no more than one-quarter of a million (that's less than half a percent) do so in New England.

In other words, what you have accomplished and what we are celebrating today is *rare*. Most of the people you meet in the future will not have worked as diligently and closely with their faculty as you have. Nor will most of the people you meet in the future have had the opportunity to forge friendships on top of a mountain with the rest of their college.

Being a college graduate is a tremendous accomplishment. Being a Colby-Sawyer College graduate is a unique achievement unlike any other.

But you're not waiting patiently in your seat to reminisce about the past. You're ready to line up, hear your name and cross this stage. It's my job to use what time I have left to provide lasting advice to propel you forward.

Fortunately, I have written here a singular truth about what comes next and how you should face it. Understand that coming to this truth took considerable time and contemplation and that I don't share it lightly. Why? Because it is earth-shattering and life-changing and once shared, it will reveal *the* secret about adulthood and by extension *all* the adults in this room.

What comes next, and how should you face it?

I don't know.

What's more, nobody knows! And I mean nobody. Pick your favorite faculty member, wisest grandparent, best friend, sassy aunt or anyone else in the room. We don't know what's in store for you. We don't know the challenges you'll face next or how you should face them. That may scare you. I assure you, it scares us too.

Wow. That's not very uplifting, is it? Let's try that again.

Class of 2026, you and I are very similar. When many of you were applying to colleges, I was applying for tenure-track teaching jobs all over the country. Like you, I visited a few campuses, including Colby-Sawyer's. I took a tour, met with faculty, asked a lot of questions, and *hoped* that Colby-Sawyer would accept me.

Like many of you, I moved onto campus four years ago with too much stuff and not enough time to organize it. I didn't know anyone, I wasn't *sure* if I'd made the right decision, and I found myself missing home and missing my family. How had I wound up here?

My first year of college, I was a computer science major. It took me a week to realize I was not remotely good enough at math to actually *do* computer science. I wound up in a class on adolescent development, discovered teaching, majored in English and became a Baltimore City high school teacher and I *knew* I'd retire after 30 years. Six years into my teaching career, I got a master's in fiction and *knew* I'd write novels as well. Six years later, I found myself teaching college courses in and out of a state-run prison and earning a

second master's, now in creative nonfiction, and I *knew* my career had reached its pinnacle.

In other words, I didn't know what would happen next — and I am all the better for it.

Not knowing is scary, but I would contend that the very essence of being an educated person isn't knowing what is coming next but knowing how to approach new situations. In other words, *not knowing* is the entire point of a college education. But you don't have to take it from me.

Take Associate Professor Chery Whipple who wrote, "When a scientist starts a new experiment or technique — such as working with cells in tissue culture — we start by setting goals/making a plan/writing a protocol, then we break the goal down into many small steps."

She then added, "Two things are certain: 1. Things will not go exactly as planned. 2. That is OK. You will learn something new and grow in the process."

Assistant Professor Andrew Cahoon adds, "The lesson from physics is that the thing you cannot know might teach you more than the thing you know well. Uncertainty and knowledge are not opposites. They work together. If I don't know something, I can study it and gain satisfaction from learning about it. If I can't know something, I might be able to learn something even deeper."

Prefer a social science take? Assistant Professor Mike Staunton offers this: "In sociology, we often think of the world through two broad lenses: the objectivist lens and the constructionist lens. To the objectivist, reality exists 'out there' waiting to be encountered. From that view, the unknown is objectively real, and it's scary when it's coming right at you. But, to the constructionist, reality is something continually created and shaped by our actions and interactions. From that view, the unknown is not something you have to face — it's something you help to create. There's a lot of hope and opportunity in that."

Perhaps you can relate to Professor Todd Coy's advice: "Cognitively reframe the 'unknown' as chances to explore and grow. The brain treats the unknowns as a danger resulting in a physiological stress response. This narrows perception and focus, thereby potentially leading to missed alternatives. Shift to "What can I learn?" This lowers stress response, boosts curiosity and openness, and turns uncertainty into a potential rewarding information gathering, growth opportunity."

"From a nursing perspective," Assistant Professor Arianna Anton adds, "Stepping into the unknown is deeply human. Every day we meet people in moments of vulnerability, transition and uncertainty, and often, we are right there with them, not fully knowing what comes next. Some of the most defining moments in our careers (and in our lives) come

from when we don't feel fully ready — when the path isn't clearly mapped out or unfolding exactly as expected. Sometimes the most important thing we can offer, whether to a patient, their family or ourselves, is the courage to show up, even when the path isn't clear or smooth."

You may find yourself thinking, "Brandon, you said none of these adults know anything! Why would I listen to them now? Why did I listen to them for the last four years!?"

I'm not saying advice is meaningless. We can't tell you what will happen next, but we can share what we did when we were where you are now. All of us have stood on lines before you and learned from those experiences.

But it isn't enough to take our advice as gospel. For what we know comes from who stood in front of us, and that person from another, and so on. Take in advice, ask for sage wisdom, but understand that fundamentally it is up to you to face unknowing and more so up to you to decide what you do next.

So, when someone asks you what comes next, remember it is not only OK but representative of your education to say, "I don't know."

Where are you going to live after graduation? I don't know.

Are you going to move in with your boyfriend/girlfriend? I don't know.

Where do you see your career in five years? I don't know.

BUT... I can figure it out.

You may feel tempted, then, to prepare for what comes next by creating logical expectations — a roadmap of what you *should* do next. I understand that temptation but let me be clear that had I done what I *should* have done in *my* career, I would not be standing on this stage right now.

You stand on the precipice of immense change and infinite potential for both good and bad. I don't know what is going to happen next, but I do know that life isn't waiting on a series of lines that lead to where "you're supposed to go."

Yes, the unknown is scary, but you are prepared to reason, think and create your way through that fear. How do I know that? Because I know that you are smart and talented, and well-taught to do so.

You will be challenged a day, a week, a year from now. In the decades to come, you will face uncertainty and doubt. But I want you to hold on to this moment — when you sat patiently anticipating what comes next, waiting for me to finish speaking to close this chapter of your life and start the next one — and use it when you're facing the unknown.

I want you hold fast to this advice when you feel overwhelmed, or when you think your career isn't where it should be, or you get passed over on that promotion you *know* you deserved, or when everyone else's relationship seems to be progressing faster than yours, or when you're confident you're the only person not taking amazing vacations or building a family or doing "the next step" of adult life.

Remember: This is your life. It is not a series of right or wrong places to wind up. It is not a list of lines to stand on.

Instead, close your eyes, breathe and repeat:

This is my life. There is no punchline.

This is my life. There is no punchline.

Thank you.