

President Kelly, Provost Danilowicz, members of the FAU community:

I am honored to be here today alongside so many talented individuals and I warmly congratulate everyone for the amazing accomplishments that are being highlighted today. I want to give thanks to the student committee who trusted me with this honor, and I want to express my gratitude to my supportive colleagues at the College of Social Work and Criminal Justice. I also want to thank my family for their support, particularly my husband, who patiently lets me practice lectures on him, and brings me cups of tea during marathon zoom meetings.

I am a social worker at my core, as an academic I still fancy myself a practitioner - education and research are simply my macro strategies to change the world. I absolutely adore teaching and working with students, so this award means more to me than words could adequately express. Still, I am here giving a speech, so I have been reflecting on what words will have to suffice. To that end, there are three things I want to share with you all today: seeing challenges as opportunities, the importance of considering the “so what”, and planting seeds.

To say this year has been a challenge is an understatement. It is hard to feel that sense of community when we cannot physically be together. Many of us have felt isolated, scared, sick, or grieving over this last year- it can be hard to find meaning in so much discomfort. The way we frame things in our minds can significantly alter our reactions and interpretations of them. I often encourage my students to consider how the way we see things shapes our experiences and perspectives as we move through life. For example, a dog can be seen as a friend or threat, depending on whether you've ever been bitten. I keep this in mind when I meet people with very different opinions and perspectives than me. I consider what may have shaped their reality to make it so different from the one that I hold. Sometimes, I share my experiences to help present an alternative “reality”, other times I find that I must be flexible in my own views. After all, in

educational settings, the point is to expand our thinking and open our minds- to grow and shift as we incorporate new experiences and information. With that in mind, today I want to share the power of seeing challenges as opportunities. The word “challenge” sounds intimidating, by definition it is a difficulty. An “opportunity” however is an open door that we can walk through, and hopefully find ourselves stronger on the other side. This year, I have found opportunity to explore my virtual classroom strategies, as well as opportunities to support students during a difficult time. Framing the past year this way doesn’t remove the difficult components, but it allows me to highlight growth and strengths while overcoming barriers and learning new skills. I hope you all can see benefits to approaching the next chapters of your life as opportunities, intimidating as they may initially seem.

In thinking of the power of framing thoughts, I’m reminded of one of my professors back when I was in school. I would be excited about a particular research finding, some sort of statistic, and as I shared it, she would ask so what? In other words, why does this matter? What makes this important to people? This mental exercise shaped me as a researcher, and I have carried it with me as an educator. In the classroom I try my best to connect my course material to the world. After all, classrooms are a place to explore society and get excited about how to save the world, improve it, and help the people living in it. This year though, we found ourselves in virtual spaces, often isolated, and navigating classes in the context of the pandemic. It was hard.

And so I pose the question- “So what?” The last year has given us many lessons we can carry with us, as things (hopefully) return to normal over the coming months. We learned how quickly things can change, and the importance of being flexible in adapting to situations. We learned to be compassionate towards ourselves, and how to be creative in how to work and socialize from a distance. I do not intend to minimize the difficulty of the last year, however I do want to

highlight that all of us here demonstrated our ability to adapt and rise to the occasion. Students- I am in *awe* of the work you put in to finish your degrees with all that has gone on in the last year. Your determination and dedication to your education is impressive alone, but then to also finish with Honors- you are inspiring. I hope that moving forward you all will continue to recognize that resilience in yourselves, how hard you worked to make it here, and the quality of your work despite all challenges. So what has the last year shown us? That you have the capability to be a leader even during discouraging times, and that you are resilient. On my own difficult days as an educator, I remind myself of your strength and energy, and it keeps me motivated and eager to come to class to work with you.

We grow from our own experiences, and we shape realities and experiences for others. In this way, sometimes the “so what” is that we are planting seeds. We may not even realize how much something has shaped us until months or even years later. For me, one of the most pivotal moments in my life was deciding to offer a man experiencing homelessness some ice cream after seeing him get harassed by a group of teenagers. We sat on the sidewalk with ice cream, and we spoke for over an hour, and I thoroughly enjoyed speaking with him. It did not seem like a transformative experience at the time, I just left that evening with a new understanding that people who are homeless are very much the same as people who have homes. Cut to three years later, I was becoming interested in social work, and I remembered the day with the ice-cream and decided to volunteer with an agency in homeless services. Even as just a volunteer, it quickly became apparent that I had found my passion, that I had found my path. I became interested in research to better understand how to end homelessness, and I found myself called to teaching, so that I could share my passion and hopefully encourage students in my classes to consider work with those facing a housing crisis. I’m not sure if I would be standing here today if I had not met

that man on the sidewalk all those years ago. I share this to showcase how a single moment can have a ripple effect, or perhaps better aligned with my metaphor, can plant the seed. It took three years for that seed to germinate, but something blossomed within me that drives me to this day nearly 20 years later.

We all carry around a bag of metaphorical seeds, and if we are aware of this, we can be intentional of what we try to plant in this world. I am constantly inspired by the stories, dedication, and passion of the students at FAU and the faculty and staff who support them, and one of the most rewarding and nourishing parts of this job is to see those seeds sprout and grow. Every person here has the power to make tremendous change, and I encourage you all to consider how to best use that power and recognize the changes and moments that have shaped you. Imagine the possibilities when we are mindful with what we sow into this world, and we take time to nurture the passions growing within us.

In closing, I want to again express my gratitude for this honor, the opportunity to plant seeds here at FAU, and feel myself grow alongside so many amazing scholars, educators, and students. I would like to dedicate this award to my students, past, present, and future, because you all have shaped me as an educator, as a social worker, and as a person. Teaching is a privilege, and it is an honor to join each of you for part of your journey. May we all continue to grow.

Thank you.