

College of Southern Maryland Celebrates its 21st Winter Commencement

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La Plata, MD - The College of Southern Maryland (CSM) honored 508 candidates for 465 degrees and 255 certificates during its 21st Winter Commencement Jan. 16, 2020, at the La Plata Campus. The degrees and certificates spanned 64 programs of study.

Of the students earning recognition, 133 were from Calvert County, 166 were from Charles County and 165 were from St. Mary's County. The majority of degrees, or nearly 31 percent, were in the field of arts and sciences, nursing and general studies. General study transfers, emergency medical services – paramedic, advanced accounting and cybersecurity were the primary certificates awarded.

The graduates ranged in age from 19 to 62. Of the associate degree candidates, more than 18 percent graduated with honors.

"Every student who is graduating today has had to overcome challenges to get to this point," said CSM President Dr. Maureen Murphy who offered the first of several congratulatory remarks to the graduates. "Limited finances. Medical problems. Juggling family or work responsibilities. No goal is achieved without some struggle, some challenge to get beyond.

"All of our students are an inspiration to all of us," she continued. "Many have completed their studies while working, raising families, and volunteering in your community. That is what makes our graduates so special. Your determination and persistence have paid off. We hope that the learning you were a part of here at CSM will help you fulfill a lifelong sense of purpose."

'Be a Doer, not a Dreamer'

Next, Faculty Senate President Dr. Sarah Merranko urged the graduates to 'ditch the dream and be a doer, not a dreamer.'

"While dreams are wonderful," she continued, "in fact, at times they may sustain us and give us comfort when we have nothing else, they can also prevent us from doing the actual work that is necessary. We all know those people who say—one day I'll start that business—or solve that problem—or build that building, write that book, earn that degree and so on. True success is achieved by making dreams come to pass. The people who achieve the loftiest goals, the biggest successes and realize the greatest achievements are the people who wake up, take action and make a plan while others merely dream. Our world needs new ideas and bold leaders who can come up with them. We need dreamers, but dreamers who are dedicated to getting things done." (Read [Merranko's entire speech](#).)

CSM is no longer a place you 'go to,' it is now a place you 'come from'

As keynote speaker, Executive Director for the Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division – or NAWCAD – Leslie D. Taylor talked about the power of learning and gratitude and the grace and growth that comes with success and failure.

"I was hired by the Navy for my engineering, math and physics skills and quickly began to connect with my work and just as importantly my colleagues," she shared. "I learned quickly that nearly all things are done on a team and 'likeability' matters. Be the colleague who everyone wants on his or her team. Be the employee every boss wants to tap on the shoulder to do more and more, because they simply know that you not only have the skills, but that you can work with others."

Taylor recommended the graduates actively seek out multiple mentors.

"It does not have to be the same person for every stage of your career," she advised, "but it should be someone who knows you and your workplace. Allow your mentor to take the gloves off. Ask them to truly advise you on how to improve on not only the things you do well, but the things they see in you that might be career inhibiting."

Taylor also reminded the graduates that before reaching the highest summits of success, Steve Jobs, and the inventor of Post-It Notes were either fired or failed. "J.K. Rowling, who as an unemployed, single parent, and – as she said – 'as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain without being homeless' – didn't give up after being rejected by almost every major publishing company in the world," she added. "Can you imagine never having read about Harry Potter?"

"On joyful days like this, it's easy to forget the difficult days, the struggles, the stumbles, the disappointments, you have experienced," she said. "But, it's important that you remember that those difficulties are what got you here to today. You made it through. By going through them, you grew up, became stronger, and learned how to deal with demanding times. You now have courage and confidence to weather what life may throw your way."

Taylor told the students that "CSM is no longer a place you 'go to,' it is now a place you 'come from.'"

"And finally," she offered. "Remember to make your bed, eat your vegetables, and call your mom and dad. Yes, call, not text. You are here because of the support, care, and love of your parents, grandparents, guardians, families and friends. Make sure you stay in touch with them and give back to them." (Read Taylor's [entire keynote address](#).)

'We Believed We Could, and We Did'

CSM Student Speaker Shekera Grayson, of Lexington Park, earned her AAS in business management and will be transferring to University of Maryland Global Campus in February to pursue a bachelor's degree in management studies. A lifelong resident of St. Mary's County, she is a single mother of four children, ages 9 to 15 years old, and frequently volunteers with her church and the local chapter of the NAACP.

She takes pride in the five years it took her to earn her associate's degree as well as certificates in business management, and basic and advanced accounting; and letters of recognition in business management and financial office assistant – while balancing life's demands. In fact, she said the best part about her journey at CSM – and most difficult – was juggling her academic goals and her job as Medstar Medical Group Practice Manager with her personal life.

"My desire to learn, and set a good example for my children, kept me going," she shared. "It was hard, but it was worth it."

Her four children were on hand Thursday to cheer her on as she addressed her graduating class as the student speaker.

"Though we all come from different walks of life and each of our journeys to higher education differs, we all have one thing in common: We believed we could, and we did," Grayson told her class, before having them stand and join her in repeating their commonality. "We believed we could, and we did!" chanted the class with rousing applause.

During her time at CSM, Grayson was the recipient of the CSM Alumni Scholarship, the Jane Hale Sypher Scholarship and the Eleanor Loretta Alvey Scholarship – all of which, she said contributed to her success.

'Never Give Up on Your Dreams'

In 2018, everything about Kara Gilbert's personal life was changing. The Prince Frederick woman shared that her marriage had ended abruptly and she was feeling "hopeless and broken" when she was extended the invitation by her employer – Exelon – to attend the [Calvert County Chamber of Commerce Women 2 Women](#) Conference being held at CSM's Prince Frederick Campus.

Gilbert said she was assigned to a table with women of many backgrounds and careers and amongst them was CSM Special Project Director Lydia Williams.

"The guest speaker requested for each person to share a dream with those seated at their table and while I cringed at the idea, I reluctantly shared my desire to complete my degree even though it had been more than 15 years in the making and something I gave up on years ago," shared Gilbert. "I'll never forget Ms. Williams holding my hand and telling me that my dream is attainable and that she believed in me. It was at a time when I didn't believe in myself."

Williams and Gilbert began a friendship that day that guided Gilbert to her classes at CSM and to a "Completers Grant" to assist her with tuition. Gilbert tackled her classes with fervor to obtain two AA degrees – one in arts and sciences and one in general studies, as well as earn a certificate to transfer to a four-year institution.

"Ms. Williams helped me to relay a very important message to my three children, and that was to 'never give up on your dreams,'" Gilbert shared. "Her compassion for my success was written within every email checking in with me for an entire year. It was not just empowering, but such a blessing – and the world is simply a better place with Ms. Lydia Williams in it."

Youngest Graduate

Being one of the youngest to participate in commencement was nothing new for CSM's youngest graduate Neko Ennis, 19, of Brandywine. He also graduated one year early from Thomas Stone High School in 2018 and as his high school valedictorian.

He said when he first graduated from high school, CSM was not his first choice for higher education. But today, he can't imagine having attended anywhere else.

"When I graduated high school early, at the top of my class, CSM was not particularly on my radar," he admitted. "With only one month until school let out, I applied to numerous schools and as application portals began to close and the finances of college became apparent, I realized that the College of Southern Maryland could be a great option for me. Now, after unveiling the opportunities CSM offers to its students, I would not have had it any other way."

Ennis said he was able to explore his interests "affordably and quickly obtain a powerful degree which I have utmost confidence in." The 2019-2020 CSM La Plata Campus Student Association president said he suggests CSM to every high school graduate in the area.

He shared that he is particularly thankful for two people at CSM for helping him succeed.

"I was lucky enough to be granted [the Nyce Annual Scholarship](#)," he said. "With [the scholarship] I was not only able to find security in funding my studies, but also security in the fact that others had confidence in me, too."

He said he also credits CSM Math Division Chair Dr. Stephanie McCaslin for his success.

"Dr. McCaslin possesses the most pure passion for student success, inclusivity and kindness I have ever known," Ennis shared. "From the moment I reached out to her, she guided me through not only the confusion of college but also the struggles of my life. Her drive among many others here at the college is what makes this institution the amazing place it is."

The business administration major said he plans a career in finance after finishing his bachelor's degree online while concurrently chairing the finance and accounting committee for Adax LLC, a WOSB focused on inclusive government contracting. Ennis also works as a student assistant in CSM Financial Aid Department.

Nursing Recognition and Career Changer

Adrien Seaton, 60, of Waldorf, left her career in finance 20 years ago to raise her children and didn't think beyond her tasks at-hand about returning to the labor force until her father died about six years ago.

"When I saw my father going through his medical processes," Seaton shared. "I was inspired by the nurses who treated him. They made a tremendous difference in his life and in our lives, and I decided I, too, wanted to be a nurse and give back."

So four years ago, Seaton enrolled in the CSM nursing program with the goal of adding an associate of nursing degree to her bachelor's degree in finance from the University of Colorado.

She graduated with high honors Thursday and earned CSM Health Sciences Division "Academic Achievement in Nursing" for maintaining the highest GPA in her nursing class.

"I was actually really excited to hear this news," she said. "I worked really hard." She credits the caliber of CSM's other nursing students for keeping her motivated.

"Nursing students are wonderful people," she said. "They are very accepting and truly care about people; and thanks to professors like Turner Coggins and Margaret Bolton my classes were interesting and challenging."

Alexandra Esser, 22, of Huntingtown, joined Seaton in receiving accolades when she was awarded the CSM Health Sciences Division Achievement in Nursing Award.

Esser graduated from Huntingtown High School in 2015 after participating in the Calvert County Public Schools (CCPS) Career and Technology Education Program for nursing. [CCPS and CSM have several articulation agreements](#) in place to jump start higher education for students interested in pursuing either an associate degree (A.S.) or an associate of applied science (A.A.S.) degree. Esser also worked at [CalvertHealth](#) in the cardiac unit where she said she met a lot of people who graduated from CSM and talked highly of the program – so attending CSM was always her plan.

"I was thrilled to hear I had earned the nursing award," Esser shared. The annual Achievement in Nursing Award is given for demonstrating academic achievement, clinical competence, community service and leadership potential.

Esser, together with classmates Leinna Haines and Anna Waller, created the "Scrub Network Program" at CSM last year to provide nursing students peer counseling.

"Basically, we assigned senior nursing students to all incoming nursing students for peer support and we also get together for bonding and fellowship each month," she explained. "We have a lot – and really great – advisors, but we wanted to set up a peer group to help each other navigate this program at a different level."

Esser, who is currently working at Calvert Hospice, plans to attend the University of Maryland to advance her nursing skills and pursue a career in pediatric oncology.

Lois DiNatale Receives Distinguished Service Award

The CSM Board of Trustees honored fellow trustee [Lois DiNatale](#) with the Trustee Distinguished Service Award. The honor recognized DiNatale's service of two full terms from 2009 to 2019 and her continuous service currently until the new appointment is announced by the governor's office.

Appointed in 2009 by then-Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley to serve as a CSM trustee, DiNatale became a valued trustee representing Charles County within the tri-county regional board.

"Recently retired, Lois had an impressive career as a Navy civilian with over 33 years of experience as a senior subject matter expert in the environmental and explosives safety fields," shared CSM Board of Trustee Chair Ted Harwood. "In her most recent assignment, she served as the Navy's Operational Ranges Environmental Sustainability Program Manager for the Chief of Naval Operations."

She remains active in the community and many organizations have benefitted from her service including in her roles as a past president of the Optimist Club of Hollywood, board member and chair of a local Southern States Cooperative Advisory Board, and as a member of the Masons.

"Lois has made significant contributions to the board participating and chairing many committees; her leadership, commitment, keen insight and passion for the students, staff and faculty has helped to ensure that governance of this institution operates at high standards in order to best uphold the mission of the college," Harwood added.

DiNatale earned a bachelor's degree in liberal arts from the University of Maryland and a master's degree in environmental science from the University of Maryland Global Campus. She is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in education from The George Washington University.

Latasha Gatling Receives Faculty Excellence Award

Latasha C. Gatling was selected to receive the 2019-2020 Faculty Excellence Award Honoring Adjunct Faculty. This award recognizes outstanding contributions to teaching, professional development, the CSM mission and the community at-large.

Gatling is an adjunct professor, teaching history in the Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education Division since 2006. Described as a dedicated and innovative instructor, she was recognized by her colleagues for her ability to use multiple methods to engage students and she developed the college's first hybrid history class.

"LaTasha has been, in every way, an asset the history program, eager to support our students and faculty," wrote [CSM Humanities Coordinator Dr. Christine Arnold-Lourie](#) in Gatling's nomination. "She has been with CSM for over a decade, during which time she has taught all five of our history survey courses, in every platform. Her work, however, has gone beyond simply teaching classes. She is a dedicated and innovative teacher, using multiple methods to engage students; I have observed her classes and her students are clearly learning and enjoying the work. I cannot think of a better recipient of this award."

According to Merranko, a woman who had previously been a student of Gatling reached out to Gatling via email last fall and wrote:

"Many years ago I was a student of yours in History 1031 at the College of Southern Maryland during which time, I shared with you how your class impacted me in a lot of ways. Needless to say, I am now teaching social students in a high school environment. I am sitting at my desk and looking at my students and I thought of you. All I know is you were there for us and what you shared with me stayed in my heart all these years."

Within the community, Gatling serves on the board for the Historic McConchie One-Room School, and has been a contributor to the Teaching Professors Conference as well as to the Association of Faculties for Advancement of Community College Teaching (AFACCT) conference. Gatling received her bachelor's degree from Bowie State University and her master's degree from Morgan State University. In addition, she has completed CSM's Faculty Adjunct Certification Program, gaining Level III certification.

To view photographs of CSM's 21th Winter Commencement, visit <https://csmphoto.zenfolio.com/20jograd>.

For the listing of graduates, [click here](#).

