Graduates, as you reflect on your achievements and think about your road ahead, I want to share a brief message with you before we get to the part of this ceremony in which you are most interested – the conferring of degrees.

You came to CSU Bakersfield from different cultural, experiential, and educational backgrounds. Many of you were first-generation college students. You earned various undergraduate degrees. You have completed different master’s degree programs. You took different pathways and time frames to get to this point. You have different life stories. We heard many of your remarkable stories during the seven pre-commencement convocations, honors and recognition programs and receptions. Those very human stories reminded us of why we are here – to provide access to quality and affordable academic programs and co-curricular experiences that are transformative; that make significant differences in the lives of our students, their families and our communities. All of you have one thing in common – your commitment to the achievement of your educational goals. And you have learned from each other, as well. You epitomize a significant component of our vision of excellence and diversity.

As a class, when you enrolled in your masters programs you had various goals you wanted to achieve. Some of you wanted to gain more knowledge and skills so you could become your very best in your current position. Many of you had a goal of moving up the ladder in your current organization, while others planned to prepare for new opportunities in different organizations.

Still others wanted to re-tool to move in a different direction from your current career or position. For example, many individuals who have spent their careers in corporate America worrying about bottom line profits decide they want to “give back” and do something more personally meaningful such as “hands on” engagement in education or community services.

For most of you, your goals included using your education to achieve both personal and professional gains (a private good) while also wanting to make a difference in some sector of our society (a public good).

For decades in the united states there has been a debate about whether higher education is a private good – that is, it solely benefits the person who gets the education – or a public good – where the state or larger society benefits. That is not simply an academic question. The answer has implications for who should pay the cost of public higher education, or at least who should pay the larger share – the individual or the state.
California answered that question with the passage of Senate Bill 33, the legislation that created the master plan for higher education in California in 1960, known as the Donahoe Higher Education Act. When then-Governor Pat Brown signed it into law on April 27, 1960, he called it “The most significant step California has ever taken in the planning for the education of our youth.”

The master plan created the California state university system by putting then-existing separate state colleges into a single system. It also specified the roles of the CSU, the University of California, and the California Community Colleges. The fundamental premise of the master plan was that higher education is a public good.

Therefore, there was the promise or “social contract” that a low-cost higher education would be available for every Californian prepared to pursue it. For decades the state legislature provided the funding necessary for the promise of the master plan to become a reality.

That historic commitment has not been sustained over the last decade or so and that situation is getting worse.

For example, the reduction in state support to the CSU for 2011-12 (this year) was $750 million. The governor stated in his May revision to his 2012-13 budget proposal that if his tax initiatives on the November ballot are not passed by voters, that would “trigger” an additional CSU reduction of $250 million. That would be a total reduction of $1 billion over two years, or a loss of 40% of the state support to the CSU. Similar reductions are proposed for the UC budget, and the California Community Colleges have seen dramatic reductions in their budgets as well. As state support has been reduced, student tuition and fees have increased significantly in all three segments of public higher education.

Of course, I am not suggesting that higher education should not get its share of budget cuts. Instead, I am suggesting that a 40% reduction is too much, and evidences a lack of priority on higher education. It represents a disinvestment in a state asset which produces more than 90,000 graduates each year; graduates who become part of the well-educated citizenry and workforce California needs. Studies have shown that for every $1 of state support, the CSU provides a return on that investment of $5.

A recent study titled “California’s economic payoff: investing in college access and completion” was conducted by the Institute of Societal Issues at UC Berkeley and jointly released by the Campaign for College Opportunity, the California Civil Rights Coalition and the California Chamber of Commerce offers these important conclusions:

- “This study concludes that the benefits of higher education extend well beyond the direct payoff for students and include substantial gains to the state. California’s Higher Education investments pay off for all of California.”
- “This report concludes that the investment in education is critical to the ultimate success of California.”
• “Supporting funding for higher education is not a single year budget line item, but an investment in our human capital that yields significant returns and promises to provide Californians with continued opportunity and hope for a better economic future.”

This Friday is the constitutional deadline for the California Legislature to pass a balanced budget.

What are we to do in addition to sustained, comprehensive state-wide advocacy to turn this situation around? Well, the good news, graduates, is that you have already completed a bachelor’s degree and now you are completing your master’s degree. And, collectively, you have the knowledge, skill sets and abilities we need to manage our state and its budget.

For example, accounting and finance graduates mastered the art of balancing revenues and expenditures and accurately projecting cash flows. Our state could use more of that.

Our economics graduates probably could have assisted the state department of finance in reviewing all of the economic data relevant for accurately projecting monthly state revenues from taxes and other sources of funds.

But the states’ fiscal crisis is about more than just balancing the budget. Most importantly, it is about having a vision for the state’s future, setting priorities, and aligning resource allocations with those priorities.

We need statesmen and stateswomen in Sacramento who think beyond television sound-bites and short-term self-interest and focus, instead, on what is in the long-term best interest of the people of California. Some of you, graduates, could become those statespersons. There are 120 seats in the California state legislature and there are more than 400 of you.

We need state legislators who have backgrounds in the humanities and social sciences; who understand human development within its socio-cultural context; who can articulate the impacts of social systems and forces on family structures and family functioning; and who can understand the set of predictable consequences of differential opportunity structures within society on individuals, families and communities.

We need more educators in the legislature who can convince others that the lack of quality pre-kindergarten education has negative ripple effects at each successive stage in the educational process.

We need scientists in the legislature. People who can advance the legislature’s understanding of how best to balance the often competing demands of human progress and environmental stewardship. Our nursing graduates and health care management graduates could shed some light on how best to improve patient care while containing costs.
Finally, in this regard, we need legislators who understand that support for the CSU, and other segments of higher education, is a critical investment in the state’s future which has a five-fold return on investment. In addition, it makes possible the education of the highly skilled workforce needed to fuel California’s economic recovery and development.

In short, graduates, the California legislature and the governor’s office could use a few good people, like you – CSUB graduates.

Even as you might agree that the legislature could benefit from the knowledge, skills and abilities you have acquired, many of you will decide to forego the life of politics and make your contributions through other avenues.

Be assured that we need you wherever you choose to make your contributions – in business or public administration; in teaching and educational leadership; in the arts and humanities; in the social sciences; in the natural sciences, mathematics and engineering; or in other areas. We need some of you to become the next generation of college and university faculty members, staff, and administrators, including presidents and chancellors. This year, alone, seven of the 23 CSU presidents have retired, and the CSU chancellor announced his retirement last month.

While it has been your own commitment and effort that have brought you to this significant milestone in your life and career, I know you have benefited from the love, support and encouragement of parents, spouses, siblings, children, extended family, and friends, many of whom are assembled here to share in your success and celebrate with you with enormous pride.

In a few minutes it will be my pleasure to confer your degrees.

Congratulations!