Good afternoon! When I was selected to be the commencement speaker for the Educational Studies program this year, I decided to go back and look over the speeches from past years to get an idea of what I might like to say. A common theme was starting off the address with a personal anecdote or experience that could tie into the broader issues we have learned about during our time here. However, the stories I found were by graduates who had been one of the only Black or Asian American students in their high schools, or who had been tracked into honors and AP courses with mostly White students, while their peers of color were stuck in the lower level classes. My story differs from theirs, though, because I was one of those White students in the honors classes. In almost every aspect of my schooling, I was surrounded by others—students, teachers, administrators—who looked like me, acted much like me, valued the same things as me. My race, class, sexuality, and ability put me in the majority in nearly every situation, yet I always worked hard and believed I deserved everything I accomplished because I had fairly earned it.

The Educational Studies program has made me realize, though, that schools are not truly meritocratic institutions, where hard work and effort always pay off. I did work hard, but so do all students, in various ways. The pay off is what is different. Through our coursework and research in the Ed Studies Program, my peers and I have been challenged to recognize and interrogate the structures that are in place to systematically benefit certain groups at the expense of others, and that work to maintain the status quo and pass it off as normal and natural. Why did my hard work land me in AP while, for some of my peers, hard work meant they were relegated to special ed and remedial programs? School policy, pedagogy, and curriculum are not arbitrary and neutral, but in fact emerge from specific ideological and political perspectives that ensure that schools continue to operate as they always have, to keep the same people in power without even necessarily knowing they have it. Power, perhaps, is the defining word of the Ed Studies program. Everything we learn is, directly or indirectly, related to power structures as they play out in schools, in policy and law, and on the children and adults they by necessity affect. Ed Studies has allowed us to critically examine these forms of power, and the mechanisms for its operation and maintenance, in the context of US schools, which I believe is a crucial starting point to effecting any sort of meaningful change. Jess, for example, has analyzed the FAIR Education Act in California, and Carrie has investigated sexual violence against LGBT students on college campuses, while I have deconstructed representations of race and schooling on the popular TV show Glee. These are just a few among many rich scholarly examinations undertaken by my peers during the course of our program, all with important ties back to education and power.
I believe I speak on behalf of my peers and fellow Ed Studies graduates when I say that, throughout all of this, we have been extremely grateful to have the guidance and insight of Professor Sabina Vaught as our advisor and program director. Her direction, whether in the classroom, group meetings, or one-on-one advising, has been invaluable, as have the resources provided by the Department of Education and other affiliated faculty. I know that Dean Karen Gould has been a mentor and advisor to both Eve and Carrie, while Kris and others have taken classes with Professor Brian Wright that have challenged them to consider alternative social and historical perspectives. As Rob's paper advisor, Patty Bode took him to museums in addition to her work as a reader, and as Stephanie's advisor, Silas Pinto has, in her own words, been a constant source of inspiration. We would not be standing up here today without the support of you all, so thank you.

The question I most often receive when I tell people what I am studying is, "Oh, so you're going to be a teacher?" I inevitably have to say, "No" and then launch into a long spiel about power, social reproduction, theoretical frameworks, etc. But, really, it's simple: Ed Studies has taught us about schools, not only as institutions of learning, but as institutions of inequity. However, schools are also sites of possibility, and as Gloria Ladson-Billings has written, "We must not legitimate the inequity that exists in the nation's schools, but attempt to delegitimate it by placing it under scrutiny." This is vital knowledge, and it with these insights and this possibility that these graduates move forward to effect change. Thank you."