

Aarushi Desai

Speech to Class of 2023 Public Policy B.A. graduates

Dear fellow graduates or should I say soon to be alumni,

It's an honor to be standing here in front of you today. First, I want to thank the Public Policy Program and my many peers for allowing me to represent you under this historic building. In this moment, I have realized the true meaning of being here. Every single person at this ceremony, from the family members who answered frantic phone calls and provided much needed reassurance to every professor opening their doors for us – you were all there when we needed you the most, and for that, we are truly appreciative. So, thank you all for making the journey to see us graduate, it means more than words can explain.

Four years ago, by no means would I have expected to be standing here before you as a graduate of William & Mary, much less the speaker for the Public Policy graduates. I was uncertain about where I stood and whether I would fit in. Let alone what I wanted to major in. Like many of us, once I started adjusting to

the college life, discovering new interests, and making new friends – the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and everything was put on pause. We all had to learn a new way of living, learning, and interacting with each other. While I do miss attending zoom classes where I could learn in my pajamas, we witnessed how important it is to have strong leaders who can think critically and respond swiftly to unforeseen challenges. As we watched the world navigate through unprecedented times, we were reminded of the power of effective public policy and the impact it can have on the lives of our communities. That's where we come in as graduates of William & Mary's Public Policy Program, equipped with the necessary tools, knowledge, and unwavering passion to fearlessly tackle challenges head-on, and make a lasting impact on the world.

I never imagined that I would find myself as passionate about public policy as I am today, and it's all thanks to the incredible community here at William & Mary. The professors are always available and willing to go above and beyond to help their students succeed – whether it's giving you extensive feedback, listening and providing you comfort when you need it the most, or simply sending you an email

to check-in. I know we have all experienced moments of genuine care and compassion from our professors these past four years. For me, it was from Professor Joosse, who is not only my mentor but my inspiration for pursuing public policy. I mean what student can say that she and her “big girl” friends went to her professor’s 5 year old daughter’s birthday party. The professors here, like Professor Joosse, are not only knowledgeable and experienced, but they are also flexible, kind, and most importantly, human. So, please never forget the people who have helped you get to where you are today: whether it was a professor supporting you, a parent believing in you, or a friend lending a helping hand. Your mentors, family, and friends have been there for you every step of the way, and they will continue to be there for you as you navigate through this next chapter. Cherish those relationships, and never take them for granted.

I see so many of my classmates before me today and it’s amazing how unique each and every one of you truly are. What makes us different is our persistent passion to make a difference in the world. Whether it's advocating for marginalized communities, improving healthcare policies, or combating environmental issues, our dedication to social justice and public service is inspiring. What's even more

impressive is how many of us have integrated business, statistics, and economics into our work, using data-driven insights and innovative strategies to learn how to create real impact.

I have no doubt that your impact will be felt far and wide, and I'm honored to now call you all, my colleagues. And who knows, maybe one day we'll cross paths again on LinkedIn and reach those 500+ connections -- where we can connect professionally, endorse each other's skills, and maybe even like each other's posts.

While we all come from diverse backgrounds, with different perspectives and ideas; we have learned to work collaboratively, embrace diverse viewpoints, and challenge our own biases. William and Mary's Public Policy Program has been instrumental in shaping us into the policy students we are today and the policy professionals we will be one day.

As we leave the familiarity of college life, we embark on a journey of exploration and discovery. Whether we're pursuing further education, starting a new career, or simply navigating life's ups and downs, let us remain curious about the world around us. So my

fellow graduates, let us never stop asking questions, seeking new knowledge, and embracing new experiences. These qualities have fueled our success thus far and will continue to guide us as we venture into the unknown.

Though I won't be leaving the William & Mary community just yet, I know you all are going to change the world through your passion, curiosity, and perseverance and know that the William & Mary community will always be here to support and guide you on your journey – whether you end up being alumni donors or not ;). Congratulations to the graduating class of 2023!