Good afternoon. My name is Athenamarie Demeros and I am honored to represent one of the many voices of this graduating Class of 2017. The title of my talk is “From Frightened to Fearless: Flourishing in the EIU Community. I’m really happy to be here and I know you are too! I’d like to say a little about all the communities who helped me get here.

Four years ago a shy, terrified girl from the Northwest Chicago suburbs moved into Taylor Hall 4 South. As a natural homebody, being three-and-a-half hours away from home was the worst kind of homesickness I had ever felt. I debated dropping out and going back home so that I could go to community college and work. I didn’t fit in with the girls on my floor or those that I had met at orientation. I missed the comfort of my hometown, my family, and my high school friends. But I told myself to stick it out and actually give Eastern and this new experience a chance. I immersed myself into the culture and soon found my place and love for this school and community. I joined a sorority and finally felt like I belonged here. I was lucky to have met my best friends early freshman year, who I am still close with today. I’m so thankful I stuck it out during those lonely days and nights of heartache and tears. I learned quickly that you get out of an experience what you put into it; so my message to you all today is that whatever you choose to do with your life, put in your best effort so that you can get the most out of it.

 I have found my second home within the community here at Eastern. One that I’m incredibly saddened to leave, but a home I know I can always come back to. I am grateful for the friendships I have made, for the faculty connections I have formed, and for the lasting memories I have created these last four years. With the resources and knowledge I’ve gained at Eastern, I feel more than prepared to take on the next chapter of my life. Though I won’t be taking pictures on the panther anymore, I will always carry a piece of this university and community with me, as I leave a piece of myself here. While our undergraduate careers may be over, our lives are just beginning. Wear these colors proudly and always remember where you came from.

 There were some people who tried to talk me out of coming to EIU. Some people said I was making a mistake going to a state university as opposed to a big name one. Luckily, I didn’t listen to them. Throughout my years here at Eastern, I have developed a deep appreciation for the communities I have been a part of. EIU has provided me with opportunities I wouldn’t have found at any other university. I have received an academic scholarship for each term that I’ve been here; I have been a member of the Pine Honors College, a member of Kappa Delta Sorority for 2 years, Phi Alpha Delta Law Fraternity, Pre-Law Society, Haiti Connection, and St. Vincent de Paul Society. I participated in two Alternative Spring Break mission trips through the Newman Catholic Center across from campus. I have been a Panther Pal, helping freshmen and transfer students move into their dorms. I completed a ten-week internship in Alabama at a ranch for abused and neglected children that counted towards Honors class credit. I earned a spot on the Dean’s List with a 4.0 my first semester in my new major. I have been a coach for Special Olympics and Girls on the Run. I’ve made lifelong friendships and had the most wonderful experience thanks to Eastern, its faculty, and this loving community.

 I have been enriched both in and out of the classroom; taught by some of the most well versed and educated professors; enlightened and impressed by my brilliant classmates, participated in numerous extracurricular activities and organizations, and felt like I had the world at my fingertips. I have been mentored by some of the most empathetic and supportive faculty, who I could not be more thankful for as they’ve guided me along, helping me put my best foot forward. I have never denied this school the excellence it deserves. Thank you to the Journalism Department for teaching me to be precise and concise in my writing. Thank you to the Philosophy Department for enthusiastically welcoming me with open arms. Thank you for applauding my achievements and for not making me feel inadequate or unintelligent when I didn’t understand the material. Thank you to this institution for molding me into the person I am today. I am humbled to stand before you as the 2017 College of Arts and Humanities Commencement speaker. The small town, close-knit comfort of EIU has allowed me to find myself and to flourish. I always knew I could reach out to anyone if I needed them. But also, I thank EIU for pushing me out of that comfort zone and encouraging me to look beyond my little bubble. The courage I have cultivated here brought that terrified first year student to this moment, standing before you all at graduation. I am indebted to this community for helping me grow into the person I’ve always dreamed of becoming.

 For many students this is the end of our educational community: some just for the moment and others for good. Others are starting in their professions; some are taking time off to enjoy life. Whatever you do, do it well and with purpose. Carry this feeling of community that we’ve tended. As we sit here in Lantz, soak in this moment, appreciate and admire yourselves for this amazing accomplishment. If it were easy everyone would be doing it.

In August I’ll begin my next chapter at Northern Illinois College of Law pursuing a Child and Family JD with a possible Masters in Psychology and Child Development. The experiences I’ve had these past four years have solidified my commitment to represent children with troubled backgrounds, working to reverse the narrative: you are not what you came from. The opportunities I’ve had have prompted me to use my law degree to help those in communities just like this one; to look outside my bubble and explore places I never knew existed, places I didn’t know I could have an impact in until I came here. I’m thankful to Eastern for preparing me for this next step, and providing me with all the various resources needed to succeed. As we part ways, may we always honor this institution that has shaped us and carried us through these past few years. Find your passion. Work smart. Live with purpose. Do good for others. Remember who you are. And finally, choose your community wisely. It can make all the difference.

Congratulations class of 2017! We did it! Thank you.