Thank you, President Potter, and congratulations to the Class of 2012. As our time as students on this campus draws to an end, it’s an honor for me to share a few thoughts with you.

Those thoughts actually start with our campus, and its immediate surroundings. As an undergraduate at SCSU, I was fascinated by the historic homes located around, and in some cases on, university property. When time came to choose a topic for my master’s thesis, I decided to study the families who lived in the South Side/University neighborhood. As I learned about South Side life around 1900, I saw a connection between neighborhood architecture and how people interacted with friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens. This neighborhood was once home to St. Cloud’s wealthiest families. Yet they built their houses a stone’s throw from their neighbors, with front porches close to busy streets and sidewalks. Compare this to the “American dream” of today: living on a suburban cul de sac, with a gated driveway and, instead of a front porch, a deck hidden away behind the house.

Of course, my point isn’t really about architecture. The “closeness” that shaped the neighborhood’s construction also shaped civic relationships in that era. Living in close quarters, people interacted with each other differently than we do today. South Side residents spent their free time participating in community service organizations. Women worked with neighbors to host fundraisers. Men belonged to fraternal orders. Labor unions and church groups supported activism. Community service became a status symbol. Spring cleaning of the South Side’s Presbyterian Church, for example, was a social affair. The neighborhood’s leading ladies would...
march up Fifth Avenue on their way to clean the church—proudly displaying their mops and buckets to passersby. South Side culture required civic responsibility of its members.

American life has changed in 100 years, in some ways not for the better. In his book *Bowling Alone*, Harvard professor Robert Putnam shows that, since the end of World War Two, Americans have disengaged from civic life. Putnam notes that involvement in civic organizations has fallen by 50% since the 1950s. Time spent engaged in any form of social activity has decreased by 26% since the 1960s.

How does this hurt communities? To answer, we need to understand a term Putnam coined—“social capital.” The term refers to our professional and personal networking. Because today we spend little time meeting people through civic engagement, we possess less social capital than our ancestors. The most valuable social capital—and the hardest to create—is that which connects us to people different from ourselves. The challenge is to cultivate relationships with people with whom, at least on the surface, we share little in common.

Early South Side residents provide models. There was a time not long ago in St. Cloud history when Catholic-versus-Protestant divisions were so deep that football games between Protestant and Catholic high schools were cancelled, for fear of violence, and a romance between a Catholic and Protestant might incite tragedy of Shakespearean proportions. In the midst of this, who should form a friendship but the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of St. Cloud and the South Side’s Presbyterian pastor? When the pastor died, the bishop went to his funeral, angering some Catholics, upset that their leader had entered a Protestant church.

Another socially aware South Side resident was Alice Whitney, who lived in the colonial mansion that still stands on our campus, near Lawrence Hall. Whitney was a member of an
organization called the Civic Music Association. In 1942, the Music Association brought world-famous singer Marian Anderson to town. Because Anderson was African American, however, hotels refused to rent her a room. Mrs. Whitney, the best-known woman in St. Cloud, invited Anderson to stay at her home, making her feelings on racial inequities known throughout the city. Mrs. Whitney would not have had the opportunity to make this gesture had she not been involved in the Civic Music Association.

How can today’s graduates use social capital to enhance their professional and civic efforts? Many already are. I’d like to highlight a project led by a graduate in the audience today that epitomizes the advantages social capital offers.

As an ethnographic project, anthropology major Kurt Neu volunteered with a group that provides free bagged lunches to kids living in a low-income St. Cloud neighborhood. This was only the start of his effort at social capital building, however. Kurt was struck by academia’s disconnect from the needs present in the community. So, he formed a new student organization, the Anthropology Collective, which connects members to meaningful community service opportunities. Kurt now sits on the board of directors of the organization that sponsors the free lunch program. And, he acts as liaison between anthropology classes and that community program. Many needs can be addressed by forging connections between parties who might not otherwise come into contact.

The Class of 2012 is entering a world very different from the one that existed when the South Side was built. But it’s just as important in 2012 as it was in 1912 to unite diverse perspectives to develop new approaches to common challenges. We might learn from how our predecessors expanded opportunity right here in St. Cloud by building social relationships across
boundaries of profession, class, and ethnic origin. If we are as successful as were they, then our future is bright indeed. Thank you.