

“Lifting as We Climb”
Inaugural Address

President Manya Whitaker
Colorado College Inauguration
Saturday, Nov. 8, 2025

“Lifting as We Climb.” I chose this as today’s theme because it captures so much of my life. I am a third-generation teacher, and in fact, my grandmother, Catherine Whitaker, who spent her career teaching high school science, is here with us today. Early in my life, my dad did all things **public service**—from teaching to social work, to being a program manager in a low-income housing development. My mother, though never a formal teacher, was *my* teacher.

Some of my strongest memories are watching my mom walk in the door around 6 p.m. after working all day, fielding me and my brother’s—and all children’s—**perennial question**: “What’s for dinner?” She would put down her purse, take off her shoes, and start cooking. And despite our prior query, my real question was always, “Can you help me with this, mom?”

“This” ranged from vocabulary words and book reports in elementary school, to history papers, **science projects**, and exams in high school. She was the one I called when I needed

clay, paint, and feathers to make a 3D Model of my pet bird, who was the subject of a year-long science project in 6th grade. She was who I called when I “remembered” that I needed to bring cookies to school tomorrow and when I realized at 8 p.m. that I didn’t have enough poster paper to finish my assignment. Mom taught me **how to walk in heels**, how to drive, and how to apply thick silver eye liner—because I was the epitome of cool in the 90s.

I integrated these concrete learnings into my **growing life philosophy**. One where my dad repeatedly encouraged me to “sing that song.”

Sing that song.

As an accomplished vocalist, Dad knows I can’t sing. As I got older, I realized he wasn’t literally encouraging me to sing. He was telling me to do what’s in my heart. **To not hold back.**

So I did. I haven't. And here I am. Standing in front of you as the 15th president of Colorado College.

But I am not here because of me. Or because of grandma’s legacy, mom’s teachings, or dad’s life lessons.

I am here because of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that **transformed what was possible** for women and people of African descent. Because of Shirley Chisholm, who in 1972 became the first Black woman to seek a major party's presidential nomination.

Because of Willa Player, who in 1956 became the first Black woman president of an accredited 4-year institution.

I am here because today, Black women earn more than 60% of all degrees awarded to Black students yet still represent only 3% of full professors and 2% of college presidents. I stand here knowing that I am both an exception and a promise.

I follow in the footsteps of teachers like Patti Harburger, Jeff Gray, Ralph Pillsbury, Sonya Macroberts, Abigail Baird, Kathy Hoover-Dempsey, Mike Taber, Mike Edmonds, and dozens of others who saw something in me and created opportunities for me. These are the people who modeled what **it means to lead for and with one another.**

So, it makes sense that my personal mantras are variations of one another: "lead from the front," "start where you are, but don't stay there," "lifting as we climb."

“Lifting as we climb” is the motto of the National Association of Colored Women founded in 1896 **whose inaugural president** was Mary Church Terrell, a member of the incomparable, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

The NACW was established to advocate for the social, economic, and political advancement of Black women and their communities through education, suffrage, and anti-lynching campaigns—a **radical vision of collective liberation** at a time when both racism and sexism sought to silence their voices.

So, you see, lifting as we climb is not about me; it’s about us. It’s about remembering where you come from and not embarrassing the family. Honoring those who not only paved the way but passed bricks to elongate the path for others. Lifting as we climb is not about paying it forward or community service or sending thoughts and prayers.

When we lift, we advocate not just for diversity, but for belonging—for a campus where first-generation students, students of color, international students, and students from every background don’t just survive, but thrive.

When we climb, we stand alongside, and sometimes in front, of those who face systems designed to keep them out—using whatever platform we have to dismantle barriers.

Together, we create more spaces at the table, and when there's no more room, we build a bigger table—or better yet, we redesign the room to meet the needs of **our entire community**.

That is how we intentionally elevate others: lifting their voices, their perspectives, their humanity.

This philosophy is not just personal—it is institutional. It is woven into the fabric of who we are at Colorado College and who we must continue to become. Our Block Plan itself embodies this principle: we lift students by giving them the space to dive deep, to focus intensely, and to discover themselves one course at a time. We **lift each other** through our commitment to the liberal arts, recognizing that education is not merely about individual achievement, but about cultivating citizens who will lift entire communities.

That is the honor and privilege of the presidency. No matter what chaos swirls in higher ed, let me be clear, this job is a privilege. It

is my pleasure and my goal to ensure that our 2102 students are having the best years of their lives.

It is to all of our benefit that we keep future generations at the center of our decision-making. At Commencement, I reminded the class of 2025 that they carry the future in their hands. And I remind us of that today.

The students on this campus and every campus across the country are our greatest hope. We've burdened them with a climate crisis that threatens the planet they will inherit, with rising authoritarianism that **tests democratic institutions** worldwide, with economic inequality that has reached levels unseen in generations, and with divisions that fracture the very communities they must rebuild. They carry our future in their hands.

The least I can do is create conditions for them to discover their purpose, develop their voice, and deploy their talents as they claim their space in the world. The least *we* can do is provide them with resources, mentorship, and unwavering support. And the *best* we can do? Remove the obstacles we've placed in their path. That's my job as president: to clear the way.

That's the job of every educator, and at my core, I will always be a teacher. I learned from my grandmother that education is about challenging yourself. I learned from my father that teaching is about helping others find their song. My mother made it clear that learning happens everywhere—in kitchens at 8 p.m., in cars lapping around empty parking lots, even in front of mirrors applying questionable makeup choices.

As president, I am still teaching. But now the work is institutional: shaping the conditions under which learning happens, ensuring that every student has what they need to find their voice and wield it with both conviction and care.

My family gave me the foundation, the values, and the confidence to aim high. My **husband keeps me afloat**—with love, partnership, and gentle reminders that presidents can and should watch reality TV. And the Colorado College community has instilled in me the belief that when we elevate others, we **all rise higher**.

So let us move forward together, investing in our collective well-being. Let us create space for others to speak, engage with the ideas that challenge us, and welcome the questions that make us uncomfortable. Let us raise standards of excellence while

dismantling the barriers that prevent too many from reaching them.

This is our work. This is my calling. This is how we honor those who came before and serve those who come after.

Let us never forget to look up, and laugh, and love, and lift. Thank you.