

**Welcome Remarks Language Schools Commencement
Friday, August 14, 2015
Mead Chapel**

President Laurie L. Patton

Graduates, Faculty, and Friends – I am delighted to be here at the Language Schools' Commencement – my second graduation ceremony at Middlebury. I want to put into circulation Gamaliel Painter's cane, the significance of which I will explain shortly.

Painter left this cane to the College when he died in 1819 and it has become an important symbol for the institution. I ask you to please pass it among yourselves, and when the last person receives the cane, will he or she please return it to me so future generations of students can share in this tradition.

Gamaliel Painter, one of the visionaries who helped to found Middlebury College over two hundred years ago. He was a familiar sight to the College's first students as he frequently roamed through the town's streets and strolled by the College, which then was entirely located on the site that is now Twilight Hall at the bottom of the hill on the way into town.

As he strolled about the town and College, Gamaliel Painter carried with him a walking stick. When he died, Gamaliel Painter bequeathed to the College a significant sum of money, enough to secure the future of this fledgling institution. He also left us his walking stick.

It has become a tradition for newly arrived students to pass among them Gamaliel Painter's cane. A few years ago at commencement we added a new tradition. As each of you leaves the platform, you will be presented with a replica of Gamaliel Painter's cane. Thus we signify your passage into the distinguished alumni body of Middlebury College, and commemorate the beginning of a new and lifelong relationship between you and your *alma mater*.

You have spent glorious months here thinking, dreaming, stumbling, joking, arguing, persuading, dancing, running, sighing, playing, and hoping, in another language. I know this because your presence has laced the memories of my first 8 weeks on campus.

You and all your language learning companions have shown discipline. I saw it one night when I was walking my two large furry dogs, and two Japanese students met us along the path. They bent over to hug them, and exclaimed just two words in English, then quickly corrected themselves to exclaim more in Japanese. Dog love in Japanese. Pretty darn good.

You have shown resourcefulness. I know it because I met a Spanish masters student when walking away after a reception. When it was clear that I didn't speak Spanish, she switched to French -- a language I could speak-- and stumbled along slowly. She did this even though the pledge could be lifted when talking business with an administrator. For her, any

second language was worth trying, even if she didn't have to follow the rules to the letter in our conversation.

And you have shown great strength of character. Every single one of you graduates I have spoken with has told me that you indeed have a different identity in your second language. And most of you have gone on to describe what that is: I dance more in Spanish. I'm tougher in Russian. I am more easygoing in French. I like my family more in Chinese. I have more friends in Hebrew. I'm kinder in German. I have a subtler sense of humor in Japanese. And you have not wanted to relinquish those personalities after the pledge has been lifted. I still see gangs of you wandering around campus, speaking your language joyfully as if nothing at all had changed since the height of those glorious days.

But of course, everything has changed.

We attribute this change to the language pledge, and its power.

Vice President Michael Geisler told you at the beginning of the summer, and at the beginning of the many summers in which you have worked to earn your degree: may the pledge be with you. And it was. The pledge was your Discipline. It was your resourcefulness. It was your strength of character. You now know how transformative this pledge truly is.

And because you now know this you will forgive me one delightful little word history. You already know that the phrase "May the pledge be with you" is of course a play on the phrase from Star Wars-- "may the force be with you." Don't worry-- we checked with the copyright moguls before we went ahead and used it and it falls under fair use. However, what you may not know is that the force-- that power that animates all things-- is a concept from early Indian Sanskrit texts-- the Upanishads.

The creators of Star Wars drew from this tradition when they wrote their screenplays.

So inadvertently, as of course you know I would think everyone always does, we return back to Sanskrit to enlighten us. Vice President Michael Geisler might well have thought he was speaking English, but he was really speaking Sanskrit!

More seriously, the Upanishads describe students sitting under trees with their teachers and learning things through immersion, just as you have done here at Middlebury.

Even more momentously, for early Indian thinkers, the first idea of the force-- called Brahman-- was not magical, or about waving a wand. It was the simple idea that the power of the word held up the world. And the power of the well spoken word guaranteed human flourishing and prosperity.

You have done that too. Three thousand years later, through the power of your well spoken word, you have contributed to human flourishing and prosperity.

You have become masters-- literally from the Latin ones who are called to teach. You have become doctors-- literally from the Latin, ones who lead others, who show the way.

So long may you go on thinking, dreaming, stumbling, joking, arguing, persuading, dancing, running, sighing, playing, and hoping, in another language.

Finally today: I hope, in the work of achieving your degree, you have also been replenished. I hope that the letters now written after the letters that make up your name might not only signal pedigree, but also possibility. Not only pedigree, but also possibility.

I hope that your dispositions and habits of mind have been newly sharpened, invigorated, ready to engage again in the work of placing language at the center of all our human relationships.

The pledge has clearly been with you. Congratulations and my very deepest best wishes for you in all the worlds you will now inhabit.

Medal presentation to Michael Geisler

I am going to depart from our script today for one small important moment before we hear our speaker and before we award our honorary degrees. As you know in this festival centennial season we have been giving out medals to those who have been exemplary models along the path. And we have one more medal to distribute--to someone whose work has been the exemplar for the exemplars. Whose passion, commitment engagement and dedication to the Language Schools has given them unparalleled life and vigor in the 21st century: Michael Geisler. This medal is only a tiny fraction of the ways we all want to honor him. Michael Geisler, and trustee Bill Kieffer, will you please come forward.

Michael Geisler – Vice President for Language Schools, Schools Abroad, and Chief Risk Officer for Middlebury; Professor of German; C.V. Starr Professor in Linguistics & Languages. Michael, the impact of your work will be felt for generations to come both at Middlebury College and with language learners throughout the world. You have been chair of the Middlebury German department and of the foreign languages division, as well as associate dean of humanities, arts, languages, and literatures. You have served as chief learning officer for Middlebury Interactive Languages and currently chair the academic affairs committee of the World Learning board of trustees. Your contribution to the academy has been as rich as it has been varied - from your role in development of the Modern Language Association Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages' recommendations for a new conception of the status of foreign languages - to your work as editor of *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative*. Along the way, you have played the foil to Larry Summers' myopic worldview and been a forceful critic of "Davos Man" while articulating Middlebury's role in the strategic language reserve of the USA. But it is with the Language Schools and Schools Abroad where we find the full expression of your career as a scholar and gifted administrator. Under your guidance the Language Schools have grown in stature, enrollments, and languages offered – adding the School of Hebrew, the Portuguese School and, this year, the School of Korean. This expansion has been matched with the Schools Abroad, which now have 36 sites across the globe.

Michael, as a successor to Lilian Stroebe and one who has steadfastly and ambitiously carried forward her vision, it is indeed fitting, on the 100th anniversary of its founding, that the Middlebury Language Schools honors you today for all you have done to support and advance the study of languages and cultures at Middlebury and beyond. And Michael, one final note, may the Pledge always be with YOU.