Good morning President Leibowitz, members of the Board of Trustees, honorary degree recipients, faculty, staff, alumni, family and friends and the graduating class of 2017. My enthusiasm is twofold. I am here today to (1) share my thoughts on leadership, resilience and legacy that I have cultivated during my undergraduate experience at Brandeis and (2) express the depth of gratitude I feel toward this institution and to the members of this year’s graduating class.

I will start on a note of gratitude for the leaders invisible in our midst. Then, I will consider the ways in which our class embodies resilience and end by honoring a durable tradition of leadership at Brandeis, most notably by women of color, some generations before us but many graduating this afternoon.

To begin, a wise professor once taught me that we must never forget the power of those who have helped make us powerful. In this spirit, I’d like to take a moment to acknowledge the staff that is easily forgotten throughout the college experience. The dedicated people who work in our cafeterias, libraries, dormitories, transportation services, and mailroom and maintain our buildings and grounds deserve applause. The Class of 2017 appreciates the part you’ve played on our journeys as we have worked alongside you day in and day out over the past four or more years. The mark of good leadership is to always hold in clear view the many and sundry who have molded us to become who we are. This includes working to not forget the undocumented in our country, the refugees and the economically marginalized. Truly it is all of us, or none.
I stand here today and I marvel at what an incredible demonstration of resilience the past four years have been for all in our midst. As students, our experiences have been inextricably linked to the very real sociopolitical context of our times. As a campus, we have been tasked with dealing with a litany of tragic and triumphant moments in recent history that have tested our ability to remain calm, work across difference, and get up everyday and try again after rejection. We’ve witnessed several pivotal transitions in the U.S. like the rise of the Movement for Black lives, the end of the Obama era, the legalization of gay marriage—all of which have made our academic journeys all the more unforgettable. Certainly, times have changed and our definitions of what it takes to be an advocate, innovator, and trailblazer must meet the demands of those moments.

I believe that resilience is characteristic of the Class of 2017’s leadership and it is exactly what Brandeis, the U.S. and this world desperately needs at this moment. In our commitments to our community we understand that the nature of peace and justice is a collective struggle. Take for example, Witney Christie, a student from Philly who has an irrepressible desire to teach elementary school aged children. Whether it’s in the classroom listening to the needs and concerns of her pupils, or working endless hours on community-wide events for the Black Student Union for over four years, or even at the end of a long week showing up for friends and family—you know Witney relentless in her passions to create change. I’d also like to celebrate Yael Platt and her valiant work to defend survivors of sexual assault and expand bystander training to clubs across campus. Yael is a gentle spirit, modeling the kid of rich intersectional and explicit anti-racist work more white folks need to do. There are also students in the senior class that are resilient in their friendships. Anyone who knows Terry Shaipitisari knows she shows up for community with infectious joy and endless energy looking to build coalition
between campus clubs and groups. Witney, Yael and Terry are a snapshot of how the Class of 2017 has made sustained attempts to be there for one another, and those outside of our community every step of the way throughout our experiences at Brandeis.

And finally, Class of 2017, we must recognize that resilience in leadership at Brandeis is not new, but rather has been cultivated throughout the university’s 68 year history. As a student liaison for the Brandeis University archives over the course of this semester, I have spent countless hours mining our collective memory seeking to uncover the hidden narratives of women of color. I have come to understand how necessary it is that we affirm and honor the thought-leaders who have called this institution home and subsequently made transformational strides in significant areas of public life through their resilient characteristics. In particular, Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins was a Brandeis alum, class of 69’ and 84’, that championed the interdisciplinary field Black feminist studies. Her writings and those authored by alums Margo Jefferson and Angela Davis about their undergraduate tenures in the late 1960-1970s have taught me that women of color at Brandeis have been demonstrating how important continuous allegiance to the ideas of social responsibility and radical democracy are to social justice movements. In her memoir, Angela Davis notes, “Revolution is a serious thing, the most serious thing about a revolutionary life. When one commits oneself to the struggle, it must be for a lifetime.” Many of the student-activists involved in FordHall2015 understood this message, many on whom are Black women and serve as an important and contemporary example of honoring a legacy of resilient leadership at Brandeis.

As I conclude, the ensuing decades demand for as many of us as possible to never cease showing up for the causes that keep us awake at night and bring us hope for the future. We may grow tired but rest assured we will never forget that destiny is reliant upon a sober view of the
present and relentless attempts to break the glass ceilings we encounter. As the great Maya Angelou writes, “You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated.”

Thank you.