Thank you, President David Van Zandt, Board of Trustees, committee of students, faculty, and staff who elected me as your speaker, and a special thank you to the students and faculty who uphold The New School’s progressive ideals of being a place for academic freedom, tolerance, and social justice. I am honored to be here. It’s by accident that I am here.

You see, my mother was eight months pregnant when she was convinced by my father to go back to Ecuador and have me there. My dad wanted his daughter to be Ecuadorean, like him. Eight years later, my dad again convinced my mother to come back to the U.S. to give myself and siblings a better life (Mom was not too amused with Dad). Eight years after that, I’m crying at a DMV because I cannot get a driver’s license; I was told, “You don’t have the right kind of papers.” And eight years later, I am walking from Miami to DC on a 1,500-mile on-foot march, to ask for my existence, and that of 12 million people in this country, to be recognized. It was all by accident, because I came to the U.S. not through Ellis Island like some of your families did or was not planted in the womb of your mother but mine.

But it is not by accident you are here and I stand before you, because we all have a choice on how we are going to live our lives and what we are going to do while we are here on this earth.

We all have a choice by what people will know us by and what we are going to do for ourselves, our families and community. We all have a choice of what our legacies will be. And while the country’s laws only gave me the choice to live in the shadows, keep my head down, and be scared, I chose to stand up for my dreams and those of others. And it was in a college institution, Miami Dade College, where I learned to open my wings and fly fearlessly through my life.

Today, your life wings are being unveiled. Wings you built and spent many nights crafting and years creating. Those wings will take you wherever you want.

They say the flapping of the wings of a butterfly can create an agitation in the atmosphere that can be felt across the other side of the ocean. And I believe your wings have this kind of power. You have so much power, and I want to ask you to consider five simple ways you can use it:

1. Be kind. Even if others don’t think like you, be kind to them; I’ve found that talking to anti-immigrants, nativists, xenophobes, naysayers, with compassion has given better results than screaming at them. They have more to lose anyways.

2. Stand up to bullies. Bullies can come in many sizes; they can be entire countries, systems, leaders, bosses, friends.... They can be found in churches or in social media. Don’t be afraid to stand up when a bully is hurting someone else or hurting you. Don’t take your voice and actions lightly. Remember, you have power.

3. Leave the door open and invite others to come in. I don’t mean your car door or houses; I mean this metaphorically. Don’t be the last person in your family or in your high school, town, or city to go to college, to go to The New School. Find a way
to model, mentor, and share your knowledge. There are still people in the 21st century that, because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, social-economic class, or immigration status, are banned from obtaining an education.

4. Feel—it’s okay to cry. Don’t hold your tears back, ladies and gentlemen; waterproof mascara exists. When 43 students are kidnapped and killed by the local government, feel; when a black young person gets killed by a cop, feel; when a young mother gets separated from her child as she is being deported, feel; when a student’s dream of going to college is crushed by their lack of immigration status, feel; or when I, an immigrant woman, tear up as I stand before you, because my existence and struggle are being recognized, feel. This goes beyond putting on the shoes of others. It’s actually feeling, imagining the pain, empathizing with your fellow human being. Understanding them.

5. Love. I’m really big on this one. You have one life, and as you all know, we are here for a finite time. Don’t be afraid to love this world; it’s the only one we have (well, at least for now). Take care of the earth. And as much as you love yourself, love your partner, love your family, your career. Love!

So today, and from now on, you have this moment to remind yourself that you can and you have. You have proven yourself to have a great sense of determination and perseverance. Today, like you will do tomorrow, anything you set forth, you will accomplish. My pride is not that I am here to receive an honorary degree or to give this speech; my pride is that I get to experience this with you and your families. Spread your wings and go. Make the world yours, but don’t forget to come back home. Go and set your legacy; go and do good in this world. Fly. Congratulations, class of 2015!