

2022 CSAE Valedictorian Speech

Sitting down to write this address, I found myself staring at a blank page with a blinking cursor for quite a long time. I'm sure many of my fellow CAE grads can relate – over the last year, I suspect there were more than a few of us who stalled before we started as we buckled down to write yet another paper.

This time, it wasn't the dread of writing another gap analysis or the painful process of tracking citations causing the blank white page and the dreaded blinking cursor.

Instead, I was thinking about expectations. Your expectations of me as a valedictorian. My expectations of the conference - my first CSAE conference. My expectations of the CAE program, way back in early 2020, when I decided that 2020 was shaping up to be a relatively uneventful year by the looks of things and, therefore, a perfect time to embark upon a new program and certification.

I know, I know. We'd all prefer to stop talking about (Covid). But for the class of 2022, I suspect our CAE journey and the pandemic will always be intertwined. I began the CAE program in April of 2020, full of energy and excitement, with absolutely no idea what lay ahead. I was six months into my very first CEO role, parenting three teenagers, and signing up for a new program seemed, if somewhat ambitious, like a reasonable thing to do.

This whole "coronavirus" issue, I told myself, would surely be in the rear-view mirror within a few weeks

I will say this. We certainly spent no shortage of time sitting at home in front of a computer during the next 18 months, which, one could conclude, ensured that we were never far away from the endless readings and paper writing required to be successful in the CAE program.

But we made it through, and we made it through together. One of the quirks of doing an online program, pandemic or not, is that you don't get to meet your classmates in person. Instead, we are relegated to grainy headshots and screen names and thank goodness for the mandatory introductory posts. Otherwise, I wouldn't know who I was sharing the stage with today.

As the program progressed, however, you began to learn more about your fellow virtual classmates.

You learn who the eager beavers are – you know, the ones who are either so organized or so busy that they are always the first to post, the first to complete the assignments. Then they disappear for a week until everyone else has submitted their work, at which point they breeze in again to leave the requisite two comments on their classmate's work.

You know who you are.

Then there were the writers. These classmates are typically the ones that hold roles such as "Communications Manager," "Vice President of Marketing," or "Policy Analyst." You scoffed at them at first – who has enough time to write so many words each week? – but in reality, their posts were often organized, well thought out, and helped the rest of us figure out where to even begin with our own coursework.

You could also usually pick out the classmates who had kids at home. The parents typically wrote their discussion posts on weekdays between 11 pm and midnight, or what I refer to as the "hour between when my kids finally go to bed and when I pass out from exhaustion." There may have been a glass or 5 of wine worked into that hour.

Not that I speak from experience or anything.

Finally, there was the group to which I had the dubious honour of belonging—the procrastinators. I recently discovered that the reason for my lifelong procrastination is that I'm neurodivergent. I always assumed I was missing the time management gene! As it turns out, procrastinating is one of my superpowers. The adrenaline from that "oh crap, this is due tomorrow" (... or in an hour, as occasionally happened...) magically turns into what is known as HYPERFOCUS. Whether it was from neurodivergence or hyperfocus or, let's be honest – sometimes actually just lousy time management - the procrastinators showed up in force each week, with a posting frenzy that, in my case, was usually followed by a carefully curated sense of accomplishment. We did it, we'd say to ourselves. We did it on time, and NEXT WEEK, we will NOT leave it until the last minute.

The fact is, we worked hard, the CAE class of 2022. We worked hard from behind our screens while stuck at home eating our 4th lunch of the day because why not. We worked hard while watching the entire season of Game of Thrones for the 10th time or while learning how to make sourdough bread from scratch. We worked hard while homeschooling our kids while coping with the unknowns of our first pandemic while showing up for our jobs day in and day out, and discovering that "remote work" meant that there was no longer any believable excuse to avoid doing the breakfast dishes. We worked hard while our respective associations and organizations struggled to redefine "member value" during a pandemic. We worked hard even while some of our classmates saw their positions temporarily and sometimes permanently eliminated.

We worked hard, and we made it through. And here we are, in this beautiful city, just weeks after a terrible hurricane (because why not, after all we've been through)? Here we are together in person. We are reunited, not as friends who knew each other before, but as human beings who need real-life connections to thrive.

It's pretty awesome.

According to my research, this is the point where I'm supposed to provide some uplifting wisdom or sage advice. I'm pretty sure that this next part caused my initial writer's block when I began writing.

I was trying to find something inspiring to say about governance, the importance of professional development... or how writing three papers in 48 hours means we can survive pretty much anything. But instead, the word "connection" kept resonating in my mind. It's a word I think about a lot these days. I've been thinking about what connects us. Connection, after all, is at the heart of why associations exist. But over the last year or so, the concept of connection has felt different to me. What IS connection? What connects us? I think it feels different lately because everywhere we turn, we're faced with division. We're unwittingly focusing on what separates us. I know I can't be alone when I say that being divided, being separated, whether it's physically due to a pandemic or politically because our leaders can't get it together...being separated, being divided, is exhausting and demoralizing.

Intellectually, I am a realist. But over the last few years, I've realized that as a human being, I'm an optimist.

So, here's what I want to leave you with. As you wrap up your time at this incredible conference that we are so lucky to be attending, I encourage you to focus on connection in your work as association leaders and your families, which I know is not always easy, with your fellow Canadians and fellow humans.

Focus on connection.

When we focus on what connects us, whatever we thought divided us will begin to fade away.

We are MEANT to be different, to have differing opinions and perspectives. But without that shared sense of connection, those differences indeed can divide us. We've seen it happen, and we're still seeing it happen.

This room is filled with thought leaders and change-makers. The majority of us here are part of ready-made communities – our associations – and as we set our respective strategic priorities and begin working on our 2023 business plans, connection must be the foundation of every value proposition of every product and service we offer. CSAE members represent over 800 organizations across this wonderful country. Imagine the impact we can have if we collectively advocate for connection over division. Together, we can change the trajectory.

So, my fellow classmates, faculty, staff, and attendees choose connection.

To my fellow graduates – it was an absolute pleasure to go through "CAE, Covid Edition" with you, and I look forward to connecting with each of you after the conference ends.

Thank you.