

QCNR Valedictorian Izzy Wappett on The Power of "Yes"

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05/01/2025



Delivered at the 2025 QCNR Convocation

Yes. A brief word we barely notice in conversation. Yet, in the right moments, it becomes the dividing line between who we are and who we might become.

Think of a time when you said "no" but looking back, you wish you had said yes. We all carry regrets of what might have been. Yes, it isn't about agreeing to everything. It's about opening doors to experiences that help us discover new paths and unlock versions of ourselves we never knew existed. Today, I want to share the dimensions of yes that have changed my understanding of growth, discovery, and what we're truly capable of becoming when we open ourselves to possibility.

I discovered this power firsthand when my journey as a trip leader for the Outdoor Programs began three years ago. My first trip to Lake Powell— quickly taught me the weight of leadership. I was no longer just a participant, I suddenly carried responsibility for everyone's safety and experience. This reality hit hardest on our first morning in the desert when I discovered I'd forgotten something seemingly small: coffee filters. To a 19-year-old who had never made coffee before, this seemed like no big deal. Four caffeine-free days in the desert taught me an unforgettable lesson. You do not want to face sleep-deprived college students in the wilderness without their morning coffee.

Fast forward to one of my final trips—leading a five-day canoe trip down Labyrinth Canyon this past year. Standing at the canyon's edge, watching them prepare their canoes, I was struck by how far I'd come. The once inexperienced, self-focused trip leader had evolved into someone who

thought two steps ahead, knew exactly what gear to bring, ensured all student's safety, and—most importantly— never forgot the coffee filters again.

The transformation came from one decision: saying "yes" to becoming a trip leader. This is the power of "yes" as a catalyst for growth.

But yes, doesn't just help us grow—it helps us discover. And sometimes, those transformations reveal parts of our identity that have remained undiscovered until we dared to say "yes." This happened when I became an undergraduate teaching fellow in Organic and General Chemistry. Working alongside Dr. Russell and Dr. Kofoed, I quickly realized that figuring out what students are actually asking sometimes takes more brain power than solving the chemistry problems themselves. What I learned was eye-opening: knowing something as a student and teaching it are entirely different. Students' questions made me rethink concepts I thought I knew well. I had to find new ways to explain things I hadn't considered before.

But I discovered something unexpected—I love teaching. I found joy in seeing a student's face change from confusion to that "aha!" moment. That yes revealed a part of myself—someone who finds deeper meaning in helping others understand difficult concepts. Had I said no to that opportunity because I doubted myself, this piece of who I am might have remained undiscovered. This is the true power of yes—it doesn't just open doors to new experiences; it unlocks parts of ourselves we never knew were there.

But what happens when saying yes requires facing our greatest fears? I confronted this question the summer after sophomore year when I accepted a position as a raft guide in Washington—committing to live in a tent in the North Cascades for four months. I was terrified of everything that could go wrong. I feared failing as a guide. I feared living in the wilderness without the comforts of home. Most of all, I feared being alone in a place where I knew no one. What I found was both harder and more rewarding than I could have imagined. My boss of the company I worked for was toxic. I started the season with about 10 other first-year guides. But as the weeks passed, they all quit one by one—but I stayed.

I gained invaluable life lessons through that experience. I learned to persevere through hardship. I developed true self-reliance when there was no safety net beneath me. Perhaps most importantly, I learned to stand tall even when completely alone. One of life's most profound skills is learning to keep moving forward when everything within you wants to quit. It's a strength I never would have

discovered had I chosen the comfortable "no" instead of the terrifying "yes."

This power of saying "yes", it doesn't just apply to us. Today marks an end and a new beginning for the Quinney College of Natural Resources by it saying "yes" to a new chapter—embracing new paths while staying true to its 134-year history at Utah State. What makes QCNR special isn't *just* the name on our building. It's the professors who don't just mentor but inspire. It's the staff who work tirelessly behind the scenes. It's the friendships that we have made with each other that will last a lifetime. Thank you to everyone who has made this place our home. QCNR was never just a college—it was, and always will be, all of us.

And thank you to those who have supported my "yeses" throughout my time at Utah State. To my parents and siblings—my loudest cheerleaders who never let me give up. To the faculty and staff who helped me discover purpose and passion in my studies. And to everyone in our QCNR community— you've collectively created a place I'll always carry with me, not as a forgotten chapter, but as a cherished part of who I am.

As we leave here today, we find ourselves in what psychologists call our "defining decade" – these pivotal years where our choices and experiences will shape who we become more than at any other time. This is not just a phase to pass through; it's the foundation upon which our future selves are built.

The yes-es we embrace now are the catalysts that transform potential into purpose.

I've shared three dimensions of yes that have shaped me:

- **The power to transform ourselves beyond who we are currently when we say yes to new opportunities for growth.**
- **The power to discover hidden parts of ourselves when we say yes to new paths.**
- **The power to confront our fears when we say yes to what terrifies us most.**

So, as you move forward from this moment, I urge you to recognize the power you hold in that simple word: yes. Because in this defining decade, it's not the comfort we seek but the challenges we embrace that will ultimately reveal who we're truly meant to become.