

Get to know Denise Saltojanes the 2023 CEPS Commencement Speaker

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University of New Hampshire (UNH) College of Engineering and Physical Sciences (CEPS) 2023 Commencement Speaker Denise Saltojanes's advice for the 2023 CEPS graduating class is as follows: "Learning who you are and knowing yourself is a life-long endeavor. But it will be surprising to you, when you stop to think about it, how many superpowers you already have. You really do have some stunning tools in your toolbox and to understand what those are should give you a sense of fearlessness as you go out into life."

On March 21, 2023, UNH Today shared that Saltojanes will be the 2023 CEPS Commencement Speaker. A graduate of UNH class of '95, Saltojanes has had a robust career since graduating with a Bachelor of Science (B.S.) in Chemical Engineering.

Saltojanes began her career with General Electric in Somersworth, NH, as a process engineer. From there, she started working at a contract research startup lab out of Boston. Saltojanes highlighted that she was the second employee at the company, so she played a big role in the company's initial operations working as a lab tech.

When asked about how she transitioned her career from engineering to finance, she said she became interested in finance while working at this startup with two MIT graduates that headed the company.

"I noticed that they were needing some help on the finance side. My mother ran her own business so I had kind of an understanding of chart of accounts and double-entry accounts just through growing up, so I started doing that for the startup as well," she said. "I'd work in the lab, I would do some of the accounting work, and as time went on, I thought, 'Well, this is really interesting. I want to learn more of the business strategy finance side.'"

She then attended Babson College and received a Masters of Business Administration (MBA), applying her degree to become Vice President of Investment Banking at Medical Capital Advisors from 2007-2008. Saltojanes highlighted that she did evaluations at the company, much like what she does now, where she evaluated companies that were trying to raise money or be bought. She said that understanding what creates value in the business world was really key to blooming her finance career.

"I always have been really... tangential to technology though, and I think that's one thing that the chemical engineering degree does give you is kind of a lack of fear," Saltojanes described.

Saltojanes said that her B.S. in chemical engineering gave her a wide understanding of math and technology, which gave her a leg up when applying her knowledge from her B.S. to finance, as she had the foundational tools to understand key disciplines in finance such as statistics. "I do understand the broad brushes of a lot of different disciplines, and am able to pick up what I don't know."



Denise Saltojanes, the 2023 College of Engineering and Physical Sciences commencement speaker.

“[With] the specificity of a more technical degree, I have been able to kind of walk between worlds, much easier than other people would,” said Saltojanes.

However, continuing her career after the 2008 Great Recession created a hiccup in her finance journey. She went on to work for the United States Air Force, becoming a Division Chief of Cost estimating at the Hanscom Air Force Base with the Department of Defense, where she worked as an opposition research analyst.

“That job is effectively talking to program managers and engineers to figure out what the Air Force needs to build in order to do its mission,” Saltojanes explained.

She described her role in the job where she'd match the dollar sign to the projects that were devised; then, she assessed the costs of materials needed, personnel, timeline and various roadblocks to create large financial models where she'd ultimately come up with a number or a number range of the costs it would take to create the project. From there, she'd go to Congress to present the financial findings needed for the Air Force to complete a specific mission and tell Congress that they'd need to appropriate a sum for the project to be completed. Saltojanes successfully defended \$6 billion of appropriations passed by Congress, while she additionally managed financial deals relating to technology with U.S. foreign allies.

Presently, Saltojanes now serves as the co-chair and managing director of the Golden Seeds Boston chapter, along with her co-chair Sarah Sanford. Golden Seeds is a national investment company that specializes in financially backing companies with a mission to make investment equal in female-led companies. The company is female-owned by Jo Ann Corkran and Loretta McCarthy, Co-CEOs.

“It is a very uneven field and women entrepreneurs do not seem to have access to the capital that the male entrepreneurs do. Some of that is systematic, in that most of these venture firms were always kind of run by men,” said Saltojanes.

She explained that Golden Seeds' mission is to support women-led companies, specifically startups, in achieving equal success in gender equality. As explained by the Golden Seeds' “Who We Are” statement, written by author and philosopher Charles Handy, “It is a vital ingredient in life to receive a ‘golden seed’ early on from someone you respect, a compliment or expression of confidence in you that fortifies self-belief.”

Saltojanes says that she has seen the companies she works for grow and that she enjoys working with a younger demographic to firsthand see what is coming up in the market from the various companies that come to Golden Seeds investments.

She said that she finds her career very fulfilling as she likes to ask a lot of questions and “understand what a person's mission is,” regarding entrepreneurs and investors.

“I love hearing about the future, I love working with especially young entrepreneurs, they have a lot of energy,” Saltojanes highlighted.

To explore more about Saltojanes's extensive career in the engineering and financial fields, check out UNH Today's “UNH Announces 2023 Commencement Speakers,” as well as the CEPS Advisory Board in which Saltojanes is a member.