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“This is not the end, nor is it the beginning of the end. It is perhaps the end of the beginning.”

~ Winston Churchill

Graduation! That word is a welcome sound for almost all of us. For students it represents the culmination of years of hard work. For parents it may represent financial freedom. For faculty and staff, it is a chance to enjoy seeing “our” students moving into the wider world and onto new opportunities, and a time to anticipate the calmer pace of life at Virginia Tech and in Blacksburg during the summer. I also enjoy wearing a black velvet robe on a warm day in Cassel coliseum! I don’t know anyone on campus who doesn’t enjoy this time of year. In CSES, we will have at least 52 graduating students receiving degrees in Environmental Science, Crop and Soil Science, and MS and PhD degrees. Each one of these students could tell her or his own story of challenges overcome and opportunities taken, and they deserve our congratulations for their achievements. Fourteen of our 35 undergraduates will graduate with honors—proof of the ability of our students. Our outstanding seniors are Logan Holland for CSS and Haley Randolph for ENSC. Haley is also the department’s overall outstanding senior.

I want to pay special tribute to one group of graduating students in particular—our cohort of seven graduate students from Senegal. These students—Andre Diatta, Sekouna Diatta, Ndeye Helene Diallo, Thiore Fall, Fatou Tine, Aissatou Diouf, Marieme Drame—have accomplished something very special. They arrived as a cohort, along with six other students enrolled in other VT departments, in 2013. The official language of Senegal is French; therefore, they took several months of intensive English language training at the Language and Culture Institute. In spring 2014 they enrolled in CSES and all will graduate in May or August. They have excelled in coursework and research. Each one was required to conduct part of their research in Senegal, as a condition of the funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development. This created a special set of challenges to overcome; for example, communication, timeliness of research activities, arranging permits for shipping samples to the U.S., and so forth. Each of them returned to Senegal for extended visits to conduct research. I’ve been impressed that they have handled these challenges with poise, and in most cases the challenges have been overcome.



Our CSES graduate students from Senegal, minus Aissatou Diouf, and with a few of their friends from other departments.





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Not only have our Senegalese colleagues excelled as students; they have also contributed in many ways to the department. They have actively participated in the life of the department, and many of us have had the opportunity to appreciate the richness of Senegalese culture because of them. Many of us have also been able to experience Senegalese cuisine also, and it is fantastic! Sharing these past two and a half years with these colleagues has vividly illustrated the richness that cultural diversity can bring to the department. I hope we have more such opportunities in the future! I am very proud of what each one of them has accomplished, but am really sorry that the time has come for them to leave. I think that each one of them leaves as a proud alumnus of VT and CSES, and will show that pride every chance they have.

One of the many great things about our business is the privilege to work with students during some of the most formative years of their lives. If you have the opportunity, please take time to congratulate all our graduates and share your best wishes for success and fulfillment, and especially our friends from Senegal who return to families and careers starting next week.

Sincerely,