WINCHESTER — People’s concept of time, John Sununu said Saturday afternoon, evolves as they live their lives.

The former New Hampshire governor and White House chief of staff told 1,196 soggy graduates at Shenandoah University’s 2013 commencement exercises that the next decade is crucial for them.

“You’ll almost certainly find out that what happens in the next five to 10 years,” he said, “will provide the momentum, set the tone, be the catalyst for what you will accomplish in life.”

Sununu spoke to the graduates and their friends and family on the plaza in front of the Alson H. Smith Library. He made his remarks shortly after a 12-minute rainstorm doused those in attendance.

Sununu, 74, said that during those critical years, the graduates will learn how to deal with whatever unexpected opportunities might come their way. How they respond to those personal or professional circumstances will greatly affect their satisfaction and happiness.

“You can turn an often unpredictable opportunity into something good — or even great — results,” he said.

That happened to him multiple times in his life, said Sununu, who was presented an honorary Doctor of Laws degree by the university.

Among those opportunities was being elected governor of New Hampshire three times, serving from 1983 to 1989. Then he moved to the White House, where he spent more than three years overseeing its daily operations for President George H.W. Bush.

Sununu called his time in the White House “one of the most exciting times in history” because the Soviet Union was collapsing.

He said he got to do important things in his life because he was “prepared, focused and ambitious enough” to take advantage of the opportunities when they arose.

Others, he said, have done the same thing. He even praised “my friend Bill Clinton for seizing opportunity when none of the heavyweights in the party wanted to run against a sitting president.”
What they’ve learned at Shenandoah, Sununu told the graduates, has helped prepare them for the life-changing opportunities they’ll face. He suggested that they try to find a job that they really like because it will lead to greater personal satisfaction.

Sununu also took umbrage with President Barack Obama for comments he made at Ohio State University’s commencement last weekend. He said the president told the graduates not to worry about the growth of government.

“That ignores basic concerns that go back to Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe,” Sununu said. “It’s wrong, naive and deceptive, and it flies in the face of history.”

What America needs, he said, is not more government but better government.

He encouraged the graduates to “add public service to the list of things you do. There’s nothing more gratifying.”

Sununu, who co-hosted CNN’s “Crossfire” nightly news and public affairs discussion program from 1992 to 1998, opened his speech with a bit of humor.

He said he would keep his remarks brief because he didn’t remember anything a speaker said at any of his commencements, and he couldn’t even recall the speakers. He also congratulated the graduates and their “former tuition payers” for their accomplishments.

Also during the ceremony an honorary Doctor of Science degree was presented to Ina May Gaskins, a childbirth expert who founded and directs the Farm Midwifery Center near Summertown, Tenn. She has attended more than 1,200 births.

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