

North Carolina State University Commencement | December 16, 2016

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People are capable of extraordinary things when we expect it of them. That has been a guiding belief of my life and my career, and it remains my strong conviction today.

When we ask for the best in others, and offer our best in return, our ambitions are boundless with no obvious limit to what we can achieve for ourselves and for others.

This isn't meant as a cliché or some abstract theory. You all are a shining example of high expectations made real. And this University is an institution born of strong confidence in the capacity of ordinary people to do remarkable things.

Now none of you, I know, are ordinary. Your parents certainly don't think so. And you wouldn't be standing here today, preparing to accept diplomas from one of the world's finest universities, if you were.

But let me assure you that you *started out* ordinary. You started out, in fact, as helpless little things that couldn't walk or feed yourselves or Snapchat anyone.

I'm sure you were all adorable from day one, but there still was a point in your lives when you hadn't done much to distinguish yourselves.

And I bring this up because the distance you've traveled from there to here required not just your own native talent and hard work, but the patience and confidence of the people around you.

The goodwill and love of parents and grandparents, friends and siblings, teachers and neighbors who supported you and pushed you to be better.

As a parent, I'm familiar with this type of shared accountability. I have a daughter whose brilliant prospects were clouded by the fact that she wouldn't get out of bed as a teenager.

Her native genius was powerful, no doubt, but hard to see when she was asleep. So most mornings, I went to her bedroom and offered gentle encouragement, sometimes by throwing back the covers and asking, "Are you going to be part of the problem, or part of the solution?" See what I'm talking about? High expectations.

I suspect most of you have people in your lives who have played that role. People who have guided you, nurtured you, kicked you in the pants when necessary, and celebrated you on the long path to this day.

I imagine a lot of them are here, so let's take a moment to thank the families and friends who shared in the labor of love that goes into a college education.

And I also want to take some time this morning to think about the invisible labor that went into this day. Because as hard as you've worked, as much as you've studied and stressed and stayed up nights so that you could reach this point, you have also been carried along by untold thousands that you'll never know.

Across North Carolina and across this country, thousands upon thousands of your fellow citizens — many of whom will never enjoy the same opportunities you have in front of you — have given their time and care so that you could be here today.

Men and women who paid the taxes that helped fund the labs and classrooms where you learned. Donors who recognized the value of this place, and gave their money to help strengthen it.

North Carolinians who paid a little extra for cars and clothes and homes so that we could build and sustain this world-class public university.

Only about 1/3 of the people in this state have a bachelor's degree. Which means that millions of North Carolinians who never enjoyed a day like this one have sacrificed something so that you could.

They have expectations of you, these unsung patrons. They have faith that *your* education will play a role in *their* futures, that your being smarter and more prepared and all-'round more capable is going to carry benefits that echo beyond your own life.

In short, your education matters to them. It matters to the kind of state and society we all want to live in.

Are they right? Are their expectations of you justified? Is their trust in you well-placed? I think so. But why don't you prove it? Walk out of here today, and show them.

We all want you to be happy and successful. And I know many of you are sitting here right now thinking, ‘Good grief, lady, I’m just trying to land a job so I can stop sleeping on a futon and eating microwave noodles.’ Fair enough.

But you’re eventually going to get that job — we have statistics that make me a lot more confident about that than you might be.

And you’re going to build a career and be able to afford real furniture and your own Netflix subscription, and your family will be proud of you and the NC State fundraising office will be interested in you, and you’ll rearrange your memories of these years so that it all looks in retrospect like a well-formed plan instead of a mad improvisation.

I want that for every last one of you.

But I don’t want you to stop there, because your own happiness and your own success are not enough. You owe more than that.

I want to know what lies beyond, what you’re going to do for the next person coming behind you, what you expect of the next generation. Because their prospects will depend on the decisions you make, the expectations you set, and the opportunities you create for them, just as your world was built by the labor of those who came before.

The opportunities you’ve had are the product of generational investment, sacrifice, and confidence. What are you going to do with that? How are you going to pay it forward?

Popular culture has been pretty brutal to your generation, I must say. A quick skim of headlines does not give a kind assessment of American young people. You’re said to be fragile snowflakes; entitled narcissists; awkward technophiles who don’t know how to hold a real conversation or write a full sentence. And, for good measure, you don’t like being called Millennials. (And with stereotypes like those, who can blame you?)

But, I don’t think any of that is true. Our culture tends to project its deepest anxieties onto its youngest members, and you all have grown up in what seems to me an especially anxious era.

There is endless talk about uncertainty — in economics, in politics, in foreign affairs. We're concerned about the effects of new technology, worried what the jobs of the future will look like and whether there will be enough of them, and fretful about whether our standing as a nation is rising or falling. The Age of Uncertainty is upon us, and you all have borne the brunt of that anxiety.

So what are you supposed to do? How can you prove the naysayers wrong?

People are worried because we can't predict the future. That's not exactly a new phenomenon. We fear technological changes we can't control as did our parents and grandparents, and their parents and grandparents before them. The world seems volatile. Of course it does — it always has been.

We cannot know the future — we never have, and we never will.

But that I believe is a cause for optimism at least as much as a cause for worry. We may not be able to plan our lives to perfection, but we can prepare. We can learn and train and equip ourselves to face whatever lies ahead.

We can become the kind of people ready to meet and shape the world no matter what it brings. That's what you've been doing these past few years, because that's what an NC State education is all about.

When this University opened its doors in 1889, the Civil War was still a living memory. The parents and grandparents of those first students lived through the worst conflict and the ugliest division in this country's history.

They saw immense destruction on our home soil, and lived through the bitter struggle to rebuild and rebind a nation. They couldn't know what lay ahead, but they put their faith in education, building land-grant universities like this one to prepare a rising generation for an unknown future.

When those first students walked this campus, more than half of all North Carolinians still lived and worked on small farms. The Wright Brothers' first flight at Kitty Hawk was still more than a decade away, the Ford Model T hadn't been invented, and you couldn't listen to the radio because it didn't exist. (You all know what radio is, right? It's like having someone else control your iPhone from far away.)

But within the lifetime of those early graduates — those students who arrived here on horseback and studied under gas lamps — the United States became an industrial power, fought a world war, put humans in space, and broadcast live news to living room television sets.

How's that for change? How's that for technological disruption and global uncertainty?

The graduates of that era didn't shrink in the face of the unknown. They faced it headlong, and they laid the groundwork for an American century of rising prosperity and progress.

That's the kind of challenge this institution was *designed* for. Land grant colleges were purpose-built to help the next generation prepare for earth-shaking shifts in the economy and society, to offer broad knowledge so that an educated citizenry could adapt and thrive no matter what.

You are the modern heirs to that incredibly far-sighted ideal, born in the aftermath of war and Reconstruction and lighted by hope and faith in a better future.

Justin Morrill, the Congressman who conceived the land-grant university, said that education must be extended “not merely to those destined to sedentary professions, but to those much needing higher instruction for the world's business.”¹

The world's business. Not a particular profession, not an individual career, not personal success. No — you are North Carolina State graduates, and you are charged with attending to the world's business.

That spirit of grand expectation and high ambition is echoed in the motto of this place: Think & Do. That sounds simple enough, but it's a big ask. Life conspires against thought and action.

It offers you the comforts of easy entertainment and cheap distraction, both deeply opposed to the hard work of thinking. And it offers you plenty of well-worn, mundane tasks to occupy your days, guiding you away from the purposeful, creative action that your education has made possible.

¹ <http://www.aplu.org/library/the-land-grant-tradition/file>

It's up to you to go beyond the default options, to make the conscious choice to Think & Do throughout your life.

It's not an especially easy way to live, but if you can manage it — and your being here today certainly suggests that you can — then all of the personal success and happiness I talked about earlier will take care of itself.

That's the great irony of learning to look beyond your own life and work for something greater — it almost inevitably leads to a deeper, more fulfilling experience in this world. In building for tomorrow, we sharpen our appreciation for today.

In serving others, we enlarge our own capacities and heighten our own joys.

Those are the hopes I have for you, the higher expectations that come along with your higher education. Don't just navigate the world as you find it — shape it for those who come next. For your family, your friends, your neighbors and fellow citizens. They believed in you. Keep faith with them, and you'll remember this day as the start of something extraordinary.

Thank you.