

Dear Cook Class of 2006,

Congratulations to you, the class of 2006, and congratulations to your families, friends, and loved ones who join you in celebrating your graduation. Each of you knows in your heart who it is who has played the essential supportive role in your life as a Rutgers Cook student. For many, it is a parent or a sibling, for others a teacher or a friend, and for at least a few, it's possibly a husband or wife or partner. Some of you have been helped financially, but all of you have at some point or another relied on someone to provide emotional support and nurturing. I hope that you will remember the support you have received during your college years, and honor the person who provided it by yourself playing a similar role in the life of a future student.

I want to acknowledge the members of our faculty. They have played many and varied roles in your life as a student, and I hope that each of you has found a fulfilling intellectual relationship with at least one member of the Rutgers faculty, learning perhaps the ability to think clearly, or to work in any environment, or to contribute meaningfully to your profession and to society.

Graduation marks the end of your undergraduate years, and a closing of a chapter of your lives. But today is also a beginning — the beginning of new opportunities and new adventures. I see in all of you endless possibilities and I am excited for you. But before you go, I'd like to give you some passionate words of advice, and to cause you to reflect perhaps a new way, on what has happened these past 4 or more years, and what lies ahead.

Let me start with the nature of learning. What I was taught in college is mostly

obsolete now, and some of it turned out to be flat wrong. The same will be true for you. The value of my college education is not what I was taught, but rather what I learned. The most important thing that I learned in college was how to learn, and *that* will never become obsolete. So I urge you to continue your education. I urge you to read, read, read. I urge you to ask questions, to wonder, and to imagine. Keep those brains working and keep learning!

But know that learning is not alone the goal. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said, “Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do.”

At Cook, we emphasize our learning-by-doing pedagogy, because we know that doing is how you learn best. We also know that learning by doing is the best preparation for doing during your professional and civic life.

I encourage you, throughout your life, to get involved in your community, to take advantage of the educational opportunities all around you, and to share your knowledge with others. Roll up your sleeves and get involved.

Please remember that it is not enough to “receive” an education. An educated person who is not engaged in the world around him or her self is ineffective — and worse than the uneducated in the sense that the investment has been made and wasted. There is no return on that investment without engagement. Coupled to a strong sense of civic awareness, true engagement also fulfills the moral obligations that come with an education.

Where would we be if heroes like Paul Robeson, born to a former slave father and a schoolteacher mother, decided to go with the status quo? What if he allowed

racism and repression and the greatest of odds to prevent him from pursuing his education at Rutgers? We would have missed out on a 12-letter athlete, a student who graduated Phi Beta Kappa and valedictorian, and was only the third African American to graduate from this institution of higher learning. And perhaps they would have met anyway, but pursuing a law degree at Columbia certainly helped Robeson to meet his future wife—exceptional in her own right and the first African American woman to head a pathology laboratory.

Paul Robeson was a scholar, an actor, an artist, and our social conscience. And what I want you to get from his example is this: Sometimes the odds are stacked against you, but you must persevere. Recently, I heard a lunch-time talk in Trenton by Greg Olsen, a New Jersey native who was a NASA astronaut. He was telling his student audience that he'd flunked trigonometry in high school. So how did a kid, he asked, who flunked trig in high school go on to graduate from college, get a Ph.D., and become an astronaut? "Don't give up." That was the essential ingredient in Robeson's life, too. May it be the same in yours.

Some members of the class of 2006 spent their spring break in New Orleans. You got involved; you saw a need, made it into a learning opportunity, and you did something about it—that's half the answer. The other half is thinking, "What could I have done to prevent the tragedies that unfolded in New Orleans? What can I do to prevent future tragedies?" The tragedy of Hurricane Katrina was not the hurricane, but the aftermath and what it revealed about our lack of preparedness and capacity to respond effectively. How was this tragedy a result of a nation, a state, a city, that had lost its bearings, that had not invested in the important things like infrastructure, that had failed to implement policies to care for its most vulnerable citizens? And how should we now do things differently?

Step back and assess what's happening, not just in your neighborhood, but in your state, your country, your continent, hemisphere, world. And then, step boldly into that picture and be engaged. That is the heart of a real education and it is not something that ends today.

You are not the same person you were when you first arrived here. Oliver Wendell Holmes astutely observed, "One's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions." Your mind, your perceptions of what is possible, of what you are capable of, have been altered forever. You have changed, but in this regard, I hope that you continue to change and to challenge yourselves with new ideas throughout your life. I hope you discover within yourself interests you didn't know you had, talents you never suspected you possessed, and the bravery to face adversity and take risks that you never expected to find within you.

But even as you change, stay true to your moral compass. Work hard, work ethically and responsibly, work to enhance your profession, the lives of your fellow men and women, and the world around you.

John Muir, the famous naturalist, wrote in 1911, "When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world." In recent years, we have learned how true this is, as we have come to discover that the aggregate of human activity in a world that has grown to a population of over 6 billion today is changing the conditions of life on Earth. This fact is not merely a challenge — it is a threat to the future of human life on Earth. This is a threat that your generation is going to have to tackle and solve. The fact of climate change and the environmental changes that it is causing will, I believe, force human societies to

deal with global governance in your generation. After World War I, governance at an international level was seen by some, notably by Woodrow Wilson, as desirable but optional, and the League of Nations failed. After World War II, it was seen as insurance against nuclear holocaust, and while the United Nations has credits in amongst its flaws, there were other factors that operated to end the Cold War and, at least for a while, the threat of nuclear conflict.

In your generation, globalization, not just of trade or travel, but of environmental change, will make new arrangements for governance on a global scale necessary, not optional. As global citizens, you are all connected to the rest of the world. We will not successfully address the challenges the lie ahead by isolating ourselves from the world and its realities. Rather, each of you must come to see yourself as a global citizen and engage as a citizen in seeking peace, health, prosperity, and food security for all of the world's people.

I want to end with a few pieces of advice, some given to me at important stages in my career, others that came to me mostly from reading and have stuck.

From an early mentor, Bill Thompson at the University of Illinois:

“Don't do little things badly.”

Bill made the point that if you take risks, if you engage with the big problems and opportunities in your life, you will inevitably make a few big mistakes. If you are in the habit of not doing little things badly, of paying attention to details, of not being sloppy, then your little mistakes will not become big ones, and those around you will be more forgiving when you do make one of those big mistakes.

From an anonymous source:

“It’s amazing how much you can get done if you don’t mind who gets the credit.”

This advice focuses on getting things done and letting the credit follow — if and when it does. It’s about promoting causes, solutions, progress, and discovery, rather than self.

And on the topic of discovery, from the British immunologist Peter Medawar in his book *Advice to a Young Scientist*:

“If you want to make important discoveries, ask important questions.”

Throughout your career, you will be faced with the need to prioritize. Satisfaction and contribution both will come from addressing what is important rather than what is trivial.

I wish you the best of luck and remind you that you are, and always will be, a part of the Cook community. And stay tuned and participate as we navigate the future of your Cook community and become Rutgers University’s School of Environmental and Biological Sciences. Some things — including the traditional sense of “community” will be here when you return for your 5<sup>th</sup> class reunion. But other things will be different. Many of the key differences are embedded in and anticipated by the remarks I have made this morning.

Finally, I want to point out to you that members of the Class of 2006, and their parents and friends, are among those who know best the quality of a Rutgers Cook College education — and soon you will begin to learn in real time the value of that education. Rutgers urgently needs your engagement in expressing your beliefs as citizens and residents of New Jersey as we work to ensure the resources necessary to maintain and enhance the quality of this institution are available and used prudently on behalf of our students and taxpayers. As new alumni, your voice can help new students to achieve their goals, just as you have today.

Once again, my sincere congratulations to you all!

Robert M. Goodman

Executive Dean