

Commencement, 2009 – President’s speech

It is my great honor to address you, the 2009 graduates of SUNY Oneonta, on your graduation. Your education here has left you well prepared for a successful and fulfilling future. Today is a day to celebrate and I know it is a happy day for you. For the next few minutes I ask you also to reflect on some principles you have learned in college and how to make them yours forever.

SUNY Oneonta stands for many enduring values. Today I will outline three key values and ask you to remember them when you make choices about your career, your family, and your lifestyle. The three enduring values are learning, sustainability, and community service.

First, learning. You received a high quality education at SUNY Oneonta. When you came to us you were already bright and well-prepared students. We provided you with the best support, encouragement, and challenges that we could offer. Your faculty and staff members served as role models for intellectual engagement, thoughtful analysis, and compelling communication. You delivered on your intellectual potential, as we see by the many medallions, honor cords, certificates, and other symbols of achievement that you have collected.

As you leave college, whether you go on to seek an advanced degree or whether you enter directly into the professional world, you must never stop learning. Make a point of embracing new ideas and information. Travel and be inquisitive about other people and places. Read widely and critically, visit museums, see plays, hear concerts, and most of all seek friends who can help stretch rather than narrow your boundaries. College set you on a path of inquiry, and we hope you will carry the spirit of intellectual curiosity with you always. If we have taught you well, you have acquired the habit of learning – and you will always continue learning.

The second value is sustainability. Your generation has seen major changes in how we think about the natural environment. In 1987, the year some of you were born, the so-called “garbage barge” carrying 168 tons of trash set out from Islip, Long Island bound for North Carolina where it was slated to be turned into methane. When North Carolina officials denied permission to unload, the barge continued down the Atlantic coast all the way to Mexico and Belize, unsuccessfully attempting to offload its cargo. It finally returned to New York, where the trash was incinerated, and the ash was buried in Islip, back full circle. The garbage barge, along with other threats to the environment such as the 1989 oil spill from the Exxon Valdez in Alaska and the 1991 Nine Mile Point nuclear power plant scare near Oswego were wake-up calls to your parents’ generation when you were just small children.

During your lifetime, however, scientists, activists, and entrepreneurs have started to meet the challenges of living in cooperation with the natural environment. We realize that a society built on disposables is both wasteful and unhealthy so are willing to spend a little more time and effort to reuse products and recycle materials. We are aware that oil, gas, and coal resources

are finite, so we are seeking efficient, clean, and renewable sources of energy. We know that certain chemicals have deadly effects on humans and other species, so we develop alternatives. During your college years you have helped foster environmental awareness among your peers, and I thank you for cooperating with the college's efforts to save water, use electricity wisely, and reduce the waste stream. As part of the Earth Week observance this year, the residence halls held a contest to see which could save the most energy. The contest was called "Do it in the Dark." Golding Hall won with an amazing 30% reduction in electricity consumption during that week and several other halls saved nearly as much power. These and other activities on campus have raised your awareness of sustainability and helped you develop habits that will serve you well after graduation.

The third value is service. As a public institution, one aspect of our college's mission is to serve the public good. We care deeply about your success as an individual and we want you to succeed in your chosen career, but we also care about how you will participate as a citizen and how you will contribute to your community.

Your class has stepped up to the plate during your college years. Through the Center for Social Responsibility and Community, and through your student organizations, you have donated thousands of hours to nonprofit organizations such as Habitat for Humanity and Saturday's Bread. You have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for causes such as cancer research and domestic violence prevention. You have served neighbors nearby and far away. Some of you went to Louisiana and Texas for hurricane cleanup; others traveled to India to build schools; and still others helped establish a library in Ghana. You have learned to "pay it forward" and you realize that the measure of your worth as a person is as much what you give as what you get. So as you depart the Oneonta community I encourage you to continue with your community service wherever your path leads you.

On behalf of the college, I extend our praise for your progress as learners, our recognition of your contributions to sustainability, and our thanks for your service. We are proud of what you have already accomplished and we look forward to hearing about your future exploits. Best of luck, graduates, and keep the Oneonta values in mind. Congratulations!