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5-16-2010

2010 Commencement Remarks

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Recommended Citation

Cantor, Nancy, "2010 Commencement Remarks" (2010). *Office of the Chancellor (2004 - 2013)*. 4.
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2010 Commencement Remarks
Nancy Cantor, Chancellor & President
Syracuse University, May 16, 2010

I want to offer a warm welcome to the families and friends of the Syracuse University and SUNY- ESF Class of 2010. Congratulations from all the members of the university community! I'd like to ask our faculty, staff, parents, and friends to stand and join me in giving the Class of 2010, those receiving undergraduate and graduate and professional degrees today, a huge round of applause.

And now I want to ask the 2010 graduates to stand and join me in thanking your families, your professors, and your friends with another round of applause.

This time of year, we're all thinking about beginnings and endings. You're graduating and preparing to start anew. We're saying goodbye to you and getting ready to say hello to a newly admitted class. And, in a way, the messages are the same. In fact, the themes I raised with many of you as first-year undergraduates at our 2006 opening convocation, right here in the Dome, still apply as you leave here as graduates. So if you'd indulge me, I'd like to fast forward from then to now.

When you arrived on campus, I asked you to rethink the popular image of education as a preparation for life. As the British author Rose Tremain said, "Life is not a dress rehearsal," and this is also true in education. As we say at Syracuse, you've been preparing *for* the world *in* the world. This is a necessity because it's very difficult to predict what's coming next, let alone prepare *for* it from afar. Regardless of whether it repeats itself, history is only a partial guide, and we are continually confronted unexpectedly with challenges that bear a sad resemblance to the past. Yes, the world in the past has witnessed devastating earthquakes like the one this year that took such a toll in Haiti. And yes, our nation has suffered before---within living memory--- from a different kind of devastation, one that starts with excessive risk-taking on Wall Street and moves quickly through the land, sending shocks all along Main Street, toppling homes and jobs in its wake. As we experienced earlier in The Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression, today's Great Recession hurts everyone, from inner city neighborhoods like those right here in Syracuse to rural regions like those across Upstate New York, where jobs are scarce already. These events are eerily familiar.

Yet, familiarity should not make us immune from action. We must, as I said four years ago, gather up our courage and embrace our social responsibility, engaging directly with *today's* challenges. My field is social psychology, and I told you then about famous psychology experiments showing something unexpected: the more people there are in a room when an emergency happens, the *less* likely each one is to act. We all live in crowded rooms, but we must not hand off our responsibilities.

We must take on long-standing challenges like the disparities in educational opportunity in our country, and the threat to our planet from global climate change. Thankfully, you, members of the Class of 2010, have not been bystanders in that proverbial crowded room. You jumped right into Say Yes to Education in Syracuse and you got working on projects for President Clinton's Global Initiative, to name only a few of your persistent engagements. And you also didn't rely on others to rise to the occasion in the face of sudden emergencies. You got involved, whether it was working for Haitian earthquake relief, taking your lead from the Haitian community in Syracuse, or—speaking of our community---you made hundreds of calls to raise funds for Syracuse students, to “keep ‘em Cuse” in the financial uncertainties of this recession. “Syracuse Responds” we called it. The Class of 2010 knows how to respond, and most importantly, you know that you *must* respond.

The final theme I noted then--- and that you have carried on--- was best said by Marcel Proust, when he wrote: “the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.” That is at the heart of a Syracuse education. Many of you will leave here today and struggle in this unstable economy to find a job; but all of you will leave here with new eyes for the world, for others, for art, for entrepreneurship, for speaking up, and for giving voice to more people. All of you will have taken off the blinders, seeing that those who suffer most in emergencies are also the ones who are most hurt day in and day out in the regular course of things. Treat those new eyes as the most valuable lesson learned at Syracuse, and use them going forward, as you have so creatively and energetically here, to make a difference – actually many differences, small and large, near to home and far away – in this world. Congratulations on the acuity and expansiveness of your vision – keep at it, and keep ‘em Cuse – we’ll be watching with the new eyes that you’ve so generously given to us too!!

It now gives me great pleasure to introduce my colleague and friend, Dr. Cornelius B. “Neil” Murphy, President of the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, to deliver his greetings.

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