

**Durham, N.C.** - Good afternoon. President Ingram; trustees, faculty, and staff; other distinguished guests; members of the graduating class; families and friends: thank you for inviting me to be here with you today and thank you, Ms. McNally for your kind introduction. It is truly an honor to address the graduating class of Durham Tech as it celebrates its 50th year of service to Durham and the Triangle community.

My main order of business is to offer congratulations to today's graduates—and to the families, mentors and friends who helped them reach this point. Nobody, after all, reaches graduation day totally on his or her own. I also welcome the opportunity to reflect—briefly, I promise—on the mission of this institution, and on how your accomplishment relates not just to your future but to the future of our community and our country.

In many ways, the story of Durham Tech is the story of this region. Fifty years ago, the area surrounding Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill, was, in the words of one of the pioneers of Research Triangle Park, composed of little more than "scrub pines and possums."

But we had something else--visionary leaders, from government, the private sector, and academia--who came together to establish a research and development park in the middle of that pine forest. They did so because they recognized the Triangle's major assets: world-class educational institutions that could produce the ideas and innovations that would fuel the modern economy, as well as people with the talent and work ethic needed to bring such ideas to scale.

As a result, the Triangle is now home not just to tobacco farmers but to some of the world's leading agricultural research and crop science enterprises, not just to textile mills but to institutions and firms researching and developing textile products for applications beyond our forebears' imagination. And, of course, these industries have been joined by newer ones – from information technology and biopharmaceuticals to green energy and financial services.

Our four-year colleges and universities have been visible catalysts of this economic transformation, and our region's community colleges have served as its engine. Community colleges – and Durham Tech in particular – have produced business leaders and entrepreneurs as well as highly capable workers, and they have done so while constantly reinventing themselves as industries have evolved or given way to new ones.

At the national level, our leaders have also recognized the critical role that technical and community colleges play as drivers of economic growth and renewal. President Obama has made community colleges a key focus of his innovation agenda, with enthusiastic support from the Vice President's wife, Dr. Jill Biden, who has taught in community colleges for the last 17 years. Dr. Biden recently noted that, "Today, community colleges are the largest, fastest growing, most affordable segment of America's higher education system."

The President hosted the first-ever White House Summit on Community Colleges last fall. On that occasion he hailed community colleges as "the unsung heroes of America's education system." "They may not get the credit they deserve," he said, "They may not get the same resources as other schools. But they provide a gateway to millions of Americans to good jobs and a better life." And then he noted a telling statistic that underscores the key role of this level of education in providing both economic opportunity for individuals and economic competitiveness for our country: "In the coming years, jobs requiring at least an associates degree are going to grow twice as fast as jobs that don't require college."

And so the story of Durham Tech in its 50th year is also the story of the economic future our community and our nation face. It is also your story, and I hope today will mark a significant chapter in your quest for a productive and prosperous life.

Durham Tech's success is a particular source of pride for me because I began my own higher education at a two-year school—what was then Mars Hill Junior College, across the mountain from my home in Tennessee. After finishing at Mars Hill, I made the transition some of you will make—from a two-year institution to a four-year degree program, in this case at UNC-Chapel Hill, where I recently had the sobering experience of attending my 50th reunion!

My experience at Mars Hill got me off to a positive and supportive start, and helped motivate one of my first legislative accomplishments after I was elected to Congress. I was assigned to serve on the House Science Committee, and I noticed that the federal government's education and training efforts, particularly those of the National Science Foundation, were focused overwhelmingly on four-year universities, with very little attention being paid to the role of two-year and community colleges in work force development and in increasing our nation's competitiveness.

This seemed short sighted to me, and to help fill the gaps, I initiated what is now called the Advanced Technological Education program at the National Science Foundation. ATE provides targeted support to community colleges and community college systems to develop innovative curricula and teaching methods focused on high-tech industries, and also supports path-breaking partnerships between community colleges and private businesses.

I recount this story to help make a broader point. The experience you've had at Durham Tech may be related in all sorts of anticipated and unanticipated ways to what you do later in life. And I hope that will apply not just to your own work life but to the kinds of citizens you become and the kinds of public undertakings you support. That brings us, as you might have expected, to politics.

I don't know what image first comes to mind when you hear the word politics, but I hope it goes beyond 30-second attack ads, talk-show rants, special interest pleading, or power mongering. The fact is that politics in a democracy is an indispensable means of achieving our common purposes as a community. I have always been grateful to have come of age politically during the civil rights era, because it was such a positive formative experience—demonstrating that committed people acting together, using the legitimate instruments of power and persuasion, could right ancient wrongs.

It is important not to lose—indeed we must insist upon—that vision of politics in a democracy as an instrument of common purpose. For that is the kind of politics it will take, with each of us participating, whether as leaders, advocates, or informed citizens, if our community is to flourish and more people are to have the kind of opportunity to realize their dreams that we celebrate here today.

After all, the opportunities you have had and the successes you anticipate owe a great deal to the active and engaged citizenship of those who have gone before. So it is not enough for you to receive a diploma here today and take your place at a business or another institution tomorrow, as important as that is and as satisfying as it will be. You have enhanced potential as informed and active citizens, and your participation in our community must extend to its civic life.

Durham Tech has already recognized this vital connection by marking its 50th anniversary as a "year of service" – a fitting tribute to the role of this institution has played in the service of the Triangle community. And so I urge all of you to carry forth this notion as you leave this institution

and assume your next station of life. See both your work life and your civic life as proving grounds for your education.

One essential way you might do so is by becoming advocates for the kinds of public policies that have helped bring you to where you are as students, well-trained workers, and citizens. If our nation is to remain a leader of the global economy, we must train our people to out-innovate and out-build our competitors. We will only do that with education. And if the Research Triangle success story is to be preserved and enhanced for future generations, we must understand the underpinning that good public policy—strong public education and training efforts, a robust research enterprise, staying ahead of the curve on infrastructure, a supportive environment for small and startup businesses—has played.

At this moment, your elected officials—at all levels—are rethinking the role of government in supporting everything from roads to research. What kind of common stake do we have in grant and loan programs to make college more affordable? How much should we invest in job training programs and innovative curricula at institutions like this one?

America deserves a government that isn't penny-wise and pound foolish. Do we have any doubt—here in the Triangle of all places—whether investments in education work? Here in this room is all the evidence we need.

If we are to preserve and expand these fundamental efforts to meet the needs of the 21st Century, we need to hear from you – we need to hear from you at school board meetings, at city council meetings, in the state legislature and in Congress. We need your voices on this subject and many more. I hope you will consider it your obligation to contribute to the common good, not only through your work and enterprise, but also through your service and citizenship.

I will end as I began: with heartfelt congratulations for what you, with the help and support of many, many people, have achieved. You have made it through Durham Tech's demanding course of study, often under trying circumstances, on tight budgets, balancing competing family and job demands. You have earned the admiration of this community and we look forward to the contributions you will continue to make.

I wish you good fortune as you take your skills, industry and determination out into the world. I

wish you the satisfaction of productive work that uses your full potential. And may you also make a positive contribution to those around you, giving as well as receiving, blessing even as you have been blessed, gladly assuming the jobs and responsibilities of citizenship.

Thank you and Godspeed.

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