

James C. Renick, Chancellor
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

Commencement Address

University of the Virgin Islands
St. Croix Campus
Tuesday, May 16, 2006
6:00 p.m.

Good Evening!

Governor Turnbull, Mr. Chairman, Members of the Board of Trustees, President Ragster, distinguished platform guests, relieved and exhausted faculty, parents, little brothers and sisters who are already asking, "Is that man about finished?", friends, invited guests, and most of all distinguished, educated and happy graduates of the class of 2006: you made it! Thank you for the honor of addressing you on the occasion of Commencement at the University of the Virgin Islands. I am so happy to be with you on this joyous Tuesday evening. It seems like only yesterday when I felt just as excited as you sitting there, looking up at the platform, waiting to receive that long awaited degree at my own commencement just a "few" short years back.

I can tell you that I probably had similar thoughts on my mind such as why did I have to do all this work to get this degree, will I get a job, can I finish paying my school loans, and will I be successful. Although you face a dangerous world where conflicts abound, I also faced a dangerous world with the draft and the Vietnam War. I am here to tell you, the loans were paid, I have had several jobs ---good jobs, and I now know why my professors gave me so much work. If there is one thing I can tell you about my journey that may be helpful for yours is the fact that learning how to live is just as important as learning how to earn a living. You can and will be successful.

The most successful people I know are constantly thinking about who they are and what contribution they will make to their communities. Because you see, I believe we all have a contribution to make based on our God-given talents and the skills and knowledge we develop along the way. Armed with your education from the University of the Virgin Islands, you should expect success! The University of the Virgin Islands like all of America's great Historically Black Colleges and Universities was founded on a big idea---an idea that is just as big today as it was since the founding of the university in 1963. And you all are so lucky. I love to visit college campuses. Place is so important, and the first impression we have is lasting, so the entrance to a campus makes a statement about the type of place it is. As I entered the campus graced and lined by those lovely and stately royal palm trees, I can only say the entrance to this campus makes a powerful statement.

The big idea, however, for all of us to note is based on affirmations of goodness, *specialness*, and the wonder in us all. Just as my own college education gave me the tools to discover the leader in me, you can discover the leader within yourself. I owe a lot to my alma mater which happens to be another great HBCU known as Central State University in Ohio. Like me, you now owe this wonderful institution. It is a debt we all must pay. You know it! You've seen the information regarding your annual fund and creating a legacy of giving. To whom much is given, much is required. Remember we exist temporarily through what we take, but we live forever through what we give.

So graduates, when you get that second paycheck (not the first---I understand the need to celebrate). But, when you get the second paycheck, write a check to UVI. When your children are considering college at least bring them by this campus. Black colleges were important yesterday; they are important today; and they will be more important tomorrow. We must nourish the spirit that nourished us. The transfer of knowledge and wealth from one generation to the next is critical to our families, our communities, and our nation.

I promise that this evening I will take only 15 minutes of your time. Unlike the minister who said that the last time he talked for only 15 minutes was when he said hello to his mother, I know that good speeches are not measured by the hour. I asked President Ragster if she had any advice for my time with you, and she said, "Regardless of how much time you need to speak, cut it in half."

Therefore, in the next very few minutes, I will talk about you---what makes you the special person you are today, a graduate of this historic institution. As graduates of UVI, I know you have been equipped with certain tools, tools that you will need as you face today's different world and challenges. Value your gifts and talents. Let them shine. Let all of them shine.

As Nelson Mandela once said,

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.... Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, to be gorgeous, talented, and fabulous. Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God.

Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that others won't feel insecure around you.

We are born to make manifest the glory of God within us. And as we let our light shine, we consciously give others permission to do the same. "

Did you know that Benjamin Banneker, a black mathematician and inventor born in 1731, did not read his first mathematics text until he was in his forties? Yet, Banneker's accomplishments by the time he read that text were incredible. After seeing his first watch at the age of 21, he built a clock that was so precise it struck every hour, on the hour, for forty years. He studied astronomy and published an almanac. In fact, he saved the U.S. Government the effort and expense of having someone else design the capital after the architect Pierre

L'Enfant left the project in a fit of temper and took the plans with him. Banneker recreated the plans from memory.

Yes, Banneker overcame great disadvantages. Many of us have had to overcome great disadvantages as people of color, as women, as members of certain religions or ethnicities. As graduates of the University of the Virgin Islands, however, you face in some ways a more difficult challenge. That is, will you be able to overcome your advantages?

This, to my mind, is a very serious question, and it goes to the heart of what I am saying to you this evening.

As you leave UVI, each of you is superbly equipped to handle the technical aspects of being a teacher, a businessperson, an engineer, and so on. But that is only the beginning---and not the end---of the many ways in which you will be tested in the years ahead. You will be tested on your interpersonal skills. You will be tested on your communications skills. You will be tested on your capacity for personal growth.

You can be the most brilliant person in your field, but if you are unable to communicate clearly, your best ideas will not shine but are all too likely to experience the fate of the proverbial tree in the forest---falling to the ground unnoticed and unlamented. I have seen this happen to some extremely bright and talented people. What good is a 4.0 GPA if your written and oral skills are a 1.5? The spoken word is power. The written word is advancement.

Whatever your brilliance in your field may be, I believe your most important job is to fulfill your role as a human being. Remember learning how to live is just as important as learning how to earn a living.

Part of your educational requirements here at UVI have been in courses widely divergent from your major. I know that at times many of you said, "Why did I have to take this or that course?" I remember taking an art appreciation course as part of my requirements. The only problem was I didn't appreciate art. Or to put it another way, I didn't understand the wonder and awe associated with the beauty of art. Now, as an avid art collector, I can't get enough. Value your education and use the knowledge you have gained from your professors to broaden your other skills and talents. Your education should have prepared you to be independent of mind, skeptical of authority, able to forge your own identity and capable of becoming who you are rather than being bent to copy other people.

These abilities are more important than ever because we live in a time when they are more imperiled than ever. We find ourselves immersed in a hyper-mediated, fast-moving and multi-sensory world, an environment of constant stimulation significantly influenced by the mass media and other unrelenting prescribers of opinion and feelings. But it is not the media alone who are to blame for the accelerated tenor of our lives.

Telephones, television, VCRs, DVD's, fax machines, computers, the Internet, e-mail, cell phones, beepers, and all these forms of instant communication too often create a bewildering barrage of noise and frenetic movement. It is almost as if we have surrounded ourselves with such technology in order to avoid suspended moments of silence and contemplation.

If we are to succeed in preserving our humanity against such technological tyranny, we need to slow the tempo of our lives and extend the span of our attention. I believe we need to emphasize a form of educating ourselves to establish a rich interior life and an enduring openness of mind. Develop a sturdy, private self, where moral self-examination can occur. I believe we must develop our emotional intelligence. That is, we must be self-aware and understand the

impact of our emotions on work performance and relationships. It is important to be able to realistically evaluate our strengths and limitations. Furthermore, we must have self-management in the form of self-control, trustworthiness, conscientiousness, adaptability, initiative, and the drive to achieve and meet our own internal standard of excellence. We must be socially aware and have social skills to communicate well, influence others for the good, manage conflict, build bonds, and be able to collaborate and build teams. These skills are important to develop relationships that will impact our abilities as leaders. As one CEO of a large corporation noted, "I don't think of leadership as a skill. I don't think of leadership as a position. I think of leadership as a relationship." I don't know if you've ever thought about leadership as a relationship, but it is a relationship that starts with you.

You should leave this beautiful campus feeling that you have really developed and grown since that first day you arrived as the nervous freshman. Without a doubt, I can tell you that your education can give you the energy and confidence to go on and do certain things that would otherwise have been beyond your reach.

I am reminded of an old African proverb. In fact I think of it often: *It is not what they call you, but what you answer to.* Be confident to choose your own path, not that of others.

At a very young age, self-educated people of the caliber of a Benjamin Banneker developed the habit of learning for a lifetime. Did you know Banneker's grandmother taught him from her only book, the Bible, but later in life he devoured every book he could get his hands on? He continued his habit of studying, and recording the results of his studies throughout his life. Now that's a fantastic advantage. But it's one that you, or I, or anyone else can emulate if we choose to. So, too, is the habit of self-deployment---of not waiting to be told to do something or learn something important. As Zora Neale Hurston wrote, "Mama

exhorted her children at every opportunity to ‘jump at [the] sun.’ We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.”

No doubt the University of the Virgin Islands has prepared you to jump at the sun. Just remember: on your way down, do not descend too deeply in *specialism* in your work. Don’t confuse *careerism* and success with excellence. Educate all your parts. You will be healthier.

A year before George Bernard Shaw, the author and playwright died, he was asked by a journalist to name someone famous --- a statesman, artist, philosopher, writer ---- whom he missed the most. Shaw replied, “The person I miss the most is the person I could have been.”

Be all that you can be. Let your light shine, keep it shining by never letting your growth and learning end. You see, knowledge is like a garden: if it is not cultivated, it cannot be harvested. And remember that to succeed you must share your gifts and talents with others and let them succeed also.

Give back to your family; give back to your world; and give back to your alma mater so that others as bright and advantaged as you are today will have the same opportunities. I know you will not fail. My call to action is contained in the following simple lines:

- The adventure of life is to learn.
- The purpose of life is to grow.
- The nature of life is to change.
- The challenge of life is to overcome.
- The essence of life is to care.
- The opportunity of life is to serve.
- The secret of life is to dare.
- The spice of life is to befriend.
- The beauty of life is to give.

Congratulations, graduates.

Thank you for inviting me here today.