

2012 Commencement Address

New College of Florida Commencement, May 25, 2012

Mike Michalson, President

Let me start out by welcoming and congratulating the members of the graduating class and their families, and welcoming as well: the New College faculty and staff; members of the College Board of Trustees; all those associated with the New College Foundation, the New College Library Association and the New College Alumnae/i Association; all the other alumnae/i who have returned to campus; and the many other elected officials, guests and friends of the campus who are here this evening – including, I am delighted to add, our incoming President of New College, Donal O’Shea.

In my dual role as president as well as this year’s Commencement speaker, let me extend a special thanks to parents for the trust you have placed in NCF over this period of time. I’m sure that, to you, it seems somewhere between “just yesterday” and “a million years ago” that you first dropped your son or daughter off at the campus. I am also sure that the pride you feel at this moment knows no bounds. We surely share your pride and are very grateful to you for your confidence.

Graduates, you look different than you did this morning, let alone four years ago...or five, or six, as the case may be. I’m proud to be a surrogate for the wonderful graphic novelist Neill Gaiman, a truly inspired first choice for this evening’s speaker, and do believe me when I say that there were many times this week when I really, really wished we could have landed him (it was a near thing, by the way, thanks to, of all things, last year’s Commencement speaker, Dr. Helen Fagin, who is Neill Gaiman’s aunt...Helen and Sydney in fact honor us with their presence here this evening).

I just have to say, however, that each year the graduating class’s list of preferences for Commencement speaker constitutes something of a very odd Rorschach test for NCF (for there I am on a list including Stephen King, David Bowie, Pee Wee Herman, and Jacques Derrida – by the way, message to those of you who keep voting for him: J. Derrida has been dead for some time).

Anyway, you’ve extended me a nice compliment, and in the spirit of full disclosure I should hasten to add that I’ve been through this before. On that earlier occasion, in 1997 (when, at the last minute, author Barbara Ehrenreich could not come due to a book tour insisted on by her publisher), I happily filled in and started off by saying that I’d always wanted to stand before a large audience and transmit profound insights to the graduating class such as “You have your whole future ahead of you” – at which point someone in the audience shouted, “As opposed to what?,” and things got off to a rocky start. Years later, while in my current role as College president, I was attending an alumnae/i event in Washington, D.C., when a woman who had graduated in 1997 came up to me, re-introduced herself, and said how much she had appreciated my commencement speech that year. I was of course flattered and a little puffed up, and I asked her what she recalled from the speech. She said she remembered how I had read to the audience

my nursery school report card and that it included the comment, “Mike has good appetite at juice and cracker time.” Some things never change.

It will be interesting to discover what, if anything at all, you recall from this evening’s remarks fifteen years from now. I need to emphasize at the outset that I seem to have an uncanny knack for misreading audiences. A couple of years ago, at a lunch-time speaking engagement in a large room out at Lakewood Ranch, I concluded my prepared remarks about New College and about the general state of higher education and opened things up for questions. A woman down in front asked a question, and as I began to respond, someone in the back yelled: “Could you repeat the question?” I said, “Certainly. The question was, ‘how could someone as young and handsome as you possibly be a College president?’” To my dismay, my joke was met with dead silence, so to this day, I don’t know if the audience did not get the joke, did not like the joke, or is still waiting for my answer.

Well, certainly I’m experienced enough in NC Commencements that I don’t think I’ll entirely mis-read my audience this evening. Nonetheless, I have to admit to a certain uneasiness, since the very nature of this occasion likely leads you to expect me to offer some “deep truths” stemming from my years in the College president’s office, deep truths that will magically illuminate your NCF experience in a way that will stay with you and inform your life in the years ahead. Since I have what might best be described as an ironic attitude toward “deep truths,” I’m sure to let you down on this score. Those of you who’ve studied the works of Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard either with me or with another teacher may recall his lovely comment about philosophers who try to teach truths: what the philosophers say about truth, Kierkegaard writes, “is often as disappointing as a sign you see in a shop window which reads: ‘Pressing Done Here.’ If you brought your clothes in to be pressed, you would be fooled; for the sign is only for sale.” Echoing his own point, Kierkegaard would add in another context that trying to teach truths is like pushing down too hard on the saw: you get little or no cutting for your effort, only sweat. He was, of course, trying to get at the point that the only truth worth fussing over is what he would call, “lived truth,” as opposed to paragraph material, or book truth....a point worth pondering as you prepare for post-graduate life.

Well, against the background of this inauspicious beginning, let me backtrack and try to discover a meaningful theme for this evening by reminding you of some things you might have read or heard me say on this or that campus occasion – at least if you were paying attention – and see if we can draw a line through these remarks in a way that may partially offset my unwillingness to teach deep truths.

1. On your very first day here, at new student orientation, when your parents were still with you, you would have heard me cite that classic definition of a first-year college student as someone walking around with their umbilical cord in their hand looking for something to plug into.
2. On that same day, you would have heard me say that I realized many of you chose NC because it seemed like a college where you could “do anything you want.” Do you happen to recall what I said as my follow up? I said, “I have bad news for you. There is no place in the world where you can ‘do anything you want,’ least of all NC.” You may further recall that I said that if you happened to be surrounded by roughly 800 very bright peers who similarly thought

“they could do anything they want” at NC, then something had to give. Through confronting that reality, you learned at first hand that responsibility toward the community is the flip side of the exercise of your freedom. The two go hand in hand.

3. I have suggested in numerous settings that the mission of NC is to be cheerfully subversive of the least attractive features of the surrounding society. I hope you have come to appreciate some of the implications of this observation, just as I have come to appreciate the importance of including the adverb, “cheerfully,” in front of the word, “subversive,” whenever I say this in a setting attended by elected officials.

4. And, of course, I have bored everyone on campus to tears with my multiple accounts of the marks of the liberally-educated person. I have, for example, said that a liberally-educated person knows that James Joyce did not write the poem, “Trees,” that Moby Dick is not the name of a venereal disease, and that the French expression, “C’est le guerre,” does not mean: “That’s the station.”

Now just this week at a small informal luncheon, I was reminded by one of my faculty colleagues that I used to say that the value of a liberal arts education is that it enables you to deal constructively with ambiguity. I said I’d given up doing that, since I grew tired of dealing with all the people who came up to me afterwards asking if I could be clearer about what I meant.

But the more I thought about it, the more I warmed to the theme of ambiguity as a thread for my remarks this evening. (Perhaps only at NC could “ambiguity” be considered a “thread.”) Indeed, I saw this theme intersect with my comment about the cheerfully subversive nature of a NC education, since surely one of the least attractive features of the surrounding society is the widespread tendency to treat ambiguity and complexity with a rush to judgment that generates polarizing finger-pointing and even the demonizing of those with different views on matters that are intrinsically complex.

At NC, we try to be the antidote to the widespread tendency to reduce intrinsically complex issues to the parameters of a bumper sticker – speaking of which, by the way, have you ever noticed how angry-sounding many bumper stickers are, as though the owner is just itching to go after anyone who might be on the other side of that issue? (Just parenthetically, we whose field is Religious Studies recognize that note of anger as a cover-up for a deep fear: quite simply, it is the fear that the existence of people with a view different from my own may mean that I’m wrong. Once again, ignorance and fear go together.)

At our best, we seek a different way here at NC. After all, think of the number of times during your studies at NC when you had to come to terms with the fact that, on an important matter, there was no single right answer! I was actually visited once in my office by a concerned father whose son had taken a couple of Religion courses with me. I knew, by the way, that I was in trouble when he entered my office, looked around, and actually said “You have so many books! You must love to read!” (At such moments, you scramble to identify the very tiny patch of common ground that might provide the basis for a constructive conversation between the two of you – not unlike the feeling I would have years later during my first trip to Tallahassee as the

newly independent College's president, and got asked by a state legislator: "New College? What are you going to name it?")

In any case, the student's father and I set about exchanging the sorts of crushing banalities that miraculously serve as the vehicle for polite human interaction when he finally cleared his throat, looked at me nervously and said: "My son really seems to enjoy your classes, and he's very challenged by them, but he says that he's always getting lots of questions and never any answers. When are you going to give the class the answers?"

Now notice a couple of things implicit in this story that reflect what we've been trying to convey to you during your time at NC. The absence of a clear answer – especially in cases where matters are deeply opaque and complex – is not a cause for anxiety, let alone fear... let alone polarizing finger-pointing toward those holding a different view. And second of all, this example conveys the telling point that framing questions in a clear-headed and critical way may be more important than arriving at the answers. Each one of you can doubtless cite numerous instances in your time at NC when we could sharpen our questions and carry on debate but not settle on a single clear answer. And guess what – no one died! In fact, I'll bet everyone came away more stimulated and – I choose my words carefully here – more "patient," "thoughtful" and "reflective." You may even have become more humble.

Although it may seem odd to hear this coming from a career educator, I would suggest that "answers" are vastly over-rated. They are akin to "grades," in that they occupy positions in a game that isn't the "real" game. And if over time we absorb the lesson embodied in the suggestion that answers are over-rated – a lesson learned through multiple encounters with ambiguity and complexity – we cultivate an important virtue, which is the virtue of open-mindedness.

Now of course it's important to cultivate an open mind that is not simply a sieve. This is why your teachers have pressed you to develop your ability to "give reasons" for your viewpoint, to fashion good arguments based upon true premises and publicly available evidence, abilities that you mobilize when attempting to make your own best case where matters are intrinsically complex. Our collective effort here at NC to promote these habits of mind of course culminated in your senior thesis and baccalaureate experience – a baccalaureate that is, notice, chiefly a reasoned "defense" of your thesis.

Now you doubtless look back on this entire experience "episodically" or "atomistically" as you ponder the fits and starts involved in getting your thesis topic defined and the actual thesis under way....the push-back you may have received from your faculty sponsor, who told you that your original topic was too broad or your experiment ill-conceived or your artistic aims too ambitious....you think back on your worry that you would never get a word down on paper....you think back on the severe and even caustic comments from your thesis sponsor on an initial draft....and you have fresh in your mind the mixed and nerve wracking experience you probably had in your baccalaureate. (By the way, I regret that I could not reach more of you prior to your baccalaureate to give you my best advice, which is that, if you get in trouble during the exam, your best bet is to get the members of your faculty committee arguing with each other. I in

fact once won \$5 from Doug Langston when we got in an argument about Hume during a baccalaureate, though I would never crow about it).

You look back on these individual moments as just that, individual moments. In time, however, you will view that entire set of episodes as a whole, a singular moment in your educational journey, the moment when you designed, completed, and successfully defended a really big project – the very thing that NC alum Bill Dudley, president of the NY Stock Exchange, said was the most significant and lasting effect of his NC experience.

Your capacity to achieve this result, beginning with your willingness to deal patiently with ambiguity, is in turn a reflection of an incredibly important trait you brought with you when you arrived at NC and that you will take with you when you leave – namely, your intellectual curiosity. I cannot begin to tell you how important and truly admirable intellectual curiosity is, any more than I can begin to convey my astonishment at the utter lack of attention to intellectual curiosity in the numbing debates about higher education in the state of Florida, with their obsessive emphasis on “degree productivity,” “critical needs occupations,” and so-called “practical degrees” where your college major virtually names your job.

Totally lost from view in these debates is the ideal of the “truly educated person,” once defined by the late Yale president, Bart Giamatti, as someone who is “at once intellectually discerning and humanly flexible, tough-minded [yet] open-hearted [who is] responsive to the new and responsible for values that makes us civilized,” someone who can “meet what is new and different with reasoned judgment and humanity.” I submit that such a person is surely not the product of some sort of higher education assembly line manufacturing human widgets to stick into occupational cubby holes for the sake of politically-driven economic development goals.

We have a different approach here at NC, an approach that manages to support the legitimate needs of economic development without making those needs paramount. Our distinctiveness is embedded in the seriousness with which we take the ideal of educating the “whole student” as opposed simply to honing their acquisitive instincts and capacities. The intellectual curiosity of the students we attract is not only the starting point for the truly educated person we try to cultivate, it is very likely the main source of NC’s institutional distinctiveness. Intellectual curiosity is like a power supply providing the College with an ongoing stream of continuity through administrative changes, political upheavals, and budgetary downturns. The only thing parallel to it in our institutional life is the vocational commitment of our faculty, during a period when, for some perverse reason, teachers have so often been turned into the problem.

Your parents are deeply proud of you at this moment, but truth be told, they are also sitting there patiently and thinking: all of this sounds great, but will a tolerance for ambiguity and strong intellectual curiosity get my son or daughter a job? And my honest answer to that is: I don’t know about that “first” job, but I have no doubt that your sons and daughters are wonderfully prepared for a future in which college graduates will experience multiple career changes, a future filled with career options that haven’t even been invented yet. Frankly, in today’s situation, the students I worry about are those being trained to do just one thing, since that is a surely a recipe for obsolescence. By contrast, your intellectual curiosity -- reinforced by the emphasis on critical thinking skills, strong communication abilities, intellectual independence, and a humane

openness to multiple points of view – will be your secret weapon in the years ahead, while also insuring a more fulfilling personal life. Moreover, you will face the inevitable tensions of public debate over pressing issues with the self-confidence of one who does not shrink from ambiguity and complexity out of fear and anxiety. You will, in short, be a better citizen.

Finally, as it sinks in that this is last time you will all be together here on campus – and you surprise yourself by growing a bit teary-eyed and sentimental – let me remind you that you will have a new cohort, which is the entire body of New College alumnae/i. As a scattered but nonetheless corporate entity, NC alumnae/i constitute the continuation of NC by other means. You may even marry a fellow alum, since the rate of such marriages is impressive, if perhaps vaguely pathological.

So let me conclude by sharing a story about one of my many visits to alum gatherings around the country over the last eleven years, a story that perhaps has some relevance for our occasion. The event in question was at the home of John and Laura Peters, beautifully located in one of the canyon areas north and east of LA. John was a charter class member who for many years ran the business side of Francis Ford Coppola's several different enterprises, from film-making to wine-making. I knew John was doing well when I asked who lived around him up here in the hills, and he pointed to a distant property up the mountainside and said, "Well, Jay Leno lives up there." I also knew it was a quintessential NC family when John and Laura's obviously precocious, then middle-school-aged daughter invited us all to take a time out and come watch her feed a live mouse to her corn snake.

In any case, this was about 2005, and NC had successfully come through the stormy start-up period of our independence, state money was dramatically increasing, and we were able to add faculty lines and make plans for curricular growth, the enhancement of Student Life, increase in our Admissions outreach, and other positive developments. So I had lots of good things to report, even brag about.

As I reported on all this to this mixed group of alumni, I sensed an odd mixture of happily positive reinforcement and a vague but growing sense of uneasiness within the group. Finally, a middle-aged alum stepped forward and said: "This all sounds terrific and I'm really glad to hear it. But can you promise us one thing? Can you promise that NC won't become like all the other schools?"

Well, to the extent that the intellectual curiosity you brought with you to NC remains the cardinal feature of future generations of NC students – the source of energy for campus life – I have no worry that we will simply become like "every other school." For this I not only thank you, but I also predict great things for you in the challenging period ahead, as you find yourselves in livelihoods that no one here this evening could possibly predict. You will succeed precisely because we did not train you to do just "one thing."

I conclude by reminding you of something you already know and appreciate. You have been aided these past years – beyond all measure – by your teachers, who sit right across the aisle from you. May I invite you to stand and convey your appreciation to them as a possible antidote to the exhaustion that they feel at this time of year.