

**Cumberland County College Commencement Speech**  
**By Pat Stanley**  
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Congratulations Cumberland County College graduates. I bring you greetings and best wishes from President Bush, and Secretary of Education Spellings. We are very proud of you.

Tonight is a special night. You did it, you are here this evening with your family, spouses, children, parents, friends, and community college faculty, the staff and board of trustees of the college, special guests from your community, and colleagues to celebrate a major accomplishment.

During a speech he gave while running for office in Illinois, Abraham Lincoln said: *“Upon the subject of education, not presuming to dictate any plan or system for respecting it, I can only view it as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in.”* Lincoln understood, even back in the 1800s before there was such a thing as the “global economy,” that the key to the betterment of society was education.

Fifty years ago, a high school education was sufficient for getting a good job to support a family. In 21st-century America, it takes some form of postsecondary education to get such a job. In making the decision to go to college you have opened up a door to a whole new world of opportunity. The more education you attain, the more doors you will open. Today, we celebrate a commencement, a beginning or start. As someone who believes in lifelong learning, it is my hope that this is only the beginning of your education journey.

For many of you, the path to this commencement has not been an easy one. You may be the first in your family to attend college. Choosing to go to college in and of itself can be a daunting task. There are forms to be filled out, meetings with advisers, placement tests to be taken, schedules to work through, and a whole new world ahead.

Many of you faced other challenges along the way. You have gone to school in between working and or taking care of a family. There were times when I am sure you wanted to give up, when it wasn't so easy to get that homework or paper done, but you did it. You persevered and it has paid off. Celebrate your job well done, and, as you revel in your accomplishments, be sure to give your families and significant others a big thank-you hug for all of the times that they were there to support you as well. While you are at it, be sure to thank your professors for all they did to assist you.

In the words of George Boggs, president and CEO of the American Association of Community Colleges, "Teachers are truly scholars who work magic both for their community and for the lives of students."

Cumberland County College, through its vision to "enhance the quality of life through excellence in education, community leadership and economic growth," has played an important role in assisting you to achieve your goals as well. Much like Abraham Lincoln, leaders of your college understand that the betterment of society begins with education. They developed a strategic plan based upon improving access, alignment, and accountability. They set goals to strengthen partnerships within the community to ease the transition from secondary to postsecondary schooling, from a community college to a four-year institution, and finally from college to work. When our office at the U.S. Department of Education developed its plan to "Serve Community Colleges," we made collaboration and partnership the first of our core values. I

applaud the college for the work it is doing with area high schools to increase college and workforce readiness of high school graduates; the partnership the college established with businesses via the Business Education Alliance and finally the work that the college is doing with its University Center.

Through this center, the college is making it easier for you, its graduates, to further your education without having to leave Cumberland County.

Jay Mathews, a writer for the *Washington Post*, said this of community colleges: “The community college system in the United States represents an egalitarian approach to higher education that doesn’t exist anywhere else in the world.” The community college doesn’t concern itself with your SAT score or your previous academic performance. While the tuition at a public or private four-year institution may cost you the price of a new car per year, the tuition to attend a community college is less than that of a new computer. Forty-five percent of first-time freshmen attend community colleges, and the average age of a community college student is 29. Community colleges take the word “community” at its core definition. They exist to serve *all*.

As the great author Isaac Asimov once said “*the only constant is change.*” Our world is constantly changing. It seemed like only yesterday the Walkman was the biggest rage; today it is the IPOD and Bluetooth technology; and tomorrow, I am sure, will bring something new.

In order to keep up with these changes, we need to be willing to continue to grow ourselves. When you made the choice to walk through the open doors of Cumberland County College, you started the growth process, and when you chose to stay, regardless of the challenges ahead of you, you continued that process. Many of you here this evening will teach our children or adults, you will nurse

us back to health or ensure that our rights are being protected. Others will keep us safe, entertain us, and keep our books straight. Someone here this evening may discover another cure for cancer or help to create the latest “green” technology. No matter what your role, our nation will be better for it because you were willing to improve yourselves through education.

Eleanor Roosevelt said, “*The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.*” Tonight you realized a beautiful dream by graduating from Cumberland County College.

You join the ranks of many esteemed community college alumni before you. Community college graduates include many successful business executives, such as Rich Karlgaard, publisher of *Forbes* magazine; scientists, such as J. Craig Venter, the founder of Institute for Genomic Research; musicians and artists, including George Lucas and Diane Keaton; Pulitzer Prize winners and photographers; politicians, such as my former governor Paris Glendening; and a number of other people sitting here in this audience.

As you leave here this evening ready to turn your hard work and your dreams into reality, I hope you never lose the will to learn. You reached one goal here this evening when you earned your degree or certificate, but remember this is an intermediate goal that has prepared you to take another step forward.

And as you seek to make your difference in life, I would like to leave you to ponder this poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson:

*To laugh often and much;*

*To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children;*

*To earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends;*

*To appreciate beauty;  
To find the best in others;  
To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a  
garden patch, or a redeemed social condition;  
To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived;  
That is to have succeeded.*

I wish each and every one of you much success in life.  
Congratulations!