

# **Meeting America's Education Challenge**

**By**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Graduates – congratulations. You have worked hard to be here today.

Parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and friends of graduates – congratulations. You have prayed hard to be here today.

Faculty and staff – congratulations. You have dedicated your careers to be here today.

Trustees and friends of the university – congratulations. You have given much to be here today.

I am honored to have this opportunity to celebrate with all of you today.

## **THE BEST YEARS**

What can I say that might be of interest and relevance? Let me answer this question by thinking back to when I was sitting where you are sitting now.

The most formative and influential years of my life were those I spent as an undergraduate student. It was there that I found my true identity – learned who I really was. The cocky kid on the outside, who was really scared on the inside, emerged after four years as a reasonably self-confident graduate who was ready and anxious to enter the next phase of his life. His blind date – a freshman at the time – became his love, passion, best friend, and – yes – wife. This is a once-in-a-lifetime 52-year (and counting) relationship that began when I was sitting where you are sitting now.

Whether you realize it now or not, for many of you here today, your years at RIT will have a similar impact. You have formed a lifetime network of friends including, for some of you, your husbands and wives. You have enhanced your leadership skills. You have established a focus for your career. You have learned lessons that will help you raise a family, become a responsible citizen in a democratic society, and give back to your community. You have completed your apprenticeships as alumni-in-training; you are now full-fledged RIT alumni.

Truly, this is one of the most significant days of your life.

## **PREPARATION**

You are well prepared to go forward. Your academic program has been rigorous. Co-op and internship experiences have made the academic rigor all the more relevant. Undergraduate research, study abroad, the Honors Program, and the RIT incubator have enriched the curriculum for many of you. Your leadership and team skills have been developed through your involvement in some of RIT's 163 clubs; 24 intercollegiate

athletic teams; 28 fraternities and sororities; *Reporter* magazine; a radio station; a TV show; numerous musical, dance, and drama groups; and Student Government.

You are ready to face the next phase of your lives.

## **GOING FORWARD**

Many challenges await you: world peace, racial tension, poverty, violence, health care, K-12 education, cost of higher education, indebtedness, ethical and moral behavior, maintaining a democracy, sustaining the environment, technology, economic growth, income inequality, globalization, and the list goes on.

There certainly is enough for you to do. The good news is that we have every confidence that you are up to the task.

Meeting these challenges requires everyone in society to work together. Moreover, research shows that the greater the diversity of the problem-solving team, the better the solution. When deaf and hearing men and women of multiple races, ethnicities, and behavioral and physical attributes come together, more creative ideas emerge.

## **CHALLENGE**

I would like to address one of the challenges just listed. Specifically, I would like to talk a little bit about K-12 education and higher education.

For years, the U.S. has been complacent about and a little arrogant with regard to the status of education in this country. Then, in 1983, the research study *A Nation at Risk* was published, sounding the alarm about K-12 education. Not a lot has changed since then. Several years later, similar reports concerning higher education have appeared. Similarly, not a lot has changed.

What am I talking about? Let us look at some data.

In 1950, 34% of U.S. adults had completed high school or higher, and 6% had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. In 2005, these percentages were 84% and 27%, respectively. That is remarkable growth. Does it place the U.S. at number one in the world? Many would say "yes". The answer is that the U.S. ranks fourth in the world in average level of education, as measured by years in school. That is not bad – not the best – but maybe acceptable.

But wait. Let us break down the data a little bit. In terms of high school graduation rates, the U.S. ranks 17<sup>th</sup> and in college graduation rates ranks 14<sup>th</sup>.

Let us break it down some more, this time by age group. In the U.S., 36% of Americans aged 55 to 64 have college degrees; higher than all but two countries (Russia is the

highest at 44%, followed by Israel at 42%). In the U.S., 39% of Americans aged 25 to 34 have completed college; however, nine other countries have higher college completion rates.

In terms of high school completion, the U.S. leads all countries in the 55 to 64 age group. However, among Americans aged 25 to 34, the U.S. ranks 12<sup>th</sup> (South Korea leads at 97%).

OK. We have talked about quantity. What about quality? The news also is not so good.

In the U.S., reading and math scores of 17-year-old students have remained unchanged over the last 20 years. What about international comparisons?

The cumulative expenditure per student aged 6 to 15 in 2002 was \$84,000 in the U.S., second only to Switzerland at \$89,000. Yet, of 41 countries tested, U.S. 15-year-olds scored 24<sup>th</sup> in math (South Korea had the second highest score spending half as much as the U.S.). The U.S. scored 17<sup>th</sup> in science. In another international test, U.S. high school seniors were at the bottom in math and second from the bottom in physics.

Why am I setting forth this challenge to you today? One reason is that you have been formally categorized as a student for virtually all of your lives, so you can relate directly to the issue at hand. Second, never before in the U.S. has education at all levels been so critical to our continued economic growth, quality of life, national security, and preservation of democracy.

To hold our place in the world, the U.S. must lead the world in innovation and entrepreneurship. This kind of leadership requires us to possess high-level *cognitive ability* involving the mastery of basic academic disciplines, along with judgment-oriented and problem-solving capabilities. While this attribute is necessary to achieve leadership, it is not by itself sufficient. Two additional attributes are required for sufficiency.

The first is *complex communication ability*, involving the effective combination of information technology and interpersonal skills. The second is *creative thinking ability*.

More Americans need to have these three attributes. Education is the key. I am asking you to help meet this need. But what can you do?

## **GIVING BACK**

Each of the last several RIT Convocation speakers has implored graduates to “give back” to the community. Each speaker had their own way of delivering that message, based on their own life experiences. I am asking each of you graduates today to “give back” to education some time in your life.

I know that some of you have already engaged in teaching assignments in developing countries and with K-12 students here in Rochester. Although we do not have a teacher education program at RIT, I know some of you will be entering K-12 teaching upon graduation and that at least one of you is participating in the Teach For America Program. I am asking the rest of you graduates, sometime over your lifetimes, to consider volunteering in the K-12 educational system in your community. You can make an important difference.

We know that there are students in high performing schools and students who take AP courses that compete favorably with the best international students. However, the U.S. cannot rely on this relatively small number of students – and you graduating today are among that number – to carry the challenge for all of America. Everyone has to contribute. And everyone deserves to have the opportunity to contribute.

## **THANK YOU**

This is my last RIT Convocation Address. It is number 15. I remember all of them. I suspect I shall remember this one the best. There have also been 15 opening day and 15 orientation addresses for freshman. You must be tired of listening to me by now.

I want to thank all of you here today – and through you, all of the outstanding graduating classes which have preceded you – for being my teacher. You have challenged me. I have learned much from you.

Many of you are my friends – we have laughed, debated, played, and worked together. I know this friendship will continue in the years ahead.

The future is bright for you. Take full advantage of the opportunities that await you.

Everyone celebrating here today is proud of you. We have confidence in you, our graduates. Everyone here needs you. Our country needs you.

I know you will be happy. You will be successful. You will make a difference in the world.

Thank you and good luck.