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Barack Obama

Commencement Address at Miami Dade College



Delivered 29 April 2011, James L. Knight International Center

AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Thank you, Miami Dade! Thank you. Please, everyone, be seated.

Hafeeza, thank you for that wonderful introduction. To Dr. Padrón, Dr. Vicente, to the board of trustees, the faculty, parents, family, friends, and, most important, the class of 2011, congratulations -- congratulations on reaching this day.

And thank you for allowing me the profound honor of being a part of it. And thank you for my first honorary associate degree. One of the perks of this job is that degrees come free these days. Not that it impresses anybody at home. Now Michelle just says, "Hey, Doctor, go take that dog for a walk."

It is such a thrill to be at one of the largest, most diverse institutions of higher learning in America -- one that just this week was named one of the top community colleges in the nation. More than 170,000 students study across your eight campuses. You come from 181 countries, represented by the flags that just marched across this stage. You speak 94 languages. About 90 percent of you are minorities. And because more than 90 percent of you find a job in your field of study, it's fitting that your motto is "Opportunity changes everything."

As someone who's only here because of the chances my education gave me, I couldn't agree more.



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Opportunity changes everything. America will only be as strong in this new century as the opportunities that we provide you -- the opportunities that we provide to all our young people -- Latino, black, white, Asian, Native American, everybody. America will only be as strong as our pursuit of scientific research and our leadership in technology and innovation. And I believe that community colleges like this one are critical pathways to the middle class that equip students with the skills and the education necessary to compete and win in this 21st-century economy.

And that's why I've made community colleges a centerpiece of my education agenda, along with helping more students afford college. I couldn't be prouder of the work we've done in community colleges. And your accomplishment today is vital to America reclaiming the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. So I am proud of you. I am proud of you.

I know that for many of you reaching this day wasn't easy.

AUDIENCE: No.

THE PRESIDENT: See? I got some amens there.

Perhaps you're the first in your family to go to college. Some of you have had to overcome big obstacles, defeat your own doubts, prove yourself to everyone who ever believed that you couldn't make it because of what you look like or where you came from. And, of course -- of course, for so many of you, this day represents the fulfillment of your family's dreams when you were born. This is their achievement as well, so give it up for your parents and your grandparents, your cousins and your uncles and your aunties. This is their day, too. This is their day, too.

See, the diploma you're about to receive stands for something more than the investment you made in yourselves. It's the result of an investment made by generations before you; an investment in that radical yet simple idea that America is a place -- the place -- where you can make it if you try. That's the ideal that has made this country -- that's the idea that's represented by that one flag that all of you cheered for; that's what has made us a shining light to the world.

And preserving this idea -- keeping the American Dream alive from one generation to the next -- that's never been an easy task. It's an even greater test in times of rapid change. And all of you are graduating at a moment when change is coming faster than ever before. We're emerging from an economic downturn like we haven't seen since the 1930s. Massive shifts in technology have shifted profoundly what our economy looks like. Massive shifts abroad geopolitically have swift and dramatic impacts not only overseas but also here at home, from markets on Wall Street to wallets on Main Street.



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Just as advances in technology have the power to make our lives better, they also force us to compete with other nations like never before. Tackling big challenges like terrorism and climate change require sustained national effort, and yet too often, our politics seems as broken, as divided as ever.

So I know that for many of you it's an intimidating time to be marching out into the world. Everything seems so unsettled. The future may seem unclear. But as you make your way in this ever changing world, you should take comfort in knowing that as a country, we've navigated tougher times before. We've sailed stormier seas. Earlier today, I spent some time in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. And some of you have seen what happened there as a consequence of the tornadoes that struck. The mayor and I visited a community where the devastation from this storm was simply heartbreak -- entire homes and blocks just gone, wiped away. Some families lost everything. Some families lost family.

But what was striking is the way that damaged community has come together, how they've rallied around one another. The mayor there, young man doing wonderful work, Mayor Maddox, he put it best. He told me that when disasters like this strike, all our grievances seem to go away. All our differences don't seem to matter. All our political disagreements seem so petty. We help each other, we support one another, as one country, as one people.

That's the American spirit. No matter how hard we are tested, we look to our faith and our faith in one another. No matter what the challenge, we've always carried the American Dream forward. That's been true throughout our history.

When bombs fell on Pearl Harbor, when an Iron Curtain fell over Europe, when the threat of nuclear war loomed just 90 miles from this city, when a brilliant September morning was darkened by terror -- in none of those instances did we falter. We endured. We carried the dream forward.

We've gone through periods of great economic turmoil, from an economy where most people worked on farms to one where most people worked in factories to now one fueled by information and technology. Through it all, we've persevered. We've adapted. We've prospered. Workers found their voice, and the right to organize for fair wages and safe working conditions. We carried forward.

When waves of Irish and Italian immigrants were derided as criminals and outcasts; when Catholics were discriminated against, or Jews had to succumb to quotas, or Muslims were blamed for society's ills; when blacks were treated as second-class citizens and marriages like my own parents' were illegal in much of the country -- we didn't stop. We didn't accept inequality. We fought. We overcame. We carried the dream forward.



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We have carried this dream forward through times when our politics seemed broken. This is not the first time where it looked like politicians were going crazy. In heated debates over our founding, some warned independence would doom America to "a scene of bloody discord and desolation for ages." That was the warning about independence. One of our greatest Presidents, Thomas Jefferson, was labeled an "infidel" and a "howling atheist" with "fangs." Think about that. Even I haven't gotten that one yet. Lincoln -- Lincoln, FDR, they were both vilified in their own times as tyrants, power hungry, bent on destroying democracy. And of course, this state has seen its fair share of tightly contested elections.

And we've made it through those moments. None of it was easy. A lot of it was messy. Sometimes there was violence. Sometimes it took years, even decades, for us to find our way through. But here's the thing. We made it through. We made it through because in each of those moments, we made a choice.

Rather than turn inward and wall off America from the rest of the world, we've chosen to stand up forcefully for the ideals and the rights we believe are universal for all men and women.

Rather than settle for an America where everybody is left to fend for themselves, where we think only about our own short-term needs instead of the country that we're leaving to our children, we have chosen to build a nation where everybody has a shot at opportunity, where everyone can succeed.

We've chosen to invest in our people and in their future -- building public schools, sending a generation to college on the GI Bill, laying highways and railroads, building ports all across the country.

Rather than turn on each other in times of cultural upheaval, we've chosen to march, to organize, to sit-in, to turn out, to petition our government for women's rights and voting rights and civil rights -- even in the face of fierce resistance -- because we are Americans; and no matter who we are or what we look like, we believe that in this country, all are equal, all are free.

Rather than give in to the voices suggesting we set our sights lower, downsize our dreams, or settle for something less, we've chosen again and again to make America bigger, bolder, more diverse, more generous, more hopeful.

Because throughout our history, what has distinguished us from all other nations is not just our wealth, it's not just our power. It's been our deep commitment to individual freedom and personal responsibility, but also our unshakeable commitment to one another -- a recognition that we share a future; that we rise or fall together; that we are part of a common enterprise that is greater, somehow, than the sum of its parts.



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So, yes, class of 2011, change will be a constant in your lives. And that can be scary. That can be hard. And sometimes you'll be tempted to turn inward; to say "What's good enough for me is good enough." Sometimes you'll be tempted to turn on one another; to say "My problems are the fault of those who don't look like me or sound like me." Sometime you'll be tempted to give into those voices that warn: "too hard," "don't try," "no, you can't."

But I have faith you will reject those voices. I have faith you will reject those impulses. Your generation was born into a world with fewer walls; a world educated in an era of information, tempered by war and economic turmoil. And as our globe has grown smaller and more connected, you've shed the heavy weights of earlier generations. Your generation has grown up more accepting and tolerant of people for who they are, regardless of race or gender or religious belief; regardless of creed or sexual orientation. That's how you've grown up. You see our diversity as a strength, not a weakness. And I believe those life experiences have fortified you, as earlier generations were fortified, to meet the tests of our time. Everything I have seen of your generation has shown me that you believe, as deeply as any previous generation, that America can always change for the better.

Class of 2011, you and your generation are now responsible for our future. I'm only going to be President a little bit longer. You are going to be leaders for many years to come. You will have to make choices to keep our dream alive for the next generation. Choices about whether we'll stack the deck against workers and the middle class, or whether we make sure America remains a place where if you work hard you can get ahead.

You're going to have to make a choice about whether we'll say we can't afford to educate our young people and send them to college, or whether we continue to be a country that makes investments that are necessary to keep those young people competitive in this new century. It will be up to you to choose whether we'll remain vulnerable to swings in oil prices or whether we invest in the clean energy that can break our dependence on oil and protect our planet. It will be your choice as to whether we break our promise to seniors and the poor and the disabled and tell them to fend for themselves, or whether we keep strengthening our social safety net and our health care system.

And it will be up to you whether we'll turn on one another, or whether we stay true to our values of fairness and opportunity, understanding that we are a nation of immigrants -- immigrants that built this country into an economic powerhouse and a beacon of hope around the world.

I know this last issue generates some passion. I know that several young people here have recently identified themselves as undocumented. Some were brought here as young children, and discovered the truth only as adults. And they've put their futures on the line in hopes it will spur the rest of us to live up to our most cherished values.



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I strongly believe we should fix our broken immigration system. Fix it so that it meets our 21st-century economic and security needs. And I want to work with Democrats and Republicans, yes, to protect our borders, and enforce our laws, and address the status of millions of undocumented workers. And I will keep fighting alongside many of you to make the DREAM Act the law of the land.

Like all of this country's movements towards justice, it will be difficult and it will take time. I know some here wish that I could just bypass Congress and change the law myself. But that's not how democracy works. See, democracy is hard. But it's right.

Changing our laws means doing the hard work of changing minds and changing votes, one by one. And I am convinced we can change the laws, because we should all be able to agree that it makes no sense to expel talented young people from our country. They grew up as Americans. They pledge allegiance to our flag. And if they are trying to serve in our military or earn a degree, they are contributing to our future -- and we welcome those contributions.

We didn't raise the Statue of Liberty with its back to the world; we raised it with its light to the world. Whether your ancestors came here on the Mayflower or a slave ship; whether they signed in at Ellis Island or they crossed the Rio Grande -- we are one people. We need one another. Our patriotism is not rooted in ethnicity, but in a shared belief of the enduring and permanent promise of this country.

That's the promise redeemed by your graduation today. That's the promise that drew so many of you to this college and your parents to this country. And that's the promise that drew my own father here.

I didn't know him well, my father -- and he lived a troubled life. But I know that when he was around your age, he dreamed of something more than his lot in life. He dreamed of that magical place; he dreamed of coming to study in America.

And when I was around your age, I traveled back to his home country of Kenya for the first time to learn his story. And I went to a tiny village called Alego, where his stepmother still lives in the house where he grew up, and I visited his grave. And I asked her if there was anything left for me to know him by. And she opened a trunk, and she took out a stack of letters -- and this is an elderly woman who doesn't read or write -- but she had saved these letters, more than 30 of them, written in his hand and addressed to colleges and universities all across America.

They weren't that different from the letters that I wrote when I was trying to get into college, or the ones that you wrote when you were hoping to come here. They were written in the simple, sometimes awkward, sometimes grammatically incorrect, unmistakably hopeful voice of somebody who is just desperate for a chance -- just desperate to live his unlikely dream.



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And somebody at the University of Hawaii -- halfway around the world -- chose to give him that chance. And because that person gave a young man a chance, he met a young woman from Kansas; they had a son in the land where all things are possible.

And one of my earliest memories from growing up in Hawaii, is of sitting on my grandfather's shoulders to see the astronauts from one of the Apollo space missions come ashore after a successful splashdown. You remember that no matter how young you are as a child. It's one of those unforgettable moments when you first realize the miracle that is what this country is capable of. And I remember waving a little American flag on top of my grandfather's shoulders, thinking about those astronauts, and thinking about space.

And today, on this day, more than 40 years later, I took my daughters to the Kennedy Space Center. And even though we didn't get to see the Space Shuttle Endeavour launch, we met some of the astronauts, and we toured the Space Shuttle Atlantis. And looking at my daughters, I thought of how things come full circle. I thought of all that we've achieved as a nation since I was their age, a little brown boy sitting on my grandfather's shoulders -- and I thought about all I want us to achieve by the time they have children of their own.

That's my proof that the idea of America endures. That's my evidence that our brave endeavor on this Earth continues.

And every single day I walk into the Oval Office, and for all the days of my life, I will always remember that in no other nation on Earth could my story be possible, could your stories be possible. That is something I celebrate. That is something that drives every decision I make.

So what I ask of you, graduates, as you walk out of here today is this: Pursue success. Do not falter. When you make it, pull somebody else up. Preserve our dream. Remember your life is richer when people around you have a shot at opportunity as well. Strive to widen that circle of possibility; strive to forge that big, generous, optimistic vision of America that we inherited; strive to carry that dream forward to future generations.

Thank you. Congratulations. May God bless you. May God bless the United States of America.