

Excelsior College Commencement
July 14, 2017
Remarks by President James N. Baldwin

Chancellor Rosa, Chairman Neff, Trustees, Provost Sopczyk, graduates, faculty and colleagues, distinguished government officials, academic leaders, alumni, family, and friends, welcome.

With great humility, mindful of the pioneers who founded and sustained Excelsior College, and eager to work with our incredibly talented and dedicated colleagues, I accept the charge to lead Excelsior College – to propel Excelsior College into the future.

Excelsior began in 1971 as the Regents External Degree Program, a remarkable innovation, the brainchild of then Commissioner of Education Ewald B. “Joe” Nyquist and the NYS Board of Regents.

(Commissioner Nyquist’s son, Ted, and his wife, Gidget, are with us today – as is the Chancellor of the NYS Board of Regents, Dr. Betty Rosa.)

Forty-six years after our founding, we have awarded 167,000 degrees, changing the lives of those alumni – and countless others who have enjoyed the fruits of the academic recognition and success they achieved at Excelsior College.

Today we renew the decades long promises – of access, affordability, and academic excellence. And we affirm our commitment to credit aggregation, competency-based learning, prior learning assessment and online instruction.

Today – and every day that follows during my leadership of the College – is about fulfilling those promises and improving those practices, for future generations of students.

I stand before you today on the shoulders of giants – those in my personal life, who nurtured me and lifted me up – and those in my professional life who saw something in me that I often did not see in myself.

I grew up a few blocks from here, in an ethnic, immigrant neighborhood. The Catholic elementary school I attended and some 98 acres of adjacent neighborhoods were torn down in the 1960's to build this Empire State Plaza.

My worldview was shaped during my early years, guided by the social teachings of the church and the values instilled in me by my parents – Mary and James – who modeled kindness to and respect for others and who were up until their deaths within the past year, my greatest fans. To them I extend my infinite love and gratitude.

We lived in a neighborhood with my grandparents and extended family. And I guess we were part of the working poor – but if you measure your wealth in love and caring and time spent together, we were wealthy beyond measure.

Fast-forwarding to now, I would like to introduce my wife Rebecca – my partner and best friend for 4 decades. She, has shared her love, remarkable strength, and tenacity with me – never losing heart, maintaining her own career as a registered nurse, and always putting our family first. Becky – as the old Gladys Knight song goes – you are and will always be the best thing that ever happened to me.

We have three wonderful children, Matthew, Kristen, and Lauryn, and three more if you include their spouses – Molly, Dave, and Mike.

Our grandchildren are here today – Ethan, Nicholas, Sofia, and Christopher. I am one proud papa to be able to share this day with them.

I was a first-generation college graduate.

Education fused my intellectual development with my emotional, personal, and spiritual experiences. It broadened my perspective, opening my eyes to the larger world.

Over time, I saw how transformative education can be – discovering the connection between the opportunity to be educated – the pursuit of that opportunity by the individual... and how an educated society advances social and economic justice, and the human condition.

Human learning has, in effect, been our endless quest for the truth.

And, despite what we read, see, and hear in the news today, the truth always matters.

And it is vital in a representative democracy – where civic engagement and discourse based upon knowledge and facts – are obligations of citizenship and leadership.

I urge you, our graduates, as educated citizens, to demand the truth. And to reject illusions of the truth – whatever their source, just as you would reject an obvious lie.

Hold those you disagree with accountable for the truth – and hold those you agree with – to an even higher standard of accountability and integrity.

I mentioned standing on the shoulders of giants. I have been blessed over a long career by so many who extended a helping hand – those who had faith and confidence in me and those friends and colleagues who took a leap of faith in me, with me. Some are in the audience here today – I thank all of them from the bottom of my heart.

Here at Excelsior we stand on the shoulders of our own giants – our admissions counselors, advisors, our faculty, our faculty program directors, all of our colleagues – the people who make this institution what it is – and who enable it to so effectively serve its students, because of their extraordinary commitment to our mission. They are the giants upon whose shoulders we stand.

I often tell people...if Excelsior College didn't exist, someone would have to create us.

In this ever-changing global economy, we need pathways for adult learners and the historically underserved to earn college degrees.

For 46 years, we have served as a beacon for those left behind by traditional educational institutions.

We validate their learning, their knowledge, their military service, their professional development, their life experiences.

In doing so we provide a tailwind that propels each of them forward into a future of their own making.

The path ahead is not without challenges and we know success often comes in fits and starts.

I can promise you this...

We will be relentless in providing access, affordability, and an exceptional student experience.

We will reclaim our place as a leader and innovator in higher education.

And, we will do it all with good and faithful stewardship of this institution and its mission, one day handing it off to our successors – stronger and better. Thank you.