

CCU Commencement Address
Coastal Carolina University President David A. DeCenzo
May 7, 2011

To the members of the Class of 2011, to your family and friends, it is an honor for me to award you your college degrees. When you entered Coastal Carolina University in Fall 2007, I, too, was a freshman – just beginning my first semester as president. Over the past four years, I know that you have grown and matured in intellect and you have achieved several goals--with this morning's celebration being primary among them. I, too, have grown in my job and I trust that I've learned much about how to lead such a great institution. I have been delighted to celebrate your accomplishments and those of this University.

As I contemplated what I was going to say, all I could think about was my own undergraduate ceremony over 30 years ago. I don't recall much from the speaker nor can I tell you what he spoke about; but I do remember this: the speech was uninspiring, long and monotonous. It is my intention to spare you of such a memory and myself from such a description. My remarks today will be guided by the immortal words of Franklin Roosevelt in his advice for making a great speech. Simply this, "stand to be recognized, speak to be heard, and sit quickly to be appreciated."

Shortly, you will walk across this stage and receive your diploma. Your dean and I will shake your hand and congratulate you. Before you make that walk, though, I want to thank you for choosing Coastal Carolina University, for being a part of this wonderful institution, and for filling my first four years as president with your energy, your idealism, and your hopes for the future. I am truly in your debt. You – the students – and your success in life are the very reasons that I, our faculty, and our staff chose higher education as our profession and our life's work. Each day that we come to work, you are the primary motivation for all that we do.

While each of you is special to us, I would like to take just a moment to recognize one of your classmates who is truly an extraordinary individual. With a rare condition that compromises her immune system, with extreme injuries from an accident, and with years of rehabilitation and recovery – Maritza Isabelle has endured far more than most of us could ever imagine. Despite her challenges, she describes her life in these words: "Even though I have had many pebbles on my path, with my strong faith and mindfulness, I have been able to overcome many obstacles." And a few of you seated before me have helped in ways that you may not know. Maritza wrote that she vividly remembers going to her Spanish class after losing much of her hair from chemotherapy treatments – where, much to her surprise her desk was decorated with scarves and hats that her classmates had left for her. To those students in that class, thank you for caring and reaching out to someone in need. That simple act of kindness tells me you have learned more about dealing with others than you could ever have learned in a textbook. You gave someone the courage and the strength to continue.

She and those who have assisted her are life-affirming examples for all of us. Maritza is seated in the suite above the stands to my right and I ask you to join me in recognizing her remarkable accomplishments.

I know that you have assisted others as well during your years at Coastal Carolina University. You built houses for Habitat for Humanity; you created more than 400 shelters for the victims of the earthquake in Haiti; you walked and collected thousands of dollars for Relay for Life; and you saved numerous babies in your support of March of Dimes. You showed us that you are not Generation X'ers, Generation Y'ers, or the Me-First Generation. Rather, you are the Generation who serves others in unique and important ways.

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In my inaugural address four years ago, I laid out my vision for Coastal Carolina University and spoke of the themes that I would use to guide my administration. Those themes are: tradition, integrity and excellence. I would like to share briefly some thoughts on these themes from the perspective of my first four years in office.

One question that might be asked is, with less than 20 years of existence as an independent public university, how can an institution have a great tradition? Let's look at the word itself – tradition. The root of the word “tradition” goes back to a Latin word for “transmitting or giving for safekeeping.” Tradition involves the handing down of beliefs and customs from one generation to another. So, the traditions of Coastal Carolina were established long before the beginning of our physical institution and long before our independence. The Founders who met in Conway at the county's public library in the summer of 1954 were handing down the tradition of valuing formal education, which was alive and well in this region and in this nation. They wanted a better way of life for their coming generations, they wanted their children to be prepared as seekers of knowledge, they wanted to improve the local economy through civility of an educated community, and they wanted to better the cultural opportunities in the area. They wanted to participate in the American Dream – a vision of each generation improving the next through investments in higher education.

This is the core of our tradition at Coastal Carolina University. As a first-year president in 2007, I pledged my efforts to continue that tradition and I renew that pledge to you here today, you who are soon to be alumni with a vested interest in the success of your alma mater.

The second guiding theme of the past four years has been integrity. In academia and throughout life, our highest calling is to seek the truth, which involves speaking the truth, even if the truth that we speak is unpopular. Without integrity, we would have no purpose in academia, other than perpetuating an empty institution. As a number of philosophers have said in different words, if we lose our honor, what is left? The world has changed a great deal these past four years. Our military has been asked to protect human life with several deployments. Our economy had recessed and is just now rebounding. During your study at Coastal you have been encouraged, even challenged, to examine the truths in all these events.

It is my job as president and it is the job of each employee to act with integrity in the course of the working day. The robe that we faculty wear as members of the academy signifies objectivity for the truth we are charged to seek; our obligation to our students and to the public demands truth. We must be honest and forthright in all of our dealings and I am vitally aware that it all begins in the voice of each of our graduates. As you go forward, remember that for there to be integrity, there must be complete transparency – an openness that not only values, but encourages questions centered around the “why is this being done.” You must remember that integrity is doing the right thing, even when doing right may carry with it personal loss. That does not mean for you that there will never be disagreements. Rather, accept that disagreements will occur over the application and implementation of a decision – but never accept any attempt to destroy the foundation from which the decision was made.

Third and last, I chose excellence as a guiding principle for my stewardship of this institution. You may be familiar with Garrison Keillor's Prairie Home Companion show on public radio and his fictional town of Lake Wobegone, where quote “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the

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children are above average.” The irony of this Keillor quote is that it pokes fun at the American obsession with ratings, since it would be statistically impossible for everyone to be above average in all ways at all times. In the same manner, some may question why every college and university declares excellence as a goal, since not every institution can be rated excellent in all ways at all times. The answer is quite simple – the Institution’s excellence is not the goal. Rather, the excellence of each of our graduates is our goal. Quite possibly legendary football coach Vince Lombardi said it best: “The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor.” We anticipate and celebrate your efforts to achieve excellence in your life after Coastal Carolina University.

Those have been the three standards that have guided our time together at Coastal – tradition, integrity and excellence. As we move this institution forward, it is my hope that you will continue to benefit greatly from your association with us. Your degree received today from Coastal Carolina University will increase in value with everything you and I accomplish in the future.

At some point in a commencement speech, the speaker typically offers advice in some form or fashion. It is supposed to be profound and memorable. I have chosen to paraphrase the words of Polonius from William Shakespeare’s Hamlet when he speaks to his departing son and says: “Above all else, be true to yourself. And if you do that, as day follows night, you will never be false to another. Farewell for the moment, my best wishes to you, and come back to us as often as you can.”

You’ve earned this day and we are enriched because of the time you spent at Coastal Carolina University. With the First Lady of Coastal, we wish you heartfelt congratulations.