

Thank you President Austin, for that kind introduction, for our lasting friendship and for alerting me to this ceremony. I would also like to extend my thanks to President Austin, Provost Nichols, members of the Board of Trustees and Professor Sally Reis for conferring this degree upon me, an honor that I am humbled to accept.

I am pleased to be joined in this distinction by Mr. Tim Page, whose contributions to the fields of music, literature and film deserve our recognition. My appreciation also to University administrators, deans, faculty, staff, distinguished guests... And most importantly, the reason we are here today, graduating students, families and friends!

Looking out over the crowd today, I see lots of smiling faces: ... from proud professors ... from proud parents, husbands, wives, children and many other family members ... and from happy students, who are anxious to get out of here and put their diplomas to work!

What an honor it is for me, to be here this morning celebrating the achievements of University of Connecticut class of 2005. Two thousand seven hundred strong, this class represents the diversity and vitality of this vibrant community.

In my generation there was a song that spoke of a "a long and winding road." The past four decades of my life have been a long journey over a road paved with many dreams, some pain, and, above all, lots of opportunities.

Those who are born here are blessed with U.S. citizenship at birth.

Many of us, on the other hand, had a choice. We were born elsewhere, but we **chose** to come here. And we brought with us a burning desire to succeed, coupled, in many cases, with the values that our families instilled in us—respect for truth and freedom, love of God, compassion, honesty, hard work and reverence for human life.

Some forty-four years ago, I came to America from Cuba as a 15-year-old refugee with no money, no family and no knowledge of the English language. My parents courageously put me on a plane and sent me here so that I could live in freedom. I, like Mike Martinez, was one of over 14,000 kids in what is now known as "Operación Pedro Pan".

For several years I was cared for, fed, and taught through the generosity of Catholic Charities, the United Way, and many, many others.

To be sure, there were hardships along the way. Times of loneliness and despair. Living in Louisiana in orphanages and boarding schools. Away from my family.

During those early years, I overcame many real and imagined barriers—and, in time, adapted, survived and thrived!

After high school, a very affordable loan from the U.S. Department of Education helped me pay for an education at Louisiana State University.

Along the way, I reunited with my parents in New Orleans.

As I think back to my LSU graduation day, I could not possibly have imagined that I would eventually have a successful career as a banker, or become chairman of the Board of Regents of the University of Houston, or receive honorary doctorate degrees from prestigious universities, or serve in the administration of President George W. Bush.

I remember with gratitude those who gave me a helping hand.

Those “gatekeepers” who opened some doors to opportunity, those who really cared...

For instance, I particularly remember the second chance I was given when I was a student at LSU.

I was struggling with the English language. I had terrible grades. I was twice placed on academic probation.

I had almost run out of options when Dean Perry —my “gate keeper”—took a chance. Allowed me return to LSU. And believed in me!

Inspired, I tried harder, earned solid grades, got on the Dean’s List, and finally earned my degree.

If Dean Perry had not given me a second chance, my life could have turned out quite differently indeed!

So, now, when it’s my turn to be a “gate keeper”... I try to balance my responsibility, my authority and my compassion.

This is the ninth time I have been invited to deliver a university commencement address.

Four were delivered at the University of Houston System’s constellation of campuses in Texas. Last week I spoke to graduates at Miami Dade College.

The others were to graduating classes in Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and the People’s Republic of China.

Very different institutions. Cultures. Societies. And nations .

However, in looking back through my notes, I found several themes that resonate with university graduates, whether they live in Beijing or New England.

Graduates, as you start a new chapter in your lives, let me share with you a couple of themes.

The most important of these themes is to serve others, to give back, to become the responsible “gate keepers” who intercede on behalf of those who deserve a break or, at times, a second chance.

Close behind is the importance of always remembering, and appreciating, those who really cared about you and made a difference in your lives.

What I mean by giving back is quite simple.

You should remember and repay—in good and material deeds—those who helped you along the way, be they co-workers, fellow students, teachers, family, friends, or *perhaps* your alma mater.

Try to be of service to others, help a friend in need, remember the poor and the sick, and remember your parents, as they grow old.

Give back to your community, your hometown, and your country — your homeland.

Earlier, I used the term “gate keeper”. What am I talking about? To me, “gate keepers” are people, or organizations, who can open, or close, the gates to opportunity.

I suggest that when you are in a position to make a decision affecting someone’s life or career, try to be compassionate —your actions may impact the life of others!

Listen to your instincts and your heart; they will tell you when to open the gate to others. And always remember those who opened the gate for you, those who made a difference in your life, and those who really cared about you.

Earlier, I suggested that you consider serving your country as a way of paying back. For me, serving my country is an invigorating experience. Government service allows me to give back some of the many blessings that have come my way.

For 4 years in the Bush Administration, I have been honored and privileged to serve in several leadership jobs. I’ve traveled to many countries, and along the way I have met more heads of state than I can count with all of my fingers and most of my toes... I have stood in the Oval Office by the President’s side as he signed a bill into law... I have testified before Congressional committees... And so much more!

As the first Director of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services,

I have presided over the naturalization of thousands of soldiers, marines, airmen and sailors, some of them gravely wounded...

Only in America will you find an immigrant in charge of immigration ! And I am proud, that each, and every one, of over one million naturalization certificates issued to new American citizens bears my signature.

And, recently the President nominated me to be the next United States Ambassador to Spain and Andorra.

Wow! I am still in awe of it all ... what honors, what opportunities, and what a privilege!

One of the key elements that made all of this possible has been my education, the great equalizer that cuts across ethnicity, sex, national origin, and socio-economic status.

Also, I have been able to experience all these things because we live in a country where there are no barriers to what an individual can accomplish.

As I come towards the end of my remarks, let's take a two-part quiz.

It's very short, and I promise you that it will be the last one you'll take before getting your diploma.

Quick!

-- Name the founder of WalMart...

- -Name the Husky Alumnus who was the first Hispanic-American astronaut...

-- Name who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004...

-- Name the immediate past Prime Minister of Canada...

-- Name the MVP of last year's Super Bowl...

How did you do? I'm sure many are still thinking about some of the questions. For the meticulous among you, the answers are:

Sam Walton–

Dr. Franklin Chang-Diaz –

Kenyan Activist Ms . Wangari Maathai –

Jean Chretien (Kray - tyan) – and

New England Patriots Wide Receiver Deion Branch!!!

So what is the point? The point is that few of us remember yesterday's headline-makers.

Mind you, these were not second-rate achievers. Not long ago, they were the best in their respective fields. But eventually—and often quickly—the applause dies. Achievements are forgotten. Awards and certificates are buried with their owners.

Here's the second part of the quiz. Let's see how we do now...

- Name one teacher who helped you in high school or college...
- Name one friend who supported you through a difficult time...
- Name someone who taught you something worthwhile...
- Name somebody who made you feel appreciated and special within the past year...
- Think of one friend with whom you'd enjoy spending a two-week vacation...

Was that easier? It certainly was easier for me...

So what is the lesson? The lesson is that the people who make a difference in your life are usually not the ones with the most impressive credentials, the most money, or the most awards.

The ones who really make a difference are the ones who care about you and personally touch your life.

And these are the people you should always keep in your thoughts—and in your hearts, as your life unfolds.

In closing, I ask you to remain aware of the opportunities that you have been afforded, because you live in a free society, where one's potential is truly unlimited.

We should remember that there are countless men and women across this earth that will never know the taste of freedom and prosperity that we sometimes take for granted.

I want to thank University of Connecticut President Phillip Austin and Provost Nicholls for affording me the privilege of addressing you on this memorable day. The day – when each one of you – embarks on your dream, your adventure, your life journey!

I wish you the best in whatever endeavor you chose in the coming years. I am very proud of each of you, and of all those who helped and supported you along the way! May you live long and productive lives in peace and prosperity.

And... May God bless America!