

Thank you, President Austin, for this opportunity and for this honor - it is special to me. It is a pleasure to join friends, family, and faculty as we celebrate the graduation of University of Connecticut 's Class of 2006. Congratulations! I know you have waited for this day for a long time, and I do hope that you will savor it.

I am honored to have this chance to speak to the Class of 2006. And with predecessors including historians like David McCullough, activists like Noam Chomsky and public officials like my old boss and colleague in the Connecticut Congressional delegation, Senator Chris Dodd, I know the standards are high.

And thank you for this honorary Doctor of Laws. My mother always said if I did not succeed in politics that she wanted me to become a doctor - now I can tell her I am both.

Before I begin, I would like to thank some of those who have helped today's graduates reach this proud day and realize their potential.

First, let me thank President Austin and the Board of Trustees, particularly the Chairman of the Board, Dr. John Rowe, for this honor and for their leadership here at the university. Long among the leading state schools, this university has always been a beacon of opportunity for Connecticut families - from humble beginnings with faculty of 3, today UConn is enjoying a true renaissance as one of America 's premiere institutions of higher learning. This is a school that attracts the best-including dozens of our state's high school valedictorians-but more importantly it *produces* the best - from the next generation of researchers, scholars and business leaders to some of the most exceptional basketball talents we have ever seen.

And so, many thanks to all of the UConn faculty whose commitment has made that possible by teaching, challenging, and shaping today's graduates, particularly this year's Board of Trustees' Distinguished Professor, Sally Reis Renzulli. The Class of 2006 arrived ready to learn - about business, health care, education, agriculture, the arts, and the sciences. Whatever their area of focus, they depart four years later-for some, perhaps a little longer-poised to make a difference. They have you to thank for that.

Let me also say a word of congratulations to a few friends who are graduating today- Daniel DeStefano, Adam Dellaventura, and Jennifer Ortiz-as well as a few who interned in my Washington office, John Hudak and Justine Simisky. You all have made your families very proud.

Also, we congratulate David and Rhoda Chase - not only for their honorary degrees but also for their inspiring commitment to our community and our institutions. Continuing a tradition the Storrs Brothers began 126 years ago, when they offered the state of Connecticut 170 acres of farmland, the Chases' story is about obligations to society, immigrant values, and how we bring those values into the public sphere. So, thank you both.

In addition, we congratulate Barbara Ehrenreich - on her honorary degree but also for her extraordinary contributions to our understanding of economic justice, our social contract, and the state of opportunity here in America . She is a deep thinker, but more importantly she is someone who *challenges* the accepted norms of our society through her work - and we should all open as many eyes as she has.

This is a special day - and college graduations are always a remarkable occasion. For the students, it is a day filled with conflicting emotions. There is the adrenaline that has left you sleepless and bleary-eyed, and probably not a little worn out from hauling family around these last few days. There is also the nagging feeling that you may be leaving behind some of the best years of your life - a time in which you learned from others, but more importantly, you challenged yourself.

Indeed, one of the great things about college-particularly a state university like UConn-is that you have no choice but to be challenged. In your time here, each of you were faced with new ideas, new cultures, new causes and communities - many of which did not make sense to you at first. Along the way, you embraced some of these ideas and discarded others - but not before you weighed their merits and determined whether they were right for you. And now you are wondering if you are leaving all that behind - not simply your friends but also the environment and communities in which you felt could take those risks and face those challenges.

For the parents, graduation day is something very different - the day in which all your hard work has finally paid off. Sending a child to college is exciting but never easy - for most of us, it is the first time our kids are completely on their own, free to make their choices, to succeed and fail. In that sense, it is the first real test of our parenting skills. None of us will ever forget that first time our son or daughter came home after that first semester of college - that anxiety-filled moment during which we wondered whether we would even recognize our child when he or she arrived. Frankly, that feeling never goes away - it never gets easier, because you never really know how it is going to turn out. But as parents, all we can do is try - we do the best we can.

So, to the parents and family here today, I say - congratulations. You sweated it out together, but you made it together. And together, you have earned this moment.

For sure, the hard work does not end here - nor does the anxiety. As nurturing of an environment as UConn has been to all of the graduates today, I hardly have to tell you that the world out there is very different from a college campus. Indeed, many of you are already looking for that next community - that next place in your lives where you can build new friendships and safely explore new challenges and intellectual pursuits. Perhaps you will be lucky enough to discover these things at a job that allows you to make a living focusing on your passion. Perhaps you will find a new circle of friends that stand by you should you not succeed the first time out.

Regardless, the real world will push you in a very different direction than college did. Indeed, where college dared you to take risks and face problems head-on-

and *supported* you when you did-the world out there is more likely to encourage you to play it safe - to change the channel, put on your iPod headphones and tune out.

This is not to say all of you will choose to do that. But the temptation will be there - and can you blame those who do? As Americans-particularly those with an advanced degree-we are blessed with so many choices in life. We are blessed to live our lives as we choose - we get to decide which kind of car we drive and which kind of house we live in. In our society, we are fortunate enough to be able to pass on our values to our children.

Indeed, growing up in New Haven 's Italian neighborhood, Wooster Square , these freedoms were the essence of the American Dream. I now serve in the Congress and often marvel at the statuary in the Capitol and all the great leaders who have taken up great causes, who came here with a sense of a larger community and shared responsibility - who faced challenges to advance their values. And I think about how fortunate I am to be able to share in those traditions - about how everyday after school my mother would make me come by the sweatshop where she worked sewing collars for pennies to see the conditions. Her message was clear. Get an education. Make choices that that will give you a better life than this.

For many-particularly those arriving on our shores today-that sense of possibility and opportunity my mother instilled in me still defines us Americans. And now, with the explosion of technology and the Internet, the most remarkable communications tool the world has ever known, Americans have more choices than ever - more freedom to live our lives as we please.

But increasingly, we seem to be using those freedoms not to tackle our toughest challenges but to look the other way. We look at tragedies like Hurricane Katrina and the Sago Mine disaster or the war in Iraq and we shake our heads in disbelief. We look at the rapid ascendance of China and India on the global stage at the same time we consider the rising cost of college, stagnant wages and rising number of families without health insurance here in this country and we feel a little helpless. At the same time, with gas prices at \$3 per gallon, we wonder how we will ever break the deadlock that has left our country so dangerously dependent on oil. And that is to say nothing of the threat of terrorism, which has changed our lives in countless ways.

Indeed, as a society, we know we have big challenges facing us - but increasingly, we seem to lack faith in our ability to tackle them together.

Why is that? Well, some would say cynicism. But even more than that, there is a growing sense that the institutions upon which this country was built are letting us down - from government to the media to the nation's corporations. For sure, it began a long time ago, with Vietnam and Watergate. But that notion seems to be magnified today, as Americans are bombarded with story after story that reinforces that mistrust - pension mismanagement at companies like United Airlines and Enron, corruption and incompetence in government during Katrina, and conflicts of interest that compromise

the free and independent media that has girded our nation's liberties for more than 200 years.

And the result is clear. Despite the fact that an overwhelming majority of us do not want this and seek a new direction for our nation-including, I imagine, many of you-most Americans feel disconnected - powerless to do anything about institutions they built to better their lives and their country.

That feeling informs a number of views - from broad perceptions about public officials and corporate executives-that they are all in it for their own personal gain-to pessimistic beliefs that our retirement savings will not be around for us when we retire. Often, these views fly in the face of the reality - for instance, Social Security-the most successful retirement program in history-has not once missed delivering a check in 7 decades. And many politicians and corporate executives bring strong ethical principles to their professions.

But together, these views make for a public discourse that is often ugly and uninviting - more importantly, they hold back what we can accomplish as a nation. They discourage our participation.

And if we are going to answer the call and face our challenges-and I believe we will-we will need to turn that around and stop playing it safe. For all of this, we are still a nation infused with so much possibility, resources and talent. There has never been a challenge America has not responded to with creativity, energy and determination.

And as history teaches us, responding starts with accepting that we have a role to play, no matter how small. As Eleanor Roosevelt once said, " Freedom makes a huge requirement of every human being. With freedom comes responsibility. For the person who is unwilling to grow up-the person who does not want to carry his own weight-this is a frightening prospect."

And so today, I ask you to turn off your iPods for a moment and think about the stake you have in the challenges we face. I ask you to not simply *accept* that responsibility, but *embrace* it with that uniquely American spirit - that affirms our belief that even in an environment of mistrust and indifference, big solutions are possible.

And just recently, we have seen how true that is. In Massachusetts, Republicans and Democrats have come together to provide universal health care coverage to every resident in their state - an idea not long ago many of us thought virtually impossible. Like all things related to health care, their plan is complicated. But it is based on a simple premise - that instead of reimbursing hospitals for treating the uninsured, they could be using that money to help low-income families purchase health insurance.

What unites people of differing views around this plan in Massachusetts -from Governor Romney to Senator Kennedy-is not any particular idea or methodology but rather the *goal* - in this case, ensuring that every family, regardless of income or background,

can afford health care. And if Massachusetts can do it, there is no reason in the world other states cannot follow their lead and take on the same challenge.

How did they do it? To start with, they believed it was possible. And just as importantly, they realized that it was up to them to tackle this problem. With rising health care costs endangering American competitiveness as much as they are putting pressure on families, the various stakeholders realized that providing health care to every family was a matter of shared responsibility - a matter of the common good.

Indeed, pursuit of the common good is a powerful aspiration. As part of a rich Catholic tradition in which I was raised, I was taught that we realize our dignity and rights in relationship to others - that we grow and achieve fulfillment in community and have a broader social commitment and responsibility to contribute to the good of the whole society.

But working toward the common good does not have to be a matter of religious faith - nor is this a plea for altruism or looking beyond our self-interest. To be sure, the reasons to fight for the common good are, at their core, almost disarmingly practical. Because when we take some responsibility for what happens in this civic sphere we call America, we know from our history *all* of us will benefit.

That is what has sustained us through our country's most difficult moments - it is what motivated the millions of women who worked in factories and shipyards during World War Two. It was what inspired those who marched on Washington with Dr. King during the Civil Rights movement. It was the driving force behind the millions who donated their blood in the aftermath of September 11th.

And there are so many challenges before the country that require us to get back to thinking that way - not only the crisis in our health care system, but also the need to strengthen our public schools, to protect our air and water, and to bring our troops home safely from Iraq, to name only a few.

And one of our biggest challenges is moving our country toward energy independence. We all know about the problems our dependence on oil has created - from skyrocketing gas prices to global warming to leaving us reliant on some of the most volatile areas of the world right now.

But even as our dependence on oil is holding our country back in so many ways, what excites me about this issue - one of the reasons I have made it a priority for me in the Congress - is that sense of possibility. This is one big area in which every American understands the stakes for us as individuals and as a nation.

Just think about what we can accomplish by drastically reducing our dependence on oil through technologies that draw upon renewable energy sources like wind, solar and biomass - and frankly, lower gas prices is just the starting point. Right now, we spend

more on importing oil than we do on education, housing and homeland security in this country combined - \$200 billion, which is a third of our annual trade deficits.

But reaching energy independence is not simply a matter of freeing up financial resources but rather of unleashing human capital and potential - and on an unprecedented scale. Just imagine the opportunity we have if we charge our farms with helping us meeting this challenge - instead of paying them to grow less crops-which is what we do now-they can be growing the crops we need to make biofuels and other alternative sources of energy.

And it is not just farms. For example, Connecticut is a leading developer in fuel cell technology - and New Haven is but one community with a fleet of fuel cell buses in development. With these technologies, critical sectors of our economy like manufacturing would no longer be as reliant on materials made from petrochemicals like plastic.

Imagine the economic boom these technologies could bring to America - they could spur our economy on a scale that would rival the 1990's with the Internet. We could spread our nation's wealth across the country - to the Midwest, the South, the Pacific Northwest and here in the Northeast. We could bridge the cultural, economic and social divide growing between rural America and other parts of the country. There may be no bigger solution than reaching energy independence - and believe me when I say that Land Grant Universities like UConn, which provide so much of this critical research, will have a big role in helping us reach that goal.

And when it comes to getting us there, your participation will be so desperately needed. Whether the issue is energy, ensuring we have enough nurses in our hospitals when the Baby Boom generation begins to retire, lowering the cost of college tuition so that millions more like yourselves can get a degree or helping working parents balance the pressures between work and family with affordable child care, we need your engagement and your energy. Solving these problems are not only matters in which we all have a stake - but also so much to gain. Indeed, they are about making America as strong and vibrant a force in the 21 st Century as it was in the last.

And so, the challenge I put to you today is not to solve the crises we face in America 's hospitals or schools - though I hope some of you will play a role in those efforts. In fact, it is not about solving any one individual problem. Rather, my challenge to you is this - restore our belief that we can accomplish things together in this country. Whatever your path in life, leave room to participate - to help us pursue goals rooted in the common good. Regardless of whether the solution takes place in the public or private sectors, at the grassroots or in corporate boardrooms, on your turf or theirs, help us transcend our differences.

We have the resources. I look out at this crowd today and I know we have the talent - we are brimming with it. And unlike any other country on this planet, we have this Constitution, which gives America the freedom to control *its* collective destiny just as

that diploma you are about to receive allows you to control yours. Such choices are never easy. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, they make a huge requirement of every human being - of each of us.

If my own experiences have taught me anything, it is that bringing your values to the public sphere is not a matter of expediency but of moral and civic obligation - a call I hope each of you choose to answer.

So, again, I offer you, the Class of 2006, my congratulations, and wish you my very best as you embark on the next phase of your lives - there is no doubt in my mind you are going to bring a whole new meaning to the famous UConn charge. And with that, let me get you on your way - Go Huskies!

Thank you again for this special honor and this opportunity to speak at this special institution.

Thank you.