

Education for Citizenship

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President Holbrook, Provost Snyder, members of the Board of Trustees; distinguished guests; faculty and staff; parents, friends and loved ones of our graduating students; and outstanding graduates of December 2004:

What a final quarter you have had! Most graduates wrap up their studies by applying for jobs. Instead, you spent your last quarter interviewing the two finalists for the most powerful job on the planet. Then, after you and the rest of Ohio had chosen the next President of the United States, you beat Michigan by 16 points!

I am deeply honored to be here with you today—just as all of us on the faculty and staff have been honored to share the last few years with you. You are talented and inquisitive, thoughtful and persistent, diverse in both your backgrounds and ambitions. It has been a delight to share our classrooms, laboratories, studios, and playing fields with you.

When you first arrived at Ohio State, you learned that the motto of our great University is “education for citizenship.” What is that citizenship you have been educating yourselves for? Let’s talk about citizenship, not just at the polls, but as you live it.

Citizenship is all of us gathered in this room, celebrating your achievements. All of us are citizens of The Ohio State University, a community that worked together to forge your degrees. You graduates did most of the work, but you didn’t achieve your goals alone. Faculty and staff gave you helping hands, family members supported you

emotionally and financially, friends applauded each of your victories. Together we formed a community that supported you as you learned.

And even as you learned from us, we learned from you. That is the first of three essential elements of citizenship: connecting with a community in which each member nurtures the others.

We are citizens when we raise children, when we teach one another, when we care for the members of our temple, our neighborhood, or our soccer team. None of us choose to become citizens. We are citizens as soon as we are born into a community and every time we connect with a new community. We can only choose what type of citizens we will be.

What will you choose? At The Ohio State University, we have taught you to be citizens who reflect on your values, who honor your principles but are not afraid to examine them. We have taught you to be open to new ideas, to talk with people who see the world differently than you do, and to weigh their perspectives. Honest dialogue is the second essential element of citizenship.

Dialogue helps us sharpen our own beliefs, to refine them by testing them in conversation with others. Debate reveals new ways of thinking about issues and new facts to consider. Discussion helps us explore abstract principles like justice or equality, rooting them in our everyday lives.

One of the hardest jobs you will face as citizens is adhering to your core values while remaining open to the competing values of others. We each need a set of principles to guide us, we each need to know what we stand for, and to know that there are certain principles we will not compromise. At the same time, we must remember that America's great legacy is to question the status quo and search fearlessly for freedom, even when our inquiries generate answers that at first seem alien or uncomfortable. As President Dwight Eisenhower said, "Here in America we are descended in blood and in spirit from revolutionaries and rebels—men and women who dared to dissent from accepted doctrine."

Most people—and most communities—are wrong before they are right. The most successful communities are those who know when to change their minds. As Americans, we changed our minds about slavery, about segregated schools, and about “white only” jobs. We changed our minds about the ability of women to practice law, run businesses, and transplant hearts. We changed our minds—twice—about selling alcohol. And we changed our minds about allowing eighteen-year-olds to vote.

The great challenge you will face is knowing when to hold fast to your beliefs and when to change your minds. There is no easy answer to this challenge. The best approach is to talk openly with one another. Through dialogue, a community discovers what is true and what is false, what seemed right but will no longer work, and how we will make tomorrow even better than today.

Of course, we can't build a better tomorrow just by talking about it. That brings me to the third element of citizenship: Action. A community of citizens comes together to shape a common vision, then works collectively to make that vision real.

In honor of your commencement, and of the community that brought you this far, I'd like each of you to make a promise to yourselves right now. Promise that you will always be part of some project in which you are working with others to make your community better. You can fulfill that pledge in countless ways. You might work on a legislative reform or a school board initiative. You can run for office, manage a campaign, or hand out leaflets. You can work with the alumni association, a religious organization, a citizen action group, or a nonprofit. You can organize your own group. But every December, when you think back to this day and celebrate the dreams you are then fulfilling, ask yourself: Have I worked with others this year to make the community a better place? The unofficial motto of Ohio State, coined by former football coach Woody Hayes, is: “You can never pay back, but you can always pay forward.”

As you pay forward into the community, stretch the actions you take. When we volunteer at a soup kitchen, we feed the people who are hungry today. When we organize a new soup kitchen, we feed the people who are hungry tomorrow. When we

stop and ask, “why are all these people hungry,” and then work with others to address the root causes of hunger, we stop the hunger from happening. Never be satisfied with just feeding today’s hunger.

So citizenship has three essential elements: community, dialogue, and collective action. Those foundations never change, but each generation creates its own form of citizenship, its own way to lead the community.

What kind of citizens are you? What will be your distinctive mark on the world? I have four predictions and then I’ll close.

First, you have already shown a strong commitment to serve the community. Volunteer rates among high school and college students have been climbing for more than a decade. Your volunteerism will continue, but you will not be content with individual acts of generosity. Service-learning classes and other experiences have shown you the power of applying your skills and knowledge on a deeper level. You are rediscovering the power of collective action and the ability of government to serve the common good. In marked contrast to the generations before you, 60% of college and university aged voters said in a recent poll that government “should do more to solve problems.”<sup>1</sup>

You backed up that attitude by turning out to vote in November. Nationwide, seventy-seven percent of college students voted last month.<sup>2</sup> The turnout may have been even higher in battleground states like Ohio. As citizens, I predict that you will help return America to the polls and deepen our commitment to collective action resolving common problems.

Second, you are already more diverse than any previous generation of citizens and you are more comfortable with that diversity. Under-30 voters include a higher

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<sup>1</sup> CIRCLE Staff, Fact Sheet on Youth Voting in the 2004 Election, <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS-PresElection04.pdf> (CIRCLE Nov. 8, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Niemi and Michael Hanmer, Fact Sheet on College Students in 2004 Election, [http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS\\_College\\_Voting.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_College_Voting.pdf) (CIRCLE Nov. 2004).

proportion of African American, Hispanic, or Latino citizens than older groups do.<sup>3</sup> You are also twice as likely as the full voting population to identify yourselves as gay or lesbian.<sup>4</sup> These differences reflect changing demographics, increased openness, and—perhaps most important, the fact that young minority, gay, and lesbian citizens feel more welcome in the civic community. Citizens don't participate until they feel part of the whole. I predict that you will continue building the trust that supports a more integrated civic community.

And like previous generations, you will also work to extend the circle of equality that is our heritage. Right now, American voters are evenly divided on the issue of civil unions. But almost sixty percent of voters under 30 favor those unions.<sup>5</sup> You will lead us in continuing to press the unstoppable tide of equality.

Third, you will reinvigorate citizenship with technology. Through cell phones and the internet, you are always connected. You have brought us globally coordinated protests, web blogs, new internet resources, and meet ups. For those of you in the audience who don't know what a blog or meet up is, that's your homework tonight. You graduates will also help us realize the full potential of our technology. More than thirty-five years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. said: "Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood." "[A]nd yet," King continued, "we have not [yet] had the ethical commitment to make it a brotherhood." I predict that you will use technology, together with your richer experience of diversity, to bring us closer to brotherhood.

Finally, your citizenship has been touched in a special way by the violence of September 11. September 11, 2001, was a day when all Americans wept. But a tragedy like September 11 has a particular impact on citizens who are just coming of age. John Glenn was a junior in college when Pearl Harbor was attacked; he and the nation both

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<sup>3</sup> Fact Sheet on Youth Voting in the 2004 Election, *supra* note 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> National Public Radio Survey on Gay Marriage and Civil Unions, <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/polls/dec2003/dec03-p.pdf> (Dec. 24, 2003).

went to war. Sixty years later, Glenn still talks about the defining role Pearl Harbor played in his life and the lives of his contemporaries, shaping their views of citizenship and community.

September 11 will play a similar role for you. But this doesn't mean that you will be stalked by tragedy. Pearl Harbor produced the citizens we call the "Greatest Generation," citizens who showed valor, bravery, and common purpose. They returned from battle to preside over an era of peace, prosperity, and rapidly expanding civil rights. They integrated our schools, appointed the first woman to the Supreme Court, and took us to the moon. Those achievements seemed unattainable in 1941, when the Greatest Generation went off to war, just as we can hardly imagine your ultimate victories today. The world will change greatly in the next sixty years, just as it did in the last. But your achievements, I predict, will be the greatest yet.

Take a moment to look at yourselves and be proud. You are diverse and talented. You have been educated in the twenty-first century, with all the promise this new millennium offers. You have already shown great strength as citizens and members of our community. Most important, you are graduates of The Ohio State University. We stand with you today as you lead us into your future. Congratulations and Go Citizen Bucks!