

*Transcribed from Senator's handwritten
Speech*

May 25, 1975

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EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

Chancellor Jenkins, Trustees, Faculty, Graduates and Guests:

I must confess that I am overjoyed and filled with pride as I undertake this commencement address at this university - a school that I have known so long and loved so well; a school where every faculty member, every alumni; and every student, whether known by me personally or not has had and will always have a special closeness and meaning because of the common ties that attach naturally to those who live and study and teach here.... ties that are known to the students and faculties of few other universities and institutions.

I suppose that with 2,618 members of the 1975 graduating class present, not necessarily listening, but at least looking on, and with more than ten thousand of your families and friends present I should attempt to use this occasion to applaud your achievements and urge you on to greater personal accomplishments. But the truth is, however, that after all the long study and hard work that you put in during the last four year and the fact that you have not yet been pulled out of line indicates that you pretty well know by now that you've made it and unless your teachers changed greatly since my days here I am sure that you have already been urged to reach greater heights.

And one would suppose also that since I have been recently enrolled by you and 5 million other North Carolinians in that greatest of all learning institutions, the U. S. Senate, that I should speak to you of the great problems that confront our republic. And I would add parenthetically that the U. S. Senate could be easily identified as the greatest of all universities for where else could a student body of only one hundred persons be lectured daily by the great leaders of the world - the President of the United States, the members of his cabinets, the Prime Ministers of great nations, of England, Yugoslavia, of Spain and Japan, and experts in the many fields of vast knowledge that confront the world - with also the privilege to question and cross-question such teachers - and I might add that even on occasion we attempt to lecture each other - but on most such occasions it is to little or no avail.

And there are issues that confront mankind for which you ~~must~~ help us find answers - how to preserve this great and beautiful land of ours so that we can hand down to successive generations the wealth and beauty that has been ours to enjoy; how we can help preserve for men and women all over the world the basic freedoms that have made our country great. The freedom to speak as one chooses, freedom from want, freedom from fear, and freedom to worship in one's own way; we must also find ways to reverse our economy, to provide full employment for our people.

You and I know that there are no clear cut answers but in helping to provide a better world and a fuller life for our people we can and will answer many of these problems.

This great university has provided us with many opportunities to help make this a better world and our lives fuller. And as I stand here this afternoon I'm full of nostalgia and appreciation - for in my mind's eye the memories of my days here as a student and as a trustee are as clear and vivid as were the events of the times. I see myself as the youngest of a farm family in Harnett County in the early forties. My sister, slightly older, was already enrolled here, and the two of us were the first generation of college students in the family.

With meager means, having just survived the great depression, and with parents whose love for education was unsurpassed, but whose formal education was almost totally lacking, we were both poorly equipped - economically and educationally - for college.

But years before our entry men and women here in Pitt County, in eastern North Carolina and in the legislative halls at Raleigh had envisioned the plight of just such young people as Esther and me. They had established this institution for persons such as we by overcoming great opposition among many in this state who thought this area was not gentile enough to train young men and women.

The first president, Dr. Robert H. Wright, and those early faculty members were determined however to create among the young rural men and women of this state a thirst for knowledge and an opportunity for learning. Many of these early faculty members such as Miss Maria Gruborn and Louise William were determined that I should learn basic mathematics and trigonometry - a course that I had never heard of in my small high school.

Miss Lois Grisly and Miss Mamie Jenkins were appalled that I could be enrolled in their composition classes without being able to write a complete sentence, let alone quote Shakespear or recite the poems of Browning and Lord Byron. And the only thing that kept Ellen Caldwell, well, maybe after all these years I should say Ellen Fleming, from flunking me out of college algebra was the fact that the draft got to me first.

I could go on but what I'm trying to say is that those who preceded me were determined that a boy or girl of that day was going to have an opportunity to bring out all that was in them regardless of the walk of life from which he or she came. And that has been the tradition and philosophy of the dedicated faculties and administrators since then and now that you are graduating and commencing again the Torch will, in the words of John F. Kennedy, be passed to your generation to carry on these great traditions to make sure that a top flight university education is available to the average man and woman.

Under previous administrations and Jenkins we've seen the philosophy develop that this university would meet the needs of the people of the state.

From Maine to Florida and from here to California and in many parts of the world graduates of East Carolina are providing the finest in teaching for our young people.

The top business leaders in the country are seeking our graduates because of their superior qualifications and as one of our friendly adversaries told me "they are of the people who are willing to put their native ingenuity and talents into practice."

From Washington to Florida and East of the Mississippi you can not find a school of music or art that excells ours.

Our School of Nursing that was created by the legislature over the opposition of the higher board is not only one of the best in the state but is of the best in the nation.

Allied health, corrections, sciences, political science philosophy and other descriptives too numerous to mention are all outstanding and our graduates are sought everywhere.

The great struggle for resources and opportunities to train more doctors began in 1963 when I introduced a resolution to look toward establishing a medical school at Charlottee. But when the doctors there said they weren't interested the following session Congressman Walter Jones and I, along with the support and encouragement of Leo Jenkins and many of you began the long fight to offer opportunities here.

We did so when Dr. Ernest Ferguson and others encouraged us to because as they said many babies in his area would die before reaching the nearest medical center at Duke or Carolina. This struggle is now bearing fruit along with many of the others because people at East Carolina believe in service to their fellow man.

And while striving to do these things we have never sought to move ahead by keeping others down.

The same year we were beginning our drive for a medical school we introduced a bill calling for an addition to the dental school at Chapel Hill, and co-sponsored the bill to create the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. In 1967 we joined together to preserve the law school at NCC. I have voted for poultry research centers at N. C. State, food packing research, improved engineering at State. We have supported the creation of more than 50 technical institutes and community colleges.

In 1963 we accompanied Dr. Leslie Campbell of Campbell College to see Governor Sanfórd to begin the move to help our private colleges survive.

The message I would leave with you is that by working together we can meet the needs of all of our people in N. C. It's not an either/or proposition. We not only can afford to do so but we must - for no one person in North Carolina can suffer nor can any one area go lacking without all of us suffering.

In closing let me pay a special tribute to the faculty and administration. As a legislator of many years I know that our faculty has carried and is now carrying one of the heaviest teaching loads in the state - for instance, I noted some time ago that if our teachers taught only the number of hours as their counterparts in some other state universities, the cost to the tax payers would be several million per year.

East Carolina has long made the highest utilization of its physical plant and facilities of any state supported university in the state.

And as I bring to close my official association with our Chancellor, an association that extends back for 25 years, I would pay our special tributes to him.

(Dean Rusk - said transmit to the next generation)