

Rep. David Price
Commencement Address
Department of Physics and Astronomy
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
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- Chairman Champagne, Professor Frampton, Professor Engel, Professor Deardorff, other distinguished faculty, other distinguished guests, members of the graduating class and families: thank you for inviting me to be here with you today. Our main order of business is to offer congratulations to today's graduates, and to the families, mentors, and friends who helped them reach this point. Nobody, after all, reaches graduation day totally on his or her own.
- I also welcome the opportunity to reflect on the nature of your accomplishment and its relevance to major challenges our society faces. There is actually quite a lot to talk about, but I promise you I will not try to say it all! You did, after all, take your chances in inviting a politician to address you. I will be brief, but I do want to use the occasion to reflect on the contribution of scientific endeavors to the common good, and on the influence your vocation as scientists or as appliers and users of science might have on your broader roles as citizens.
- Your happy occasion is actually a homecoming for me as well. This weekend I joined my classmates from the Class of 1961 for our 50th reunion celebration. It has been an occasion of nostalgia and reflection, as we have recalled everything from what was on the hit parade in 1961 to what was going on in this community — namely the sit-ins and other civil rights activity which shaped my student generation as profoundly as anything we encountered in the classroom.
- I feel very indebted to this university, and as Chapel Hill's representative in the U.S. Congress I have become even more aware of the difference it has made in North Carolina

and the resource it represents for the nation.

I need not recount this illustrious history, except to say that science and innovation have been at its very core. From John Motley Morehead's pioneering work with calcium carbide – the fruits of which led to his collaboration with this department in constructing a planetarium and paid my way and that of many others to this university – to Oliver Smithies' breakthroughs in the genetic modeling of diseases, science has been central to the university's mission of public service. This university has a long tradition of transforming new discoveries and nascent technologies into valuable commercial applications. Our current Chancellor is a pioneering scientist – though regrettably not from this distinguished department. It has been gratifying to watch this university institutionalize its start-up culture with model programs like Innovate@Carolina, which help researchers transition to entrepreneurs who create jobs and help sustain the vibrant community around us.

- That community would be the Research Triangle. Scarcely half a century ago, the land stretching between Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill held little more than “scrub pines and possums,” in the words of one of RTP's pioneers. By recognizing the potential for our area's research universities to become engines of innovation and economic development, visionary leaders such as Luther Hodges, Terry Sanford, and Bill Friday accomplished what must be regarded as one of the most stunning feats in our State's history: transforming the Triangle from a tobacco and textile dependent community into a leader in the twenty-first century economy.
- We are all proud of this history, but today we are also here to look ahead to the future, which is what commencement is really about, after all. You are marking the beginning of a new

phase of life, and I expect many of you are wondering, relishing, or stressing over what the future may hold.

- Let me presume to give some very simple career advice: do what you love and work hard. You may leave work tired, but you will have a spring in your step. And endowed with an education in science, be an advocate and an example of science's contribution to the common good, not just in the Research Triangle but wherever you find yourselves.
- You enter into professions with rich histories, and while most of your fellow citizens, including myself, "see through a glass darkly" when it comes to understanding what you do, you still have the ability to dazzle. To dazzle, for example, with accounts of astronomers pointing the Hubble at a small region of space for days at a time, revealing the "Hubble Deep Field," an image of what from Earth would appear to be a miniscule speck of the sky that turned out to be dotted with hundreds of galaxies. Or to smash atoms together at awesome speeds to reveal the fundamental building blocks of matter and energy.
- So you will be pushing the frontiers of knowledge and applying that knowledge for society's benefit. Today you mark the transition from being trained to training others, from following a largely prescribed course of study to determining your own paths of endeavor, paths fraught with risk and promise. You will be venturing, in other words, into the wider world. Today I want to suggest, as you might expect, that you will do that not only as scientists but also as citizens. And I hope you will think seriously about how your vocation as scientist will inform and shape your role as citizen.
- I don't know what image first comes to mind when you hear the word politics, but I hope it goes beyond mutually insulting 30-second ads, the ranting of talk show hosts, or power-seeking by politicians. The fact is that politics in a democracy is an indispensable means of

achieving our common purposes as a community. I have always been grateful to have come of age politically during the civil rights era, because it was such a positive formative experience — demonstrating that committed people acting together, using the legitimate instruments of power and persuasion, could right ancient wrongs.

- We have all had experiences, of course, that cast politics in a less favorable light. But it is important not to lose — indeed we must insist upon — that vision of politics in a democracy as an instrument of common purpose. For that is the kind of politics it will take, with each of us participating, whether as leaders, advocates, or informed citizens, if our community is to flourish and more people are to have the kind of opportunity to prosper and to realize their dreams that we celebrate here today.

What might your distinctive contributions as citizen-advocates be? In Congress, we are now debating the role of our government in supporting the programs and priorities which gave rise to so many of our nation's scientific breakthroughs. What level of support is feasible and desirable for the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and all levels of public education? The North Carolina State Legislature is also reconsidering its support of scientific and educational endeavors.

- I believe America deserves a government that isn't penny-wise and pound foolish. Discovery is our business: our country's public-private research efforts ensure our future economic competitiveness by powering innovation and growth. In fact, these efforts probably represent our most important competitive advantage internationally. But if we are to preserve and expand this fundamental activity, we will need to hear from you – from those who are actually expanding the frontiers of our knowledge and giving back to society.

Especially these days, the research community cannot assume that its good works speak for themselves. I hope you will consider it your obligation not only to contribute to the common good, but to interpret that contribution — and what it takes to sustain it — to the broader community.

- I will end as I began: with heartfelt congratulations for what you, with the help and support of many, many people, have achieved. You have made it through this university's demanding course of study and are uniquely prepared to contribute to our society. I wish you good fortune as you take your skills, industry and determination out into the world. I wish you the satisfaction of productive work that uses your full potential. And may you also make a positive contribution to those around you, giving as well as receiving, blessing even as you have been blessed, gladly assuming the joys and responsibilities of citizenship.
- Thank you and Godspeed.