

Commencement Remarks – Salem CyberSpace

May 7, 2009

Good evening, and my sincere thanks to Linda Saris and Salem CyberSpace for allowing me this opportunity to address some very extraordinary individuals—your graduating seniors, several of whom have spoken and performed so beautifully this evening. I congratulate each of you for all you have achieved. With great honor comes great responsibility, something you have already shown yourself so capable of assuming. By taking charge of your education, you have also taken ownership of your futures.

I also congratulate the mothers, fathers and other family member who gather here this evening to applaud your accomplishments. Their support has been critical in your success and I know they are so very proud of you tonight. Let's offer them a show of appreciation. (Applause)

Throughout our lives, we all have defining moments—moments that influence who we are and what we become. Later in life, we tend to remember some of these as our 'ah ha!' moments, for they are the experiences that shape us, inform our decisions and make simple differences in ways sometimes too small to notice.

Tonight is one of these experiences. Prepare a place in your memories for this occasion, and for all of the individuals who are here tonight because of what you have done. This is one of **your** lives' defining moments—the first, I hope, of many. Thanks to the extraordinary support provided by Salem CyberSpace, the generosity of those in this room who fund this remarkable organization and the love and encouragement of your parents, friends, allies, and family members—you stand at the threshold of a very bright future this evening.

While you and your families revel tonight in your accomplishments—deservedly so—bear in mind that what you have achieved thus far is not an ending, but rather a beginning. You are being presented an opportunity—for yourselves, for your families and for your community—to dream big and to succeed.

Previous speakers have spoken of the worrisome graduation rates for Hispanic and immigrant youths across the nation. Locally, we have seen it at Salem State, where in 2001 only two Hispanic students from Salem High School applied to the college. Both were admitted and one has graduated; the second is still enrolled. Although the number of Salem High students applying to Salem State and identifying themselves as Hispanic or of immigrant parents has risen somewhat in the past eight years, it nowhere near approaches the figures we want to see.

Of the Hispanic students from Salem High School who attended Salem State during this period, only nine students have graduated, a disappointing number, indeed. Twenty-two students do remain enrolled, however, and it is these 22 students—and those, like you, who follow them—that we must work harder to help succeed and graduate. It is incumbent on us to do a better job bridging the transition from the last year of high school to the first year of college—and we will. Entering freshmen coming to our campus during the summer to prepare for college can expect to receive all the extra help they require. They can also expect that the same advisor with whom they developed a relationship over the summer will remain by their side throughout their college experience, providing continuity, motivation, support, advice, and advocacy.

For those of you here tonight who will be attending Salem State in the fall, be assured that your continued success is our highest priority. We welcome you with open arms, and will provide the support you need to obtain your college degree and enter a work force that will require your skills and knowledge.

I also look forward to building continued partnerships with organizations like Salem CyberSpace, in the process developing a working model of high school to college transition programs that ensure greater success for Hispanic youth and the children of immigrants. A better education, wider opportunities and a chance to share in the American dream is what brought so many of your families to this country. At Salem State, I can assure you that we will do our part to see that it happens. My greatest hope, however, is that the bridging program we build at Salem State will serve as a model for other such endeavors, and be replicated far and wide throughout the region. When it does, I feel certain we will see the enrollment, retention and graduation rates of Hispanic students rise dramatically.

Congratulations on your graduation, and good luck as you enter college. With hard work and a can-do attitude, it, too, can serve as one of the defining experiences of your life.