

John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

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# Teachers and the 21st Century Economy

Commencement Address  
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**Carl E. Van Horn**  
Professor and Director

John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development  
Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

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THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY  
**RUTGERS**

Thank you, President Steele, members of the Board of Trustees, faculty, administration and staff, graduates, families, and friends. And thank you all for inviting me to join you today and for bestowing on me the honorary degree of Doctor of Public Service.

On this special day when we honor the graduates of this fine college, it is appropriate to begin by thanking the families and friends of the graduates — for their encouragement, support, and sacrifice. Let's give them a hearty and well-deserved round of applause.

For almost 170 years, Muskingum College — one of our nation's finest liberal arts colleges — has helped young people reach high levels of achievement. What the students learn at this distinguished college prepares them well for their lives and careers.

Everyone here today shares the well-founded belief that teaching is a **very** special and **very** important profession. Like a candle that consumes itself to light the way for others — a teacher lights the way for the next generation. Teachers propel civilization forward.

Indeed, our progress as a nation — and the development of our core values of honesty, integrity, and fair play — come about through teaching and learning.

As a young man, Albert Einstein studied mathematics and physics so that he could become a teacher — and what a teacher he became! Speaking about the teaching profes-

sion, Einstein said, "It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge."

I am certain that most of us here today remember how one of our teachers awakened in us that joy of creative expression and learning. Let me tell you about a high school teacher of mine who did that for me.

I grew up just outside Pittsburgh and attended Churchill High School. My favorite high school teacher was the choir instructor: Phyllis Zimmerman — Miss Z to us. A graduate of Concordia College — a small, Lutheran-affiliated college in Minnesota — Miss Z was a dedicated professional who loved to see her students meet new challenges and grow from those experiences.

As much as any teacher in my youth, Miss Z taught me the difference between **good** work and **excellent** work. She showed me — and the 60 other students in our choir — that discipline, commitment, and caring are necessary to achieve excellence in any endeavor. And that there is great satisfaction in rehearsing and preparing until you get it right. She was a dynamic motivator, a gifted leader who helped Churchill High School gain a national reputation for its a cappella choir — notwithstanding my modest talents as a singer.

Joseph Campbell, the teacher and mythologist, might have been describing Miss Zimmerman when he wrote, "The job of an educator is to teach students to see the vitality in themselves." Miss Zimmerman did that through her determination that every student should aspire to be an

exceptional student — to believe that he or she could achieve great things working together for a common purpose — singing beautiful music.

And while I am on the subject of favorite teachers, I have a bit of a surprise for you. My all-time favorite teacher is in the audience today. But it's not Miss Zimmerman. No, I am referring to my wife Christy!

Before I met Christy, she taught fourth graders in a rural town in Oregon. The daughter and granddaughter of teachers, I can assure you that she has taught me a thing or two about teaching — a few other things, too.

Coming to Muskingum College and seeing the John Glenn Gymnasium and other tributes to his achievements, reminds me of a Tuesday morning in February almost 45 years ago when — as a sixth grader in Forest Hills, Pennsylvania — I watched the Friendship 7 spacecraft ascend into the skies off Cape Canaveral.

That was a day when children's eyes were glued to black-and-white televisions as we watched the blastoff with a combination of nervousness and tremendous pride in the United States of America.

I also remember another pioneer of space flight on another winter day, almost a quarter century later — a person whose life and untimely death on the Space Shuttle Challenger was and is an inspiration to us.

That pioneer was Christa McAuliffe, the first teacher to venture into space. After she was selected from the 11,000 teachers who

applied to be an astronaut, a reporter asked her why she wanted to take part in the space program. Christa's reply was simple yet eloquent, "I am a teacher. Every day, through my students, I touch the future."

Christa McAuliffe's answer reminds us why teaching is such a powerful vocation. Teachers touch the future through those they teach today. Other than the family, teachers are the most powerful influence on young people as they form their values and as they prepare for a life of learning and work.

I am confident that your studies here at Muskingum — and your experience in the classroom — have convinced you of the vital role teachers play in the lives of students.

With each passing decade — as our economy changes — getting a good education becomes more important to our economic prosperity and values — and the teacher's role grows in significance. In fact, the global economy, the U.S. economy, and the world of work have changed radically in the past few decades — and we're all still coping with the changes.

Because of those rapid and stunning changes, your students' experiences in the workplace will be far different from the one experienced by your parents and grandparents — and even different from your own.

I'll return again to my youth in Pittsburgh to illustrate my point. My father worked at the Homestead steel plant for 40 years. Most of our neighbors were either steelworkers or associated with the industry. When I graduated from high school,

I followed the normal pattern and took a job at the mill.

But unlike many of the men who spent their whole lives there, I had enrolled in college and was headed on a different path. My co-workers knew I had a chance to have a better life if I stayed in college and they encouraged me to finish college and move on.

Those steelworkers were my teachers, too.

Well, the Homestead plant that once employed over 30,000 men and women is no more. It's not just the steel industry that has fallen on hard times. Industrial change, plant closings, mergers, people laid off from a life of work are facts of life in communities all over this nation.

As our nation and our workforce pass through the wrenching transition, factories close down, whole industries move to other countries, jobs that once seemed secure vanish.

We are in the midst of the most dramatic shift in our economic system since we moved from farm to factory. Rapid advances in information technology, globalization, and relentless competition shape these changes.

Fifty years ago, one in four jobs was in manufacturing. Today, only one in ten workers are in manufacturing jobs and that number keeps falling here in Ohio and around the nation.

Fifty years ago, many workers spent their entire career at a single company, like my Dad's 40-year stint

at the steel plant. Today, most American workers are likely to change jobs at least every three to five years.

Indeed, this is not my father's workplace or your parent's workplace. It's highly competitive and very insecure.

Amidst this rapid change, only one thing is certain — those who are well educated and know how to learn will have the most success. The same goes for communities and nations: the better educated we are as a society, the more success we will have.

The global, competitive, knowledge economy of the 21st century demands that workers figure out how to acquire and continue to update the education and skills they need to meet the changing needs of the economy.

Today, our nation leads the world in tapping knowledge and technology to create, market, and sell expert information and services. But, not everyone is benefiting from this new economy and that's where you — the teachers — come into the picture.

It's the teacher's responsibility to prepare young people to compete in the 21st century global economy. It's a chance not only to inspire and enlighten students but also to equip them to succeed. America's teachers will shape and mold the future workers for the new global, competitive marketplace.

More than anything else, your students must come to view learning as a lifelong process that doesn't stop

at the high school or college doors — because learning is the foundation of a successful life in the knowledge economy.

You can help your students not simply to know a list of facts but to develop a strategy for applying them. You should challenge your students not just to earn good grades but also to develop good habits of thinking and learning. You can instill in them the confidence to take on jobs and careers they never imagined.

While some things change, other things remain the same. I am referring to the need to recognize that the young people you teach will become tomorrow's citizens, parents, leaders, and yes, teachers.

What's also timeless is something I touched upon earlier: the solid, old-fashioned values of hard work, integrity, honesty, and fair play. As teachers, you can keep those values in the forefront for our young people.

And while I am on the subject of honesty, you will encounter more than a few students with creative excuses for why their paper is not done or why they can't take the test today.

Let me give you a little practical advice from someone who's been in the classroom for 30 years: it's best to maintain a healthy sense of humor.

Over the years, I've heard some real whoppers for excuses: close and distant relatives who've met their sudden demise, computers that malfunctioned, libraries that closed abruptly, and, of course, sudden, mysterious illnesses.

But there's one world-class excuse that I'll always remember for its sheer creativity — one I'll bet you haven't heard, "Professor, I couldn't finish the paper on time. You see I had to take my cat to the chiropractor."

In closing, we should all take pride in the fact that the foundation of our great republic — and a principal reason for our success as a people — is universal education. It has distinguished the United States from other world powers and still does.

As we enter a new era, the success of our students, our communities, and our country depends more than ever before on knowledge, creativity, and innovation. For America's prosperity and well-being, we must ensure that our young people continue to acquire, analyze, and apply knowledge. For America's future, the quality of our teaching must match our nation's dreams and aspirations.

As Christa McAuliffe reminded us, education has always been about the future — your future and the nation's future.

If we accept the challenge of shaping the future of education in this country — as Muskingum College does so well — and if we continue to inspire young people to achieve in this new world, we will surely achieve all that is possible as the free citizens of a civilized nation.

Congratulations to the graduates of the Class of 2005.

Go forward and touch the future.