

Commencement Message
LaGuardia Community College
Radio City Music Hall
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Michael Gilligan
President
Henry Luce Foundation

What a joy to be with you today! And what a privilege!

I'm grateful to your president, Dr. Gail Mellow, for inviting me to join you all on this special day – and I thank interim president Peter Katopes, and vice presidents Paul Arcario and Ramone Segree for welcoming me to the college and to this commencement. It's an honor to be asked to reflect with you for a few moments as you celebrate your graduation – and I'm humbled to receive the President's Medal of Honor, a distinction deserved by others whose contributions to the college's life are in fact longer-term and deeper than mine.

Apart from THANKS, the most important word I have to say today is **CONGRATULATIONS!** **Congratulations** to the graduates – to your families – to your teachers and mentors – to all who have supported you and accompanied you toward this goal! Did you ever think that you would appear one day at Radio City Music Hall? Neither did I! But we're here – and you made it happen.

As you receive your degrees this morning, I want to honor the sacrifices that you have made and the important work that you have completed. When you start college, you're always taking a leap of faith – hoping that what you learn and the degree you earn will yield value that is commensurate to your investment of time, talent and treasure. At LaGuardia

Community College, I believe that your leap of faith has brought you to a safe landing – and also to higher ground than where you started. In my visits to the college, I have met extraordinary professors and administrators whose sole focus has been your advancement – trustworthy leaders and mentors who have made your success their only goal. With tens of thousands of our fellow New Yorkers, you’ve had the opportunity to study in a rare place, more special than is often recognized. And to be successful, you have matched your teachers’ and your families’ best efforts with your own commitment. **You’ve taken risks** – the risk of leaving your home and your neighborhood to go past high school, or borrowing money for tuition with no guarantee of passing the exams, or picking yourself up after some experience of loss or failure, or starting in a completely new direction, believing that you might really find greater success, meaning and happiness there. You have pushed your limits. You have dared to do more. And today, all of us are here to celebrate that you have indeed succeeded.

With that success recognized, the question is WHAT’S NEXT? How are you going to build on the strong foundations that you’ve laid at LaGuardia? This question matters for each one of you who graduates today. The associate’s degree testifies that you are indeed ready for the next level of college, the next academic and intellectual challenges. I believe that it testifies to two other traits that are just as important, now and as you move ahead: your **perseverance** in completing the whole program – and your **optimism**. The question WHAT’S NEXT is important for each of you, but it also matters to everyone who has supported you. For the rest of your lives, we will depend on your skills and generosity.

I was first introduced to LaGuardia by one of your classmates who works long hours in my apartment building in Brooklyn. Like hundreds of LaGuardia students, he moved from ESL classes into the rigorous program in the liberal arts, and now has enrolled at Baruch to complete his bachelor's degree. In the last year, I've met other amazing students in your class: some have just returned from military service in Iraq and Afghanistan; some who have balanced their coursework with raising a family (often having to delay their own assignments until they'd helped their kids with their homework, then tucked them into bed for the night); others have found the focus and honed time-management skills to work full-time jobs and also study full-time. Several of you have told me that you had left dead-end jobs or dangerous streets, risking ridicule from friends who thought you were reaching too high when you took this path toward your dreams of being engineers or artists, teachers or financiers, filmmakers, physicians and civic leaders.

With over 17 million students each year, this country's system of higher education is envied by many others around the world. No doubt, some of your own families came to this country, specifically seeking this opportunity for themselves and for their children. One of the jewels of our system is the community college. For many in this country, the community college is the gateway to the future, the one place that they can count on to further their education near home, with flexible schedules, affordable fees and a reliable support system. And you're blessed to graduate from one of the very best in the country.

By its very name, a community college is a place that offers **two of the core components of learning**. It is a college – that is, in its root sense, a place where people read together. We usually think of reading as a solitary activity – a pleasure, even an escape; sometimes an

arduous necessity to gain information. But one of the joys and responsibilities of your education has been learning to read with others – especially, reading with others whose experiences and backgrounds, whose dreams and hopes, were very different from your own. You have read with your teachers and with your fellow students. Together you’ve read books and blogs and papers – in libraries and on subway commutes. And you’ve also learned to “read beyond the page” – to read the signs of the times. Reading has meant more than decoding a text; it’s meant discerning the meaning – and deciding on the impact. At LaGuardia, you’ve lived immersed in words but also in art; I’ve visited your campus and I know that you could not move from one class to another without encountering something beautiful, something challenging, a new text or image to read. As an effective reader, you’ve learned to be willing to shift your perspective, perhaps even change your position, when you learned more by reading together. Besides open eyes, you have had to bring an open mind and an open heart.

And so the college is a place where you’ve read together. But the other word in the name is another essential ingredient: this is a community! You have been supported by – and you’ve helped to build – a community. Across the gulf of differences, you have come to recognize what we, as a people, have in common: common challenges, common struggles, common hopes. We live in a time of enormous conflict – around the world, in our neighborhoods, maybe even in our homes. Our political life is too often defined by partisanship. We’re encouraged to compete, to achieve distinction by defending our differences. But I trust that the community college, this place of common labor and mutual support, has taught you that **what unites us is both more important and more powerful than what divides us.**

Before sending you forth, I should say a word about my own work. For a dozen years, I've been honored to serve on the staff of the Henry Luce Foundation, which has been making grants since the 1930s to advance higher education in this country. The Foundation was created by Henry R. Luce, who founded TIME magazine with a college friend when he was just 25 years old and who went on to become one of the 20th century's great leaders in the media. He began our foundation to honor his parents who had left the US in the 1890s when they were still in their 20s – and newlyweds – to help to build colleges in China. They raised four children there, often in very hard circumstances. The Luces originally thought that they were offering a noble service to the Chinese people – and I'm sure that they were – but as their lives unfolded they realized that their Chinese students had also taught them to read the world in new ways. When they returned to the US after more than 25 years in Asia, they insisted that they had learned more than they had taught. In our work, we try to replicate their commitments to service and discovery, and particularly to deepen Americans' understanding of the rest of the world we share.

What I've described as two essential ingredients of learning – reading together and building community—are also, I think, the keys to our full participation in democracy. Your teachers and your families and you yourselves have recognized these lofty goals. You have worked hard to assure that your education at LaGuardia was not just accumulating a bunch of credits so that you could move on and make more money. The success that you have achieved here holds the key to thriving in a world of difference – in fact, to making a difference in the world. The great Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi challenged his fellow citizens in their quest for democracy not just to be passive witnesses to change but to do

more, saying “We must be the change we wish to see in the world.” That’s true for you, as well, and it’s true for me.

This community college has prepared you for leadership in the world. As you move on, let me recommend: Keep pushing yourself to higher standards, to bolder action. Keep pushing your communities to greater opportunity and greater justice. Keep pushing the boundaries of knowledge to imagine the new solutions that we earnestly need.

Whenever I visit LaGuardia Community College, I feel more alive, more connected. That is especially true for me today, as I applaud your discipline, marvel at your passion and celebrate your achievement. Congratulations – and many thanks!