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Commencement 2012: For Graduates, an Urge to Inspire Change

The Honorable Madeleine Albright, other speakers encourage the Class of 2012 to focus not on the challenges ahead, but on the ceaseless opportunities to make a mark



May 19, 2012

Bristol, R.I. – With words of wisdom imparted by an array of speakers – ranging from one of the most accomplished women in the history of American government to a philosophy major bound for the West Coast for an internship in Hollywood – 1,124 graduates in the Roger Williams University Class of 2012 culminated their college careers on Saturday at the University’s annual Commencement exercises.

On a day that boasted bright sunshine and an abundantly agreeable 72 degrees on the thermometer along the bayside campus, approximately 6,000 people turned out under the big tent in Bristol to watch the graduates cross the stage.

In addition to awarding bachelor’s and master’s degrees to the candidates, RWU President Donald J. Farish conferred honorary doctorates to two special guests: the Honorable Madeleine K. Albright, the 64th U.S. Secretary of State, and Ms. Trudy Coxe, chief executive officer and executive director of the Preservation Society of Newport County.

In a speech both heartfelt and humorous – Dr. Albright at one point noted that her own college experience dates back “about halfway between the invention of the iPod and the discovery of fire” – the former Secretary of State urged graduates to focus not on the challenges handed down by previous generations, but in the opportunities to inspire change. And continued education is key to success, she promised.

“As you look ahead, realize that the demands of the workplace will continue to change and that maintaining a certain level of knowledge is no longer enough,” Dr. Albright said. “Whether your primary goal is personal success, community service or a combination of the two, you will have to keep learning because there’s always more to know. For this you should be grateful because the quest to learn more is a vital part of what it means to be alive.

Citing words of wisdom from Alfred Lord Tennyson and Boris Pasternak alike, President Farish urged graduates to live, not to prepare for life.

“You must ask yourself whether you are going to observe life or participate in it,” he said. “Whether you wish to be a passenger or the driver. Whether your objective is merely to survive for as many years as you can or instead to plan on leaving a legacy – something that marks in a positive way, your time on Earth, and makes a difference in the lives of those whom you know and love and for those who will follow.”

Noting the less-than-ideal economic and employment prospects that will face many job seekers, student speaker and philosophy major R. Bradley Bermont '12 told his classmates that while it’s natural for graduates to venture into post-collegiate life with trepidation, there is no need to proceed cautiously.

“You know as well as I do: We’re fully mobile, maximally capable human beings with an eclectic mix of knowledge,” he told his classmates. “We have graduated having learned something about literature, science, math and history. We’ve seen business models and physics problems, floor plans and electrical grids.

“Let’s face it: We’re polymaths – Renaissance men and women. Roger Williams has equipped us with an education fit for a jack-of-all-trades, but we’ve elected to make ourselves a specialist of one. It makes no sense to treat the unknown with trepidation, consternation, fear of panic. We are young and the world – this transforming, shape-shifting world – is at our fingertips.”

In her remarks, Dr. Albright also noted how much she enjoys academic ceremony and that she treasured the chance to participate in Commencement 2012 at RWU.

“It’s a special pleasure to visit this fine university,” she said. “After all, Roger Williams is one of the rising universities in the Northeast featuring an outstanding new president, a host of options for study abroad, a commitment to community service, a beautiful waterfront campus and a Commencement process led by bagpipes. So, what’s not to like?”

In what's become an annual tradition since its establishment in 2007, 12 students representing their respective schools and colleges took home the President's Core Values Medallion in recognition of their academic, professional and community-based accomplishments.

Recipient Ashley Aliengena '12, an at-large nominee from the Feinstein College of Arts & Sciences, said she was both humbled and surprised by the award: "I see our University's core values as a call for students to find a permanent home in learning and commit themselves to serving others," she said. "It was deeply gratifying to see that after four years of hard work, my values were reflected in my University's values – it made me feel sure that I had made the right choice in coming to Roger Williams."

During the ceremony, Interim Provost Robert A. Potter presented the University's Fifth Annual Excellence in Teaching Award to Professor of Accounting Richard A. Bernardi of the Mario J. Gabelli School of Business.

The Class of 2012 featured a number of academic firsts at the University, including the graduation of the first 11 students from College Unbound at Roger Williams University, a non-traditional higher education model for first-generation and adult students developed by Big Picture Learning and launched in 2009 in collaboration with RWU.

Of the 119 graduate degrees awarded, eleven students earned master of science degrees in construction management, the first cohort of graduates from that program. Among the undergraduate day students who graduated, the five most populous majors included criminal justice, architecture, psychology, management and communication.

One day earlier, 183 students were awarded juris doctor degrees in a Roger Williams University School of Law ceremony highlighted by an address by the Honorable Jack B. Weinstein, one of the most respected and influential jurists in America.

[For a Commencement 2012 At-a-Glance fact sheet, click here.](#)

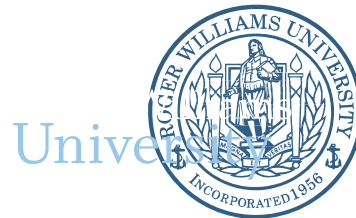
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