5-18-2019

As Civic Scholars, RWU Graduates Ready to Change the World

Jill Rodrigues  
Roger Williams University

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.rwu.edu/weekatroger_featured_news

Part of the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation  
https://docs.rwu.edu/weekatroger_featured_news/635

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Week at Roger at DOCS@RWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Featured News Story by an authorized administrator of DOCS@RWU. For more information, please contact mwu@rwu.edu.
As Civic Scholars, RWU Graduates Ready to Change the World

From committing to service on their first day as students to a deep dive into community-engaged work and real-world research projects, the Class of 2019 embodies civic scholarship at RWU.

BRISTOL, R.I. – From the first day they arrived on campus, the Class of 2019 blossomed into civic-minded scholars, addressing social justice issues through advocacy and art, working on innovative research and community-engaged projects that solve problems that matter deeply to the communities we serve. As they conquered new challenges together, they transformed themselves and discovered their power to create meaningful change at Roger Williams University and across the region – a profound piece of their education that each graduate will take with them as they cross the commencement stage and step off on their next journey.

On May 17 and 18, Roger Williams University celebrated its commencement weekend, conferring 943 bachelor’s degrees, 157 master’s degrees, and 130 law degrees. Earlier this month, RWU’s University College awarded 74 graduates with associate degrees and certificates.

At the RWU Commencement ceremony on Saturday, May 18, the undergraduate Class of 2019 became the second graduating class commissioned as Civic Scholars – students who believe in the positive impact of community-engaged work, applying their knowledge and skills toward working on real issues with community partners, from engineering potable water systems in Latin America to creating redevelopment plans for main street neighborhoods and teaching math and science in local elementary schools.

As they move on to graduate school or start professional careers, RWU Interim President Andrew Workman urged graduates to continue to serve as Civic Scholars to address “the daunting issues that we face and problems you will be confronted to solve as you go forth into the world.”
“We hope that you understand that the incredible privilege of an education is not just for your benefit alone. Giving back to the world, using your knowledge and using that privilege to benefit the world is at the heart of Roger Williams,” Interim President Workman said. “My charge to you is to be Civic Scholars for the rest of your lives. Use your knowledge for good, to make the good society. By doing so you will have met the highest expectations of the RWU community, and it will help you and it will help the world.”

Timothy Baxter, a 1983 graduate of Roger Williams and President and CEO of Samsung Electronics North America, offered the graduates three pieces of advice.

“Embrace change, get comfortable being uncomfortable,” said Baxter, who serves as Chairman of the RWU Board of Trustees. “Stay hungry, but be humble.”

Photos of RWU Class of 2019

In his keynote address, U.S. Senator Jack Reed urged graduates to continue to learn and acquire new skills, and to be prepared “to adapt to a changing economy and kinetic environment that previous generations didn’t have to contend with.”

“The Class of 2019, you, too, are part of the ‘lively experiment’ that our founding father, the Reverend Roger Williams, started in Rhode Island. Whether it’s Roger Williams University students teaching local schoolchildren about renewable energy, or the university’s steadfast commitment to ensuring underrepresented people have equal and equitable opportunities for education and advancement, you all have made a real, positive impact on the economy, society, and environment for the people of this community and the people of Rhode Island,” Senator Reed said. “And I encourage you to carry that spirit of service forward wherever you go.”
Earlier in the ceremony, student speaker Phoebe Thaler ’19 shared how she found community at Roger Williams and how a campus culture celebrating diversity and inclusion helped her establish and affirm her identity.

“Partway through my first year here at RWU, I started my transition into the woman I am today. Although I’ve known I am transgender practically since birth, being at RWU gave me the space, knowledge, and courage to come out,” said Thaler, who was the first student to utilize RWU’s preferred-name and gender policies to change her legal name and gender on campus. “I’ve had numerous friends who helped me every step of the way, and I will forever be grateful to them. I also had tremendous support from mentors across campus, as well as allied faculty and staff who made the transition easier, along with the new knowledge I gained from my gender and sexuality studies. The community at RWU has been invaluable in supporting me throughout my four years here as a student, but more importantly, as a person.”

Thaler not only found herself at RWU, she also found her voice and learned to become a leader, serving as assistant director of the social justice peer-mentoring program P.E.A.C.E, vice president of the Sexuality and Gender Alliance, and a student representative for developing the University’s Equity Action Plan. She joined her classmates in advocating for social change on and off campus, including staging a campus “black out” event supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, calling for cultural competency training and the creation of what became the Queer and Trans Resource and Advocacy Center at the university.

“Throughout our time here at RWU there has been tremendous change in the world, on our campus and in our own lives,” Thaler said. “As graduates, we have much to be proud of. Many of us put ourselves out there, occupied public spaces, and fought for what we needed to not just survive, but to thrive as students here.”

One of their greatest allies, Thaler said, couldn’t be with them to celebrate their big day: the late President Donald Farish, who worked closely with many students to enact change on campus and who served as a fearless leader in advocating nationally for the rights of transgender and refugee students.

“Although he is no longer with us, I know he would want every graduate to carry, as we head out into the world, not simply our diploma, but the spirit of creativity, care, and allyship that has been an essential part of our experience at RWU,” she said. “Good luck, my fellow graduates, in all your future endeavors. I hope we can all become a force for good in a world desperately in need of goodness.”

In addition to awarding bachelor’s degrees to the graduates, Interim President Workman and President-Designate Ioannis Miaoulis conferred honorary doctorates to civil rights leader Clifford R. Montiero, who marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and served as President of the NAACP Providence branch for a decade, and to Marcia Morris, Vice Chair of the RWU Board of Trustees who served in executive management and chief legal officer roles during her career.

They were selected, Workman said, for their deep commitment to humanitarian and business practices that benefit humankind.
This year’s Excellence in Teaching Award was presented to Professor Margaret Case, chair of the Department of English Literature and Creative Writing, for her dedication to “cultivating and fostering an inclusive learning environment, one in which all students are empowered to not only meet the course learning outcomes but also to grow as individuals.”

Joined by thousands of attendees celebrating the culmination of their college careers at RWU Commencement, 943 members of the graduating class received bachelor’s degrees from one of RWU’s six schools of study as well as RWU University College. And in what has become an annual tradition, 15 students earned the President’s Core Values Medallions in recognition of their academic, professional and community-based accomplishments.