

2006 Commencement Address, Department of City and Regional Planning, UNC
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Hello, 2006 DCRP graduates.

I am very pleased to be here, and highly honored to be offering remarks at your commencement exercise. Thank you for asking me. I feel like I know many of you from the chances I've had during these past two years to be with you at New East, talking about all kinds of things. I am grateful for this opportunity today, because I have some things I want to say to you.

For those of you whom I haven't met - - I am a 1976 graduate of this department, worked a while for a regional planning agency, and then spent 20 years as Chapel Hill's Planning Director. I currently work for a private planning firm, Clarion Associates, helping local governments design and implement growth management strategies.

What a great course of study you selected! This is an important field of professional work, and your timing is most excellent! The world needs this profession desperately right now - - the world needs people with your knowledge and abilities - - and you are in the right place at the right time to make an impact. I am excited for you. This is going to be a very interesting ride, and it is fun for all of us to be here at your beginning.

To the parents, friends, and families of these graduates: How terrific that you are here. Many of you came from some considerable distance. These students have made us all proud, and I am sure this is especially true for you, their families and friends. These are bright, talented individuals who are going to make significant contributions to the communities in which they will be working. I am grateful in advance for their work, and very pleased that you are here today to help send them off.

Graduates: I am going to offer my thoughts about what you are likely to face as you leave this campus and begin to move into your careers. I am going to talk about what's going on in the world right now, and why there is a particularly critical need for your work. I want to talk about how the world is changing, and what that means for the practice of planning as you will be pursuing it. Listen up - - this is important.

What are the issues likely to be in your career? First, the environment. We have not been kind to our planet. As we speak we are racing past the point of wanting to do something about to preserve and restore our natural environment, into the era where we must do something. I believe that the extent of the damage we've done to our environment over the last 50 years, and the limitations of our resources, are issues that are finally sinking in. I offer two examples of evidence that a wake-up call is going out

to the general population, as evidence of this growing collective consciousness that we need to take action: An April 2006 issue of TIME magazine, just last month, has dire predictions related to global warming on its cover, and the issue is devoted to implications of the disasters we are courting. Here are some quotes from that lead story:

“Never mind what you’ve heard about global warming as a slow-motion emergency that would take decades to play out. Suddenly and unexpectedly, the crisis is upon us.”

“The last 12 months have been alarming.”

“The ripple through the scientific community is palpable. And it’s not just the scientists who are taking notice.”

“Public stirrings are at last getting the attention of politicians and business leaders, who may not always respond to science but have a keen nose for where votes and profits lie.”

Okay. If a mainstream publication like TIME is showcasing these ideas, you can be pretty sure that the issue has seeped into the collective consciousness of the general population. That’s very good news. That means opportunity for support and consensus as we propose solutions.

My second example is a new book recently out by James Howard Kunstler called The Long Emergency. Kunstler talks about the peak in world oil production that we’ve just passed, the rising costs of energy, and the lifestyle changes that are likely to accompany looming energy shortages in the not-too-distant future. He also talks about the global threats to our environment that are becoming more and more serious as we speak. It is ironic - - I remember the first “Earth Day” in 1970 when the phrase was coined, “Think Globally, Act Locally.” We planners have been pushing that concept for 30 years - - Think Globally, Act Locally - - with mixed success. For me, the height of irony was seeing a Think Globally Act Locally bumper sticker on the back of an SUV. My belief is that the irony is close to being over, and that we, as a culture, finally are starting to get it. Lifestyle changes are coming, I am convinced, and you are going to be a big part of all this.

Now couple those thoughts, the state of the global environment and the growing awareness, with analysis that is coming from our demographers, who document the changing nature of our households and families. Not long ago, the average household size in the United States was well over 3 persons per household. Today it is approaching 2 persons. Our households are getting smaller, our workdays are getting longer, our demands for quality of life are getting more aggressive. Some are predicting, and I agree, that all this portends a new, increased interest in urban life. We are reclaiming our cities and downtowns, and people are moving back. Recent statistics show dramatic increases in center city populations, from places like Atlanta and LA to small and mid-sized cities. Even Chapel Hill. We had a ribbon-cutting two weeks ago for new downtown

condominiums in Chapel Hill, and plans for more are being drawn. I heard a demographer proclaim last month that, for the first time ever, people in their 20's - - you - - and people in their 50's - - you - - want the same thing: smaller dwellings, with lots of amenities nearby - - a recipe for downtown living.

You have all heard about the recent trend toward super-sized homes - - often referred to as McMansions. My prediction is that this is an example of a trend that will be short-lived. The trend lines are shifting. The economic, demographic, natural resource, scientific, and market forces are all beginning to align in support of more sustainable living patterns.

If I am on target with all of this, and I believe I am, what does it mean for the practice of planning, and for your careers? Well, it means a lot, and it's all good. First, and this will come as good news to your families, the job market for planners right now is robust and is going to get better. I hear from all sides - - public and private, that employers are now looking for and competing for planners. You picked a good time to be going into the job market. As the public in general and as employers in particular grow in their awareness of these important environmental and lifestyle changes, they are coming around to the solutions that we planners have been promoting for decades. You, my colleagues, are about to become hot commodities.

More substantively - - because I know you're not just about jobs - - OK, not ENTIRELY about jobs - - more substantively, the time is ripe for implementation of our ideas and the things we believe in. Smart Growth. Sustainable communities. Compact Development. Environmentally-friendly Development Patterns. Alternative Transportation Systems. What you are going to find, in my opinion, is a different context than the one I worked in for the last 30 years. Where I found that I had to be an advocate for these planning principles, I believe that increasingly people are going to be coming to us, coming to you, seeking your help in developing these strategies.

Let me offer an example of the value we can bring. I have just finished writing a book called Planners and Politics - - coming out this fall to be published by Planners Press. In the book I examine the work of eight successful planners who have each accomplished significant results in their communities, sometimes against the odds.

One of those case studies focuses on what was once a contaminated island in the Allegheny River, very near downtown Pittsburgh. The island had been the location of meat-packing plants, scrap yards, a meat rendering plant, and a chemical processing facility. All with beautiful views of downtown. The island was a wreck and the thinking at the time was to maybe try to rebuild it with warehouses. Enter a planner with energy and creative ideas who said, "We can do better." He worked hard to find champions for his ideas, to marshal the resources for cleanup, and to identify the market for re-use of this land. The result today is Washington's Landing - - a center for rowing, home to a market-rate residential development, office/research buildings, a marina, recreational trails, and riverside parks. At the downstream tip of the island, a small park provides stone benches and a view of Pittsburgh's eastern skyline. The community has reclaimed

this valuable island, and made it a productive part of the city. Articles and accounts abound describing this remarkable transformation of a blighted industrial area into a vibrant and financially successful multi-use development. What the articles generally do not include, however, is a description of what-might-have-been - - a collection of new warehouses - - had it not been for a planner who convinced others to raise their sights.

Kunstler, in his book, talks about raising people's sights, particularly in challenging circumstances. He writes that even in the face of discontinuity, "there is a lot we can do to assure the refashioning of daily life." He suggests that, "It is imperative for citizens to be able to imagine a hopeful future, especially in times of maximum stress and change." That's where we come in. It is our job as planners, our imperative, to help citizens imagine a hopeful future and then to help them get it.

As we think about where all of you are going and what you are likely to be doing, I invite you also to reflect on where you've been. That is part of the distinctive nature of planning. As planners we do not observe the world as a still photograph, but rather as a moving picture. One of the distinctive features of our profession is that we are aware of the motion - - where things have been, where they are now, how they are evolving, where they are headed. So, think about yourself for a moment. (Some would argue that's what we all do best anyway.) What brought you to this field? Each of you: What attracted you to the study of planning? This is not a common or mainstream profession. Something must have happened that sparked your interest. What grabbed you? Think about that as we move along here.

The reason I am asking you to think about what got you interested in planning in the first place is that those ideas and motivations are likely to stay with you for your career, and it will be important that you remember what values are driving your work. Whatever it was that grabbed you initially, is likely to remain a compelling motivation for you. It will be important for you, in building your career, to target communities and settings and governance structures that will give you opportunities to pursue your interests. I invite you to be thoughtful and purposeful about building your career - - make it work for you, make sure you're working on things that interest you, and it's a great bet that you'll be successful in helping your communities.

There are different career paths for you to consider, and this is one of the reasons I am encouraging you to be thoughtful about your career plans. I worked for 30 years in the public sector, and now am in the private sector. My newest colleague is Leigh Anne McDonald, a 2005 graduate of this department. Leigh Anne came out of planning school straight into the private sector, where she may or may not remain for her full career. But the basic skills and approaches I learned here 30 years ago are the same ones she learned leading up to her graduation last year - - learning that planning is a blend of technical skill and public governance, and that planners need to have both the technical skills to perform analysis and also an ability to understand the big picture. You now have important technical skills. My hope is that, in applying them, you will keep your eyes on the prize, and be smart about navigating through the complex swirls of opinions and governance systems. Keep in mind what you are trying to accomplish. All while helping

people focus on important issues and helping people raise their sights, helping communities decide what it is they want, and then helping them get it.

There are multiple approaches to the issues that communities will be facing in the 21st Century. But there is a place for creative planning in all of them. The task for you is to find a setting that fits you, fits your interests, and fits your values, and then to get going.

In summary, I am suggesting these ideas for your consideration:

1. Global environmental considerations, demographic trends, and increasing public awareness, are all coming together right now to set the stage, for you and your career. Pay attention to that. It is a powerful combination of forces.
2. Know the value of your work, know that you are playing an important role in the life of your community, and keep in mind why you're doing it. Do not let your core values slip too far away from your day-to-day functioning.
3. Be purposeful in building your career. You will have many choices. Select settings and challenges that fit your inclinations. Make it work for you.
4. You are looking at a great opportunity - - there is a shortage of planners now, and there is support for issues we think are important. Your timing is very good.

You are smart, talented, and could have chosen any field. You chose this one.

Be confident that you are well prepared. You are.

Your timing is good. This is a great time to be a graduating planner and to be starting your career.

The problems that our communities, our world are facing, are clear. The possible solutions and directions of change are clear. Consensus is building and you will find support for your ideas. The stage is set for you.

I want to close with a quote from one of my favorite authors. Yes, it is time for a comment from the wisest of us all, Dr. Seuss. You'll remember it, I know. Here it is:

You're off to great places!
Today is your day!
Your mountain is waiting,
So . . . get on your Way !!!

You, class of 2006, are going to move mountains, I just know it.

Thanks for inviting me to spend this time with you. I look forward to hearing of your successes.